

6. In areas of knowledge such as the arts and the sciences, do we learn more from work that follows or that breaks with accepted conventions?

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Theory of Knowledge Essay

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We human beings are surrounded by a mysterious world, one which compasses endless levels of everything. The experience of living in this world can be expressed by artistic means, for example, and the intriguing phenomena occurring around us – and even within ourselves – can be attempted to explain by science. These two areas of knowledge are thus extremely powerful ways for us to learn about ourselves and the world we live in. However, throughout history there have existed certain more “accepted” ways of producing and displaying work in these areas, and simultaneously, there have been forms of art and science that have broken the accepted conventions. This essay will thus delve into the question of whether we learn more from work that fits into its conventionally accepted framework or whether the works that break our preconceptions of their field are the ones we truly draw the most knowledge from.

First of all: what exactly can we learn from the arts and the sciences? After having watched Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Solaris*, for example, I was certainly moved and fell in love with the movie, but can I say that I actually *learnt* something from it? Similarly, Michelangelo’s sculpture *Pietà*, of the dead Jesus in his mother’s arms, fills me with sadness whenever I see a picture of it – but does this experience count as knowledge of some kind? Surely most of us have encountered the feeling that when dealing with the arts, knowledge transforms into a language much more sublime than with other areas of knowledge. However, after reflecting on the experience of having assimilated a form of art, whether it may be film, poetry, music or a painting, one can certainly begin to find traces of learning, which coincide with our more concrete conceptions of the world. For example, one aspect of *Pietà* did indeed strike me when I first saw it, that though the sculpture depicts the son of God, lying dead in his human mother’s arms, it becomes an even more universal symbol: that no matter who the dead son may be, his death is still tragic to his mother; that a mother’s love transcends all labels of identity. Even if the same idea could somehow be expressed in a scientific formula, its impact would surely not be as great as when projected through a work of art; thus art becomes a dimension of sorts, through which we can draw interpretations into our own, concrete world, and thus end up enriching our experience of life and of being a human being.

While I may have interpreted *Pietà* as a universal symbol of a mother’s love, someone else may see it even as a feminist depiction, where a half-naked man lies weak in a steadfast woman’s arms; not to speak of any possible intentions Michelangelo himself might have had, of which we can never know for certain. Therefore art becomes understandably subjective, seeing as the dimension we draw interpretations from is coloured by our own position in the world, based on our age, sex, religion, historical time period, etc. Science, on the other hand, strives to explain the world on a much more objective level, one which cannot be hindered by human conditioning. Learning is subsequently much more concrete. For example, now when I see a green plant, I know its leaves are filled with a green substance called chlorophyll, which absorbs light for a process called photosynthesis, which in its turn produces energy needed for the plant’s growth. All of this information I have learnt in my Biology classes, and none of it requires any interpretation: it can be seen as a fact. I can even verify my knowledge whenever I want, by conducting an experiment. Therefore, while art may be

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needed in order to project aspects of experiencing the world, science, on the other hand, may be seen as a more solid, objective base, upon which we can build credible assumptions of the natural world around us, based on scientific experimentation. Nevertheless, learning from science surely contributes to the enriching of our experience of life, just like the arts do. Sometimes reading a scientific magazine may feel just as exhilarating as a visit to a brilliant art museum does, and – based on the individual's own interests – vice versa.

However, even in these generalised conceptions of the arts and sciences lies some controversy. Seeing as I just described my knowledge on plants as based on factual information, the facts themselves seem to rely on something which cannot be disputed. The reason why I can safely say that I *know* why the plant is green is because I can verify my knowledge whenever I want, by experimentation. This framework for scientific credibility, known as *the scientific method*, is what is generally seen as the pillar of scientific knowledge; it is easily the main convention of science. Thus it can be deduced that since my knowledge of science is mainly based on the conventional method of observation – hypothesis – experimentation, I have learnt the most from work following the accepted conventions of science. Even though Darwin fundamentally shattered the conventional flow of thought of his time, his theories became a new standard because of their scientific credibility in this sense. But what about such outskirts of science as traditional Chinese medicine and transcendental meditation, for example, which do not necessarily abide by the Western conception of scientific credibility? Is there something that we can still learn from them, and if there is, is that knowledge somehow less valuable than the kind that derives from rigorous proof?

While science is founded on a solid convention, upon which all work is evaluated, art remains more of an open concept. I see the *Pietà* as a symbol of a mother's love while someone else may see it as a feminist declaration, or even as just "a nice statue", but there is hardly anyone who would deny that it – at least – is *art*. There certainly seems to be some sort of conventional flow of thought that unites certain works as universally agreeable, even with no direct respect to the *argumentum ad verecundiam* of an institutional definition of art. But during one of our Theory of Knowledge lessons, our teacher showed us a picture of Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* and asked us whether we thought of it as art. The signed and titled urinal caused a response both humorous and detesting, but in the end, the class verdict seemed to lean on the non-art side. The work obviously broke accepted conventions of the arts, but after all, our teacher had chosen it as a part of his lesson, and we all surely learnt something from it. What we learnt wasn't perhaps something as humanely profound as the universal nature of a mother's love, but instead: the conceptual boundaries we have for art. And, in the end, what other way is there of challenging our existing conceptions and keeping the discussion about art alive, than to break the boundaries themselves? Is such an achievement not intrinsically meaningful?

In this ironic respect, the knowledge we derive from art may actually be even more tangible than that which we acquire from the sciences, at least in regard to our everyday life. In Tarkovsky's film, a group of scientists have set up a base over a vast ocean on the planet Solaris. The ocean is a living organism in itself and is seen as a brain of sorts for the planet, and its enigmatic, unknown qualities intrigue the scientists no end. Yet no matter how hard they try, they are still not able to fully comprehend how the ocean functions. When drawing interpretations from this dimension, the ocean may become a metaphor for the sciences in our world, of us human beings striving for a comprehension about the vast enigma upon which we "float". The more we learn, through the accepted conventions of science, and the vaster our scientific knowledge becomes, the more we realise is left to be learnt. It can be exhausting. I can say that I *know* why a plant's leaves are green, but do I really? Can I truly comprehend the biological fact I have learnt from my Biology classes? Even the most advanced scientist is bound to hit a blank point in his knowledge; after all, if the scientific study concentrates on the natural world around us, of which all phenomena can be reduced to

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physics, and furthermore to atomic activity, we eventually result in such aspects as quantum-mechanics and chaos theory, of which no predictable knowledge can, in theory, be drawn. In this sense, I argue that any knowledge gained from alternative sciences, such as traditional Chinese medicine, is just as valuable as that from conventional science. If acupuncture cures one of back pain just like a surgical operation can, I believe neither one should be belittled. In the end, both methods follow a path of which we may not fully comprehend, but which still seemingly works. And ironically, even traditional Chinese medicine is a convention of its own, just as Picasso's outburst from the conception of representative art formulated into its own Cubistic convention.

Therefore the relation between conventions and their outbreaks is certainly mingled and even co-dependent: it is the contrast between the two that lets us see their difference, and subsequently learn from both. We can perhaps learn the most projected ideas from conventionally accepted works, in both the arts and sciences, but the works that break these conventions are the ones that make us renew our conceptions of their fields themselves. In the end, it is the learning experience that enriches our lives and makes us realise the kaleidoscopic uniqueness of existing in the world, and for this, neither convention nor its breaking can take the upper lead: it is their intriguing equilibrium that is required.

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