

**Sample ToK Prescribed Essay from George Spanos @ Washington-Lee High School
From 2004-2005 Prescribed Title List
1st Draft of a Practice Essay**

Title 1: For some people science is the supreme form of all knowledge. Is this view reasonable or does it involve a misunderstanding of science or of knowledge?

A person with diabetes relies on insulin to live, and thus on the scientific backing behind using insulin as a medical treatment. A person born in the year 500 is taught that the Earth is flat, and relies on self-awareness and scientific authorities. Clearly, it is known today that the Earth is not flat. However, at the time the scientific authority deemed it as a fact. On the other side, many people today find relief from diabetes by using their insulin. In this case, science is practical and proven. Nevertheless, to say science is the absolute form of all knowledge is to put knowledge incorrectly into an absolute terminology, where as of today, it does not exist. Science is not the supreme form of knowledge, but instead a good form of “knowing that” and “knowledge by description” insofar as it is relevant to its use (Abel, 19). In contrast, other forms of knowledge, embodied by “knowing how” and “knowledge by acquaintance” exist, and lacking the precision needed to be called scientific, at times seem to surpass science in their truth-value and usefulness (Abel, 19). Furthermore, knowledge of one’s emotions, especially aroused by art, is something everyone is personally certain of, yet it lacks the usefulness that science may contain.

The great physicist Stephen Hawking himself is unsure whether or not the theory of relativity, the flagship of modern theories, is leading science to the correct unifying theory of science. This doubt reveals the uncertainty which science is based upon. However, even with uncertainties, science has allowed us humans a great and powerful existence. We have the power to store 40,000 songs on a thin piece of metal and glass.

We also have the power to blow up the world by splitting something we once thought indivisible. More importantly, science has increased our life span and alleviated us of many diseases. Today, at birth in the United States we are immunized against diseases that in the past claimed countless lives. We are able to make science work, but we are not always aware of the entire truth at times. Certain medicines are often recalled due to unforeseen side effects. For example, the usefulness of extra vitamin D, once thought to prevent cancer, is now thought to actually be harmful (Lichtenfeld). Additionally, cell phones are now being tested for a link to cancer. This incomplete knowledge of science makes it impossible for science to be the supreme form of knowledge while other more certain, albeit less concrete and useful, knowledge exists (Alchin, 26).

The lack of precision needed in “knowing how” and “knowledge by acquaintance” allows these two forms of knowledge to be useful. They are not intended to contain exact guidelines that need to be filled, and thus the complete form of “knowing how” is simply knowing comfortably how to do something repeatedly. For example, I know how to catch a football. I may not know the details of the process by which my brain communicates the stimulus needed for my hands and feet to move the proper amount of space, identified by my eyes, to the rest of my body, but I do know *how* to catch the ball (Abel, 19). Similarly, “knowledge by acquaintance” is something that is not supposed to be absolute, and is therefore absolute in its incompleteness (Abel, 19). I know my father without knowing what he was doing 30 years ago exactly. Knowing these kinds of details is not intended to be incorporated in this type of knowledge. For one, it is actually not beneficial to know every such detail, as it would be so hard to do so. These forms of knowledge, just like science, are useful in their own right. Everyone uses

his or her knowledge of catching something or of a person at some time in his or her life. However, the ambiguity of this knowledge is a powerfully limiting factor. Perhaps my lack of knowledge about my father's whereabouts 30 years ago would reveal something quite radical. No matter how much I doubt this, it could be true. Due to this, it would also be incorrect to call these forms supreme over those of "knowing that" and "knowledge by description," the primary forms of knowledge used in science.

Beyond these rather pragmatic ways of knowing exist other paths to knowledge. Art contains within itself plenty to know and understand. The main argument against knowing something about art is that art is thought to be entirely subjective, and even useless by some (Alchin, 38). However, I never feel more certain than I do when I feel the emotions art arouses in me. Knowing these emotions is as sure and familiar a sensation as catching a football thrown by my father. When I hear Tom Waits play "Alice," I know I am hearing something beautiful. My emotions always inform me of this as the song careens along its smoky path. I of course am unable to tell why these emotions arise. I could describe precisely or poetically what the song seems to be, but neither of these descriptions would really tell anyone *why* the song is beautiful. Of course, there are people who would even venture to disagree with me. My mother, for example, may hear the gravelly voice of Waits and find the song abrasive and uncomfortable. Art depends upon the person experiencing it, and thus the emotions arisen from art may be certain, but since they apply only to one person, the knowledge of the emotion is really not supreme (Abel, 255). In fact, the knowledge of emotions is hardly even useful, except to the person experiencing it.

Scientific truth is truth that attempts to apply objective facts to everything (Alchin, 20). It searches for what already is. In a way, the search of a paleontologist is like the research of Stephen Hawking in that the great scientific truth is out there for anyone to dig up, and it will be the same regardless of who does the digging. However, the truth has not yet been reached, and until it has been, science is not supreme. Knowing people and knowing how to complete tasks is something we all find use for. However, to be able to explain it in completeness is useless and never completely achievable. Due to this, to call these ways of knowing supreme would be folly. The knowledge art creates about how one feels is profoundly strong and certain, but only to the one feeling the emotion. Only you yourself could dig up those facts; they do not exist as fossils in the world for any old paleontologist to discover. Since emotion as a way of knowing is not all encompassing, it too is not supreme. Here, we are left with varied knowledge that is useful but by no means supreme. So does this mean, as Tom Waits puts it in “Alice,” that “it’s dreamy weather we’re on,” with no real *certain* path, you may wonder. It seems, under closer examination, that in fact we are. Perhaps to find a supreme form of knowledge we need something that combines the objectivity scientific knowledge seeks, the practicality of “knowing how” and “knowledge by acquaintance,” and the intense certainty of emotions.

1,284 words

Works Cited

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