

“There is no reason why we cannot link facts and theories across disciplines to form a common groundwork of explanation”- to what extent do you agree with this statement?

Word count: 1581

TOK or Theory of Knowledge offers a broad explanation model of what knowledge is; however one can question if it really does this. IB students have been taught all the subsections and terminology of TOK: Areas of Knowledge, Ways of Knowing, shared knowledge, personal knowledge and more. By dividing these up, is TOK not being separated into different areas rather than broadly discussed as a general theory? Would we not have a better understanding of TOK as a whole if it were presented so that its subsections were more interlinked? Taking this into consideration we can see how the linking of the Areas of Knowledge may make it easier to interpret the broader implications of a subject.

“Facts” and “theories” may be defined as two different things: facts are normally based upon solid evidence, whilst theories could involve the thinking and claims behind the evidence. In the making of this essay, facts and theories have been taken to work together in their contribution to a “common groundwork of explanation”. I have developed the definition of “a common groundwork of explanation” to be a message or concept, that has multiple standpoints (each from an Area of Knowledge) and that is generally agreed upon. In challenging us to explore the ways in which the Areas of Knowledge overlap, we may be being asked: do Areas of Knowledge need to be combined if we are to gain full understanding of complex ideas? More specifically to my investigation: can we link Art, Ethics and Social Sciences in the analysis of the message or concept

behind a piece of art? This will serve as a knowledge question in the exploration of the title question. In investigating this, it will be determined that we do draw on different Areas of Knowledge to have a broad understanding of the message or concept behind cultural products.

Art can be defined as the expression of human creativity. It exists in various forms; it can be visual, musical, theatrical or expressed through physical movements (among other forms). Art also has various functions: it could, among other functions, imitate certain aspects of reality, provoke an audience and shape their values and/or beliefs. Visual art expresses itself through colour, shape, symmetry and composition and is created through various media. We will be looking at visual art with a specific function - to provoke and that has the desire for social change -and observe how it's message serves as a "common groundwork of explanation" by having standpoints from different disciplines.



Damien Hirst:
Severed cows head
Title: "A Thousand Years",
<http://www.damienhirst.com/a-thousand-years>

Take Damien Hirst's severed cow's head as an example (titled: "A Thousand Years"). This art piece from the 1990's has been subject to criticism over its implication of unethical animal treatment. Animal Rights activists have claimed

that his work is immoral and unjust to animals that have been sacrificed for his

art. *The Telegraph* reported the protests of an exhibitor who stated "I am shocked that in England, where the Society for the Protection of Animals originated, such a display is allowed." (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/10269482/Damien-Hirst-Tate-retrospective-triggered-wave-of-complaints-about-meaningless-artwork.html>)

People's Ethical values (that is, the standards by which we prioritize our beliefs), will change depending on their cultural, social, familial or other background. An example of this is the various attitudes towards meat eating, as these change from person to person in part, depending on how they have been influenced culturally, socially or by their family. We do, however, share certain common values. One common value is that we should not kill or harm innocent beings. The response expressed in *The Telegraph* and other similar responses show that, because of the shared ethical boundary of the audience, the art is able to create a hard-hitting message. In analyzing the possible message behind this piece of art, we need to adopt both an ethical and an artistic standpoint.

Putting the example of Hirst's severed cow's head in a different context, where, for example, it were shown to a butcher or people in a culture who are accustomed to killing their own food, then the ethical questions it may have raised by the audience of Tate Modern are no longer raised. The "common groundwork of explanation" has shifted. Similarly, if the exhibition were shown to people with specific animal rights principles such as vegetarians or vegans,

then there probably would be *more* ethical questions raised and more loudly. The moral justification of a certain issue changes depending on the ethical threshold of those who see it, as explained above. The example shows how there are different ways of looking at the cow's head: as art, food or a brutal industrial practice. In duty ethics, there is the moral absolutism that actions can only be either right or wrong, despite the intentions behind them. It can be said that what can serve as a "common groundwork of explanation" of what is right and wrong in the first example, cannot do so in this one since it is no longer common.

In preparation for the English Oral, I read some background knowledge on, the poet, Seamus Heaney. In my readings about some of the themes his poetry possesses, I came upon some opinions of his work that I found to be interesting from a social-cultural aspect. Aisling Maguire describes him as being the "potent force that molds both a nation's view of itself and an individual's self-image" (Maguire, Aisling 1994). This strongly relates to the idea of "imagined communities" which Benedict Anderson theorized(http://sisphd.wikispaces.com/file/view/Benedict_Anderson_Imagined_Communities.pdf). It argues that due to the impossibility of humans being able to encounter every single person from their nation we must imagine them. In his argument, a community is just a phenomenon to the individual; the sense of an imagined community is often given through writing. Therefore, Heaney's poetry is one place for the Irish "Imagined Community"; since it gives that particular ethnic group a sense of nationalism. Here we see a link between a social science and a form of art,

namely the concept of nationalism in social anthropology and that in poetry. In this case it is not the message that links two Areas of Knowledge (and the two different standpoints on it), but a concept (that is the concept of “Integrated Community”).

The recent scandal over the “Charlie Hebdo” massacre has served as an example of how we might look at the overlapping fields of Language, Art, Ethics and Social Sciences. To interpret this picture effectively one must have socio-cultural (Human Sciences) knowledge and an Ethical standpoint. One must understand the significance of the Koran to

Muslim culture. This allows the reader to interpret the impious joke that, despite the spiritual dependence of the Muslim on the Qur’an, it cannot be used as a bulletproof vest. A common ground of cultural knowledge of the audience is necessary for the interpretation of the picture. The message of the Charlie Hebdo illustrations have a cultural, ethical and artistic standpoint.

Notwithstanding these examples, it can be argued that some forms of art are purely made to be aesthetically pleasing. This may be apparent in Impressionism and works from the Aesthetic movement at the end of the 19th century. Take this painting by Monet (Grainstack): it could be argued that this art has only the



Laurent Sourisaut
Title: "Le Coran - C'est De La Merde"
<http://blog.matthewhunt.com/2014/02/charlie-hebdo.html>

function of entertaining and not preaching (it might be said that these paintings teach in the sense that they show another way of looking at form and light.). Although the audience can still be provoked due to differences in taste, it is not ethically



Claude Monet
Title: "Grainstacks at Sunset"

provocative. By definition, and as suggested by its name, Impressionism is a style of art in which the painter paints from their first fleeting visual impression. Arguably, fewer standpoints from different Areas of Knowledge are linked in the message expressed in this painting than those in Charlie Hebdo's comics or Hirst's cow's head. In this case ethics and social sciences are not drawn in to an equal extent in the interpretation of the message behind this form of visual art.

Facts and theories from different disciplines can be linked in order to create "a common groundwork of explanation", however the extent to which the "groundwork of explanation" (or message or concept) is "common" (or generally agreed upon) changes if put in a different context. In this exploration I concluded that standpoints from Art, Ethics and the Social Sciences may be taken up in in the analyses of the message behind one art piece but, arguably, only one of those three may be needed in the analysis of another art piece. This change is due to the form of the art that is being analyzed. This answers my knowledge question that inquires if we can link Ethics, Art and the Social sciences in the analysis of the message or concept behind a piece of art.

In response to the broader question (in addition to the response that the “common-ness” of a “groundwork of explanation” depends on its situation) I agree that it is possible and valuable to link facts and theories across disciplines to form “a common groundwork of explanation”. Although I have only illustrated this through examples from certain Areas of Knowledge, I believe that this applies to other Areas such as the Natural Sciences, or even History. Some concepts or messages will be more all-encompassing than others, this may give an indication of its real appeal.

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The candidate does demonstrate some understanding of the demands of the title and there is a clear attempt made to link it to relevant elements of TOK.

A major drawback to the essay is that the candidate is not successful in unpacking what is meant by a common groundwork of explanation; at times it appears that it is “point of view” or “perspective” that the candidate has in mind. The failure to nail this concept has implications on the clarity and effectiveness of the argument that the candidate subsequently attempts to develop.

There is need for greater development of the connection between the arts and ethics, and the specific connection to the prescribed title as the argument here seems confused, or at least confusing. It is not always clear what the entities might be that are providing the connections between disciplines - the title cites facts and theories but the candidate seems more interested in concepts and "messages.

There is however an adequate attempt to address aspects of the title and this essay can best be placed at level 3 (5/10).