

Theory of Knowledge Essay

“Given that every theory has its limitations, we need to retain a multiplicity of theories to understand the world.”

Discuss this claim with reference to two areas of knowledge.

Wordcount: 1600 words

A multiplicity of theories is needed to give meaning to our interpretations of the world. With the many constraints that theories possess, having a multiplicity of them leads to a deeper understanding of how the world works. However, one theory can also be enough to assist in our knowledge. Theories can explain the phenomena of a situation or event. Retaining a multiplicity of theories may mean keeping possession of different theories, where experts may be able to refer to past theories, even combine the best parts of different theories to create a more accurate version. Limitations can be a flaw in the content or process, a lack of content altogether, or even unseen perspectives that have not been taken into account yet. I will be exploring Arts and the Natural Sciences. These AOKs make use of a multiplicity of theories and one significant theory and have interesting perspectives on why we need theories to understand the world.

With the Natural Sciences, their way of understanding the world comes from studying and trying to gain more knowledge about our physical world. For example, reductionism groups theories that already have similar traits to other existing theories. Theories with more specificity are reduced to part of a more generalized one. A prominent example of reductionism is Kepler's and Galileo's theories of motion. However, both of these theories can be reduced to those made by Newton. Of course, Newton's theories are still limited; for example, it doesn't take into account the speed of light. But the point of reductionism is not to deny the existence of other phenomena that may occur but retain these theories into a hierarchy, where the same idea is conveyed through different "levels" of explanation. The proponent of

reductionism was philosopher Rene Descartes, who argued that reductionism processed the world like a clock, and its pieces worked like the mechanisms of one. So, the world could be understood by having its parts taken apart, studying them separately, bringing them together to see the whole frame. The structure of having a multiplicity of theories allow us to have the most accurate understanding of the world. Theories can provide an explanation for others that explain less or generalize, making up for the limitations that every theory has.

In the Arts, Film provides several theories that, in a sense, co-exist together, even with seemingly opposing viewpoints. The arts embrace multiple theories and perspectives, and yet no theory exists to disprove another. Instead, the variety of theories add to the diversity of human concepts and expression. It creates different perspectives. These theories do not negate or cancel each other out. But as time passes by, art styles also change. This is also true in the Natural Sciences, as theories can be improved and developed by peer review and replication. Theories in the arts seem to synthesize together to create not the most accurate version of a theory, but the most relevant version of a theory. In my Film HL class, one of the first topics we had discussed was the theories of modernism, postmodernism, and meta-modernism. At its core, these theories are cultural philosophies, a system for understanding the world. In films, they allow us an understanding of the underlying values and ideals that are portrayed in response to current events. Modernism was a portrayal of the classical values of the time. Postmodernism was a reaction to modernism. In contrast to modernism, postmodernism denied the romanticism of modernist film, subverting mainstream film conventions to tell something that did not

abide by traditional narrative expression. In response to both of these, meta-modernism emerged, synthesizing the opposing ideals modernism and postmodernism had. Meta-modernism reconstructs the ideals of these two theories by combining the opposing features of each theory together. Meta-modernism was able to take the cynical nature of postmodernism and still affirm the idealistic values of meta-modernism. Meta-modernism allowed for a new structure of understanding the world through the film. Each theory referred to a different context (time period), which allowed these theories to co-exist with one another. And perhaps, a multiplicity of theories leads to more than just an understanding of the world. By considering a multiplicity of theories, we gain different levels of understanding of the theory and in turn, the world.

On the other hand, perhaps one theory can be used to understand the world. This does not mean that there is only one theory that exists to explain every phenomenon, but rather a single theory is enough to expand our understanding of the world. The keyword is enough. For certain, theories do have limitations, but those discrepancies do not equal a weakening in the theory's credibility. In the natural sciences, even as scientists grow more in their knowledge of scientific theories, there are questions to be asked and gaps that need to be considered. These kinds of limitations emphasize the need for scientists to generalize information for us to understand it. In essence, even with how flawed theories are in the natural sciences, they can still be identifiable to us. However, some people are skeptical of these ideas. In fact, in the natural sciences, people tend to assume that a single flaw in a theory means that the whole argument is bound to fail. Even with large amounts

of evidence to back theories up, people tend to think of the progress of scientific knowledge as advancement in a straight line, where new facts become a permanent part of the knowledge we already have.

For example, climate change models that show have been criticized by the general public for not involving enough factors to most accurately represent the reality. But do we need to include all the factors that are affecting our understanding of the world in theories? Researcher James Hurrell, who works on these climate change models, disagrees. "Sometimes, you don't include processes simply because you don't understand them well enough. Sometimes it's because they haven't been discovered yet." This implies that having one theory can help our understanding as they leave out factors that we still do not understand. In other words, it avoids confusion in the knowledge we gain. In the same vein, the Natural Sciences seem to believe one theory is enough to understand the world. This is because of how much we are limited in our knowledge of the world. In conclusion, perhaps a single theory is enough to understand how climate change operates. With a variety of theories, there may be confusion as possibly a non-specialist may have difficulty in determining which theory to believe.

In the arts, it's a bit different. One theory is still considered, but not because our knowledge is limited, but rather because it is already enough to understand the medium (in this case, film) itself. One theory is semiotics in film, where it can be considered as a basic structure for films, the grammar behind it. Already, this definition brings about the interpretation that this theory is enough to understand the

ideas that a film wishes to convey. Semiotics studies the symbols and signs behind the film and what they might stand for. Every movie has some form of semiotics in it, due to the symbols every movie possesses to portray its themes. For example, in Logan (which is about Wolverine), the wild western “Shane” is used to represent Logan’s struggles in finding a family. Through these kinds of symbols, we are able to understand the meanings a film wants to portray, as we are able to convey a variety of interpretations within that theory. In exploring this AOK and Film in particular, I’ve seen that the arts have the ability to uncover “unknown truths” that we wouldn’t otherwise recognize due to its ability to be universal. In the theory of Semiotics, this is shown by the richness of interpretation that can be brought from it. In conclusion, everyone can have their understanding delivered from seeing the symbols presented in a film, which semiotics covers. The arts as an AOK can represent the world even if it may not intend due to how broadly content in the art can be interpreted, as seen with how semiotics helps with analyzing film.

I’ve seen how contradicting each Area of Knowledge is when it comes to the question of the prescribed title. While a multiplicity of theories allows for different theories in different areas for the natural sciences, at the same time, one theory can be retained by focusing on one part of the picture. And in the arts, several theories co-exist and yet one theory is still able to explain the basis for a specific field. It seems despite how different these AOKs are; they are still able to have the same foundations for their theories. At first glance, I had agreed with the prescribed title; one theory seems deficient in understanding the world. But discussing the claim opened up the possibility that since our knowledge of the world is limitless (which is

to say, limited), one theory may be enough for us to understand the world, not wholly, but as best as we can. But maybe we need a multiplicity of theories because of how limitless the world is, as the variety of theories brings different perspectives, coming down to how we feed our understanding by gaining valuable knowledge from any theory. In conclusion, connecting from these contradicting examples of theories, that knowledge is imperfect, which may be why AOKs turn to both using one theory or a multiplicity of theories. So perhaps we should accept whatever knowledge is supplied from these theories, as long as it furthers our understanding of the world.

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