

0038

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With reference to two areas of knowledge discuss the way in which shared knowledge can shape personal knowledge.

Different areas of knowledge lend themselves to either shared or personal knowledge.

Shared knowledge is the body of knowledge in a discipline that is accepted as part of the field, and it is shared knowledge that students most often learn in their classes. Personal knowledge, however, is subjective and based on personal experiences and impressions. Personal knowledge is usually gained through personal experiences, and can be considered to be what an individual knows to be true, rather than what a community does. In some areas of knowledge, such as ethics and natural sciences, knowledge is a mixture of personal and shared knowledge, and it is necessary to ask to what extent shared knowledge affects and shapes personal knowledge, and to what extent people incorporate shared knowledge into their own personal understanding of the world. The question also asks to what extent personal knowledge is gained through personal experiences, and to what extent it is affected by the shared knowledge of culture, conditioning, or education. We must investigate the relationship between shared and personal knowledge to understand how the two types of knowledge interact to create people's worldviews.

Shared knowledge can shape personal knowledge by providing a framework in which we understand personal experiences. We judge our personal experiences by the shared knowledge in which we have been socialized, and often our personal knowledge reflects the shared knowledge of our communities. For example, children in my culture are socialized with the Golden Rule, which states that people should treat others the way they want to be treated themselves. The shared knowledge of the Golden Rule informs childrens' personal knowledge of what is right and wrong long before they have to make serious ethical choices, but, for example, when I

was recently faced with the choice of whether to keep a friend's secret or ask for advice, I considered it in terms of the Golden Rule and chose to do what I would hope my friend would do if our positions were reversed. The shared knowledge of the Golden Rule informed my personal knowledge of right and wrong, because I had learned it before I gained my personal knowledge, and so it impacted my understanding of the experiences I later had. Had I been raised to believe that loyalty was the most important ethical imperative, however, I might have chosen to keep my friend's secret, or if I had been raised with a great respect for authority I might have chosen to ask advice from an elder. The worldview that people acquire when they grow up in a specific community is the shared knowledge of that community, and it affects the people who learn it by creating the background in relation to which they understand everything else they learn. In the same way, shared knowledge can provide a framework for personal knowledge through language. Because our culture has a shared idea of a distinction between plants and animals, when we are confronted with a genetically engineered zebrafish that performs photosynthesis like a plant,¹ our shared knowledge of the distinction between plants and animals influences our personal knowledge of which one the fish is. Shared knowledge influences personal knowledge by providing a framework in which we understand our new experiences.

Similarly, shared knowledge shapes personal knowledge by explaining and providing justification for impressions gained through personal experience. For example, in chemistry, we study thermochemistry and the energetic changes that take place in chemical and physical reactions. Before I learned the scientific principles behind the phenomenon, I had a vague impression that wet clothes become cold, even when the water was warm. In chemistry I learned that evaporation is an endothermic reaction that breaks intermolecular bonds and requires heat from the

¹ Singer, Emily. "Photosynthetic Fish and Other Oddities." MIT Review, May 4 2010. Accessed November 27, 2014.

surroundings, cooling them down.² After I had learned about the way the reaction works, I was able to justify my personal experience that things cool as they dry, and have more confidence in my impression. I was also able to connect my knowledge of evaporative cooling to more of my own experience when I remembered that my mother told me never to sleep with wet hair, and understand that she was worried that I would become sick because of the cold. My personal knowledge was shaped by the shared knowledge of chemistry, because the shared knowledge provided a principle to connect to my experience, and justify and explain my impression that wet clothes are cold. Personal knowledge can be considered to be shaped by shared knowledge, because shared knowledge justifies personal impressions, which transforms a vague impression or idea of an experience into a knowledge claim about the universe. “Wet clothes seem to be cold,” becomes “as things dry, they cool because evaporation is endothermic.” If we assume that shared knowledge is reliable, because it has been considered to be true by many other people, then it can play a significant role in shaping our personal knowledge. For the purposes of this argument, it does not matter whether shared knowledge is true or not, because even false shared knowledge can shape an individual’s personal knowledge, such as when mistaken belief that it was the best thing for people from Africa to live as slaves shaped the worldviews of the people who held them in bondage. When we assume that a principle in shared knowledge is true, it acts as an axiom, and justification of personal knowledge through shared knowledge becomes possible because it uses deductive reasoning. The application of a general principle—such as thermochemistry or the idea that some people are unfit to be free—to a specific instance—such as the cooling of wet clothes or a particular case of slavery—allows people’s personal knowledge to be proved true relative to the accepted principle in shared knowledge. Shared knowledge affects

² John Green and Sadru Damji, *Chemistry, 3rd Edition*. Melton, Australia: IBID Press, 2007.

personal knowledge because it provides an exterior standard by which to judge whether one's impressions are correct. If one's personal impressions cohere with the shared knowledge of the group, one might be more likely to believe them and incorporate them into one's worldview. Because humans are fallible, it is important to verify our perhaps-misinterpreted impressions against the accepted knowledge of the group, from which we can deduce whether the impressions are correct.

It might not, however, be beneficial to check personal knowledge against shared knowledge in all cases. For example, philosopher Søren Kierkegaard believed that some ethical judgments belong to a realm "greater than the ethical," and that we must have faith and irrationally believe our personal impressions over the shared ethic of the community.³ A modern example of someone taking this "leap of faith" is Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who chose to try to assassinate Adolf Hitler even though he and his community were devout pacifists.⁴ He trusted in his personal belief that it was more moral to try to kill a mass murderer than to adhere to his community's shared knowledge that violence was wrong. In this case, he did not allow the shared knowledge of his pacifist community to shape his personal knowledge about the morality of killing Hitler. When a situation falls outside of where shared knowledge is applicable, it is often beneficial to trust in one's personal impressions, because they offer knowledge specific to the given situation. Trusting personal impressions requires faith, because we cannot be completely certain that our impressions are right, but if the shared knowledge is clearly incorrect, trusting personal knowledge may be the only recourse. Another situation in which it is not beneficial to consult shared

³ Palmer, Donald. *Visions of Human Nature: An Introduction*. Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing. 2000, p163.

⁴ "Dietrich Bonhoeffer Biography," on "Dietrich Bonhoeffer Official Homepage." www.dbonhoeffer.org. Accessed November 6, 2014.

knowledge is when one's personal experience radically contradicts shared knowledge. For example, in the late eighteenth century, chemists believed that combustion occurred when a substance called phlogiston was released. The French chemist Antoine-Laurent de Lavoisier disproved the phlogiston theory when he established that some substances gained mass when burned, and that combustion required the presence of a gas.⁵ Although the shared knowledge of the time was of phlogiston combustion, Lavoisier trusted his personal experience when it contradicted the dominant theory. It is not beneficial to consult shared knowledge when one's personal experience radically contradicts it; in cases like Lavoisier's, shared knowledge does not shape personal knowledge because it has been determined that the shared knowledge is wrong. Shared knowledge does not shape personal knowledge in all cases, because in some cases the shared knowledge does not apply to a situation or is contradicted by a person's personal experience. In such cases, it is more valuable to trust one's personal knowledge over inapplicable or inaccurate shared knowledge, because personal knowledge can provide information specific to the situation or provide information that at least might be correct.

Shared knowledge plays a significant role in shaping personal knowledge. Even though some personal knowledge is gained through incommunicable personal experience that cannot be shared, much personal knowledge is justified through shared knowledge. Shared knowledge also provides a framework in which to understand personal experience. Furthermore, the application of a proven principle allows us to deduce what we already know from personal experiences, thus confirming and justifying it. In a majority of cases, it is valuable to check one's personal impressions against shared knowledge. Examining personal impressions and experiences in light of shared knowledge allows people to determine whether their personal impressions are true, and to

⁵ Eric Weisstein, "Lavoisier, Antoine (1743-1794)." Wolfram research. Accessed November 6, 2014.

determine whether or not they should incorporate them into their personal knowledge. Shared knowledge shapes personal knowledge immensely, by providing justification for personal experience and providing frameworks against which to test and check personal impressions to determine their validity and value as knowledge.

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