

## TOK Exhibition: The Validation of Knowledge

Word count: 945

The TOK prompt I have chosen is the simple question of: “What counts as knowledge?”. This exhibition explores the prompt by reflecting on the validation process of knowledge in three different fields of study - philosophy, history, and art. The three objects are reflected upon in regard to the theme of Knowledge and the Knower.

### Object 1. N, N- Dimethyltryptamine (DMT)



Figure 1

DMT is an endogenous hallucinogen drug capable of producing experiences that far surpass those of any other psychoactive drug. In recent years, DMT has surged in popularity with many celebrities, public speakers, and athletes advocating the drug's effects and thereby sparking great curiosity in my circle of acquaintances. DMT users claim to see new dimensions, feel realities that are more real than 'sober' reality, and most notably witness the presence of gods whilst high on the drug. Studies find that users tend to embrace altered perspectives on individual and common human existence and vigorously adopt beliefs in higher beings with even many reports of atheists turning religious upon just first-time consumption. Consumers claiming for the drug to grant increased metacognitive knowledge raises the question to what extent such postulations are valid. Can we attribute value to the beliefs in higher beings as a result of a drug's effects? Can we count such beliefs as knowledge? The logician and philosopher Bertrand Russel claimed that we can only count something as knowledge if we have a direct acquaintance with it that cannot be doubted. In the case of DMT, we rest unsure to what extent beliefs stemming from experiences are direct or indubitable as trips unfold in non-physical realities where no first-hand knowledge through our senses can be gained. We must however also accept that the drug's experiences are introspective and not universal; making it impossible for non-users to label the degree of acquaintance. We must also consider the other factor capable of validating knowledge: the possibility to describe something. In the case of DMT however, this only increases the challenge to find an answer to the question at hand because, while user's beliefs in higher beings are describable, DMT trips themselves are impossible to describe. Ultimately we cannot possibly know whether to count the believes stemming from DMT experiences as knowledge as we cannot grasp what lies at hand. While we can rule out that the believes are factual, we however cannot positively claim for the knowledge not to be metacognitive.

## Object 2: Hossbach Memorandum

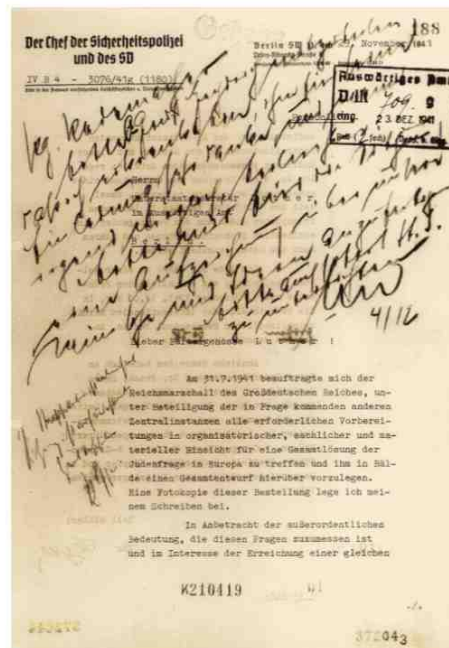


Figure 2

The Hossbach Memorandum caught my attention whilst I was researching materials on Hitler's intent to start a global war for a history essay. The memorandum summarises a speech by Hitler at an exclusive meeting and mentions Hitler's ambitions to achieve Lebensraum through war. Historians disagree to what extent the document holds value, as its author Friedrich Hossbach wrote it five days after the meeting and solely from his memory. The underlying question this object poses is to what extent its content holds any value or can count as knowledge at all. Can we count reports from human memory as factual knowledge? In the case of the Hossbach memorandum, doubts for its factual correctness are definitely appropriate, as human errors such as forgetfulness are inevitable. The memorandum's validity is further questionable considering the circumstance that it was never peer-reviewed - it is the product of just one man's interpretation. The likelihood that Hossbach misattributed words to Hitler, was inattentive, was memory blocked of valuable speech parts, was influenced by the power of suggestion by others, or failed to decipher ambiguous and vague statements is high. Human memory and interpretation are subjective and flawed by nature, leading historians such as A.J.P Taylor to see no reliability in the source. Agreeing with Taylor's stance, the question however still arises whether an unreliable source holds no value whatsoever; whether we can truly pretend for it to have never existed when talking about Hitler's motivation for international aggression, or not?



### Object 3: Three Piano Pieces, Op.11 by Arnold Schönberg

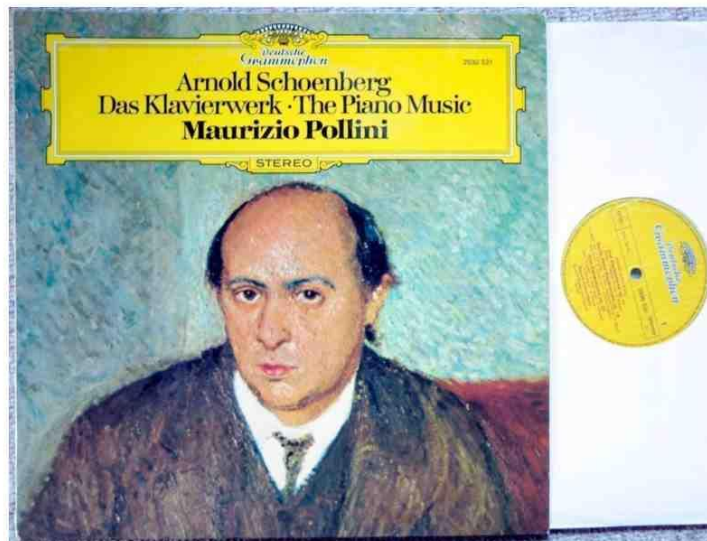


Figure 3

I find the “*Three Piano Pieces- Op. 11*” composed by Arnold Schönberg in 1909 to be one of the most intriguing sets of music in expressionism. I own a vinyl record of the Pollini recording and listen to it nearly every Sunday evening. The movement of expressionism at the beginning of the 20th century saw artists attempting to express their subjective emotional experience in order to evoke moods or ideas. The classical composer Schönberg attempted to set his emotions to music by breaking laws of traditional music theory and instead composed atonally with shifting tempos, dynamics, and harmonies. Expressionists such as Schönberg envisioned for their artworks to describe their subjective emotions by evoking similar experiences in recipients. The question at hand is whether the emotions we feel while listening to expressionists music counts as knowledge on the emotions the artist felt whilst creating it? Can the fact that I feel deep sensations of unrest and despair whilst listening to Opus 11 let me know that Schönberg had the same emotions whilst composing the music? The struggle we meet with the validation of this type of knowledge is that art is tacit. It cannot be expressed and deciphered like words or formulae, yet it is exactly this that expressionists aim to achieve. One could argue that we cannot count insights into expressionists' emotions through their art as knowledge because it is too vague, given that art is subjective. The same piece of art can be interpreted in uncountable different ways yet an artist can't have felt infinite types of emotions whilst creating it. Ultimately, we rationally comprehend that there is no way of knowing the exact emotions Schönberg felt while composing “*Three Piano Pieces*”, whilst listening to his music however, we nonetheless seem to gain tacit knowledge on Schönberg's motivating emotions based on our introspective experience.

### Image Bibliography

Figure 1: Unknown. *N, N-Dimethyltryptamine*. Digital Image. Northpoint, [www.northpointwashington.com/addiction/dmt/](http://www.northpointwashington.com/addiction/dmt/) (accessed 14.06.2021)

Figure 2: Unknown. *Hossbach Memorandum*. Digital Image. Pasapas, [www.pasapas.me/hossbach-memorandum-62/#user](http://www.pasapas.me/hossbach-memorandum-62/#user) (accessed 14.06.2021)

Figure 3: Borens, Vincent. *Record of Schönbergs Klavierwerke*. 2021.

### Text References

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