

Lesson – Ethics and art

Knowledge framework

Scope

Perspective

Methods and tools

Ethics

Context/purpose	This lesson introduces ethics as an element of the knowledge framework. Its form and content demonstrate one way of exploring the ethical considerations in all the areas of knowledge (AOK) and optional themes.
Links to areas of knowledge and optional themes	All five areas of knowledge – history, art, mathematics, human sciences, natural sciences – and all the optional themes have an ethical dimension. This lesson concentrates only on the AOK of art.
Essential understandings	That TOK discussions about ethics should focus on the knowledge questions that are woven into the ethical issues being discussed, rather than a focus on debating the ethical issues themselves. That knowledge-making and knowledge-using carry ethical responsibilities. That the IB's <i>raison d'être</i> of education for a better world implies value judgements implicit throughout the TOK programme. That in exploring ethical issues in the art sphere it is important to be aware of a tripartite relationship of the art, the artist, and the audience.
Knowledge questions	The following four knowledge questions apply to all the areas of knowledge. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Should the pursuit of knowledge in these areas of knowledge be subject to ethical constraints? 2. What responsibilities rest on the knower as a result of their knowledge in these areas of knowledge? 3. How can we know when we should act on what we know? 4. Do established values change in the face of new knowledge?

Activity for the AOK of art

Relay the anecdote below in story fashion to help students become aware of the value of inquiry rather than jumping to ‘the right answer’. Such an approach could help turn teachers and students away from their customary inclination to take one side or another before a TOK analysis of the ethical issues, something spoken about repeatedly in subject reports.

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A young TOK teacher was being interviewed for an IB position. She is asked to speak for five minutes, with examples, on: *How can a bad man write a good book?*

Hmmm, she thinks... I have to think about this as if I were teaching in class, so first the question is about two value areas – art and ethics – and how they compare, how they’re connected, and how it matters.

Having studied her Subject Guide for the meeting she recalls these knowledge questions:

- In what way are moral judgements similar to, or different from, aesthetic judgements?
- Can we separate the moral character of the artist from the value of the artwork?
- Is the production and enjoyment of art subject to ethical constraints?

She says to herself: We are exploring here.... Not just looking for the right answer... so we need to think about things before we judge. Remember... we are not debating... we need to ask if we can even separate the value of the work from the character of the artist.

For instance, does the motive of the artist or photographer weigh into the value of the art? And...

... do museums have a moral responsibility to try to ensure that their art and artefacts are come by honourably? What does this lead us to? Should a museum-goer or theatre patron determine the moral standing of the art maker before patronising or purchasing the works of art?

She turns the original question around a bit to analyse and draw some implications – *How can a good man write a bad book?* That’s pretty easy, but do you have to be a good man to make good art? And if you are good, does it follow that your art is good?

How should we decide the different meanings of *good*...? good man, good dog, good song, good food, good evening, and so on. Or maybe we should look at some examples of the question first.

Her examples come readily from contemporary social movements protesting the treatment of women in the film world, as well as from history and cultures over the ages where celebrated notables were not held to account for their immoral behaviour...

	<p>Some of the most sublime music in the Western canon was composed by people who could be described as racist, sexist, and misogynistic. Some of the greatest literature was written by people who behaved appallingly towards others.</p> <p>I should ask the students to come up with examples of art or music created by someone described by themselves or others as <i>unethical</i>, so they would have to wrestle with <i>what is ethical</i> and what isn't... before they tackle the question.</p> <p>I might go from there to asking the class: <i>What are some other ethical issues in the arts to broaden our thinking? Cultural appropriation, freedom of expression and censorship, the treatment of the sacred... song writers and rappers? What are the ethical issues? What is the harm done? To whom? What are the implications?</i> Good TOK kinds of questions, but time's up...!</p> <p>She gets the job!</p>
<p>Wider connections and resources</p>	<p>Consider: Where does responsibility lie in ethically problematic situations? And how do you justify your decision?</p> <p>In 2000 the Trapholt Museum in Kolding, Denmark, displayed <i>Helena & El Pescador</i> – a work of the Chilean artist Marco Evaristti consisting of ten food blenders in which goldfish were swimming. The public was invited to switch on the blenders. One person did so, resulting in the death of two goldfish. The museum director was fined for animal cruelty, but in contesting his conviction he said, 'It is a question of principle. An artist has the right to create works that defy our concept of what is right and what is wrong.'</p> <p>Witnesses, including the company that made the blenders, testified that the fish would have been killed instantly without prolonged suffering. The museum director was acquitted. Who do you think was responsible for the death of the goldfish? Was it the member of the public who turned on the blender, the artist who exhibited the work, or the museum director? And if the goldfish suffered no more (and perhaps less so) than they would if they had been caught on a fishing line, does it make a difference that they suffered in an art museum rather than on the riverbank?</p> <p>.....</p> <p>The case above and others are only a step away from artists who have made the portrayal of human suffering a feature of their work. This category might include Kevin Carter's 1994 <u>prize-winning photograph of the starving child and the vulture in Sudan.</u></p> 

Much war photography falls into this category, too, such as the striking photograph of the young girl running from the napalm in Vietnam.



While human suffering may be sought out or intentionally expressed in shocking ways, are there good arguments about the importance of compiling a visual record of human conflict, even when – or paradoxically because – many such photographs have aesthetic qualities that compel our attention and shake our composure.



What are the ethical issues in the scenarios above?

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Closer to home, nearly all students today own smartphones with sophisticated photographic features. Questions arise:

Is it morally permissible to take a photo of whatever you desire? Is it morally permissible for Facebook or Instagram to do whatever they want with the photos that people post?

Consider the following:

Who Should Own Photos of Slaves? The Descendants, not Harvard...



The possession by Harvard University Museum of rare and early photos of slaves, taken as part of a racist study, are contested by ancestors of that family who stake a counterclaim to their possession. What are the ethical issues? What are the relevant facts? What belongs to the discussion? Who is affected or harmed? What criteria do you use to reach a decision? What are the implications?

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The potential and nature of art intersects with the central knowledge concept of truth in Keats' famous: *Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all. Ye know on earth and all ye need to know.* (from *Ode on a Grecian Urn*)

In his Nobel Prize speech, Alexander Solzhenitsyn captures the power and potential of art in the Russian proverb: *One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.*

Read **the following excerpts** from the Solzhenitsyn acceptance speech and reflect on whether your experience with literature (or other art forms) comes close to his proclamation:



Solzhenitsyn relates the sense of value – well beyond the aesthetic – in a work of art to the sharing of human experience and through that to the creation of a common set of standards by which to judge what is good and what is bad!... of crucial importance to the well-being of humanity.

Something bold for students to think about... when he says:

Who will create for mankind one system of interpretation, valid for good and evil deeds, for the unbearable and the bearable, as they are differentiated today? Who will make clear to mankind what is really heavy and intolerable and what only grazes the skin locally? Who will direct the anger to that which is most terrible and not to that which is nearer? Who might succeed in transferring such an understanding beyond the limits of his own human experience? Who might succeed in impressing upon a bigoted, stubborn human creature the distant joy and grief of others, an understanding of dimensions and deceptions which he himself has never experienced? Propaganda, constraint, scientific proof – all are useless. But fortunately there does exist such a means in our world! That means is art. That means is literature.

One word of truth shall outweigh the whole world.

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Credits for Ethics and Art

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