3. “The knower’s perspective is essential in the pursuit of knowledge.”
To what extent do you agree?

Nature of the Title

The essay requires several key terms to be unpacked. However, the most important is the concept of ‘knower’s perspective’ (note the use of the singular). ‘Perspective’ is a particularly amorphous concept and this essay could be taken in a huge variety of directions. As such, ‘perspective’ needs to be carefully delineated and structured. It should neither be too wide or too narrow, as candidates will need ensure they can show a considerable breadth of knowledge, but also that they can define the issues within a manageable range.

The word ‘essential’ is a potential tripping point for this essay. It could unhelpfully imply an absolute relativism of all perspectives. Yet a fine distinction that could easily be missed is that some perspectives could be simply more significant or appropriate than others, i.e. a logical perspective in maths. Essays that make this title an argument for and against relativism will miss the TOK perspective! So while the topic will inevitably be broached as part of the continuum of the ‘extent’ to which the candidate agrees, the focus of the essay should be on investigating different TOK perspectives, namely AOKs and WOKs.

In questions where there is no indication of either the type of number of WOKs or AOKs, then candidates should be advised to explore at least two AOKs and two WOKs in detail, or more with greater balance. Stronger candidates may be better able to provide a balanced holistic range, while weaker candidates, who are not guided towards at least two of each will inevitably be unrewarded by the examiners.

Furthermore, candidates should avoid being bogged down with definitions of knowledge. The implications of the title are important, but again the question does not require candidates to define knowledge. A pertinent distinction between knowledge and belief could be made, and likewise it could be argued that knowledge transcends individual or cultural perspective; however, this should not be the focus of the essay. Also, the word ‘pursuit’ should not be taken to mean only ‘new’ knowledge; it is simply TOK jargon for epistemic inquiry. To reiterate, this essay is primarily about the ‘knower’s perspective’.

Lastly, the title assumes that knower’s have a perspective, whether they are aware of it or not. Again, this assumption could and probably should be briefly broached, but the candidate should be advised that it is not requirement to make the counter-argument of this assumption. Rather candidates should go with the flow of the title and look at counterclaims to the claims made in and about the AOKs and WOKs. Note the very subtle distinction between counterclaims and counter-arguments (the assessment criteria only requires the former).

A more positive definition of ‘perspective’ will be reviewed in the section on ‘possible treatment’ below.
Knowledge Questions

Knowledge questions a candidate might identify in the course of the development of a response to the title might include:

- To what extent are a knower’s WOKs essential in the pursuit of knowledge? (Substitute various WOKs).
- Are standards of rationality and norms of reasoning grounded in cultural perspectives?
- Can and should knowledge be independent of human selection?
- Can evidence be observed independent of the observer? (Observer effect)
- How does a knower’s language affect their understanding of the world?
- Is and/or should the pursuit of knowledge look for objectivity or subjectivity?
- Is the knower’s awareness of their own perspective essential in the pursuit of knowledge?
- Do the AOKs and WOKs have their own in-built paradigms?
- How do personal and shared knowledge interact and influence each other?
- What is personal knowledge? Does it uniquely differ from individual to individual?
- What are the socially accepted methods for producing knowledge in each AOK?
- What are the norms that account for what constitute facts or good explanations in an AOK?
- What are the concepts and language appropriate to each AOK and any standards of rationality?
- Does the scientific method increase the probability of objective results?
- Is complete objectivity desirable in historical knowledge?
- Is it really possible to have knowledge of a culture in which we have not been raised? (IB Guide).
- Are those outside a particular religious tradition really capable of understanding its key ideas? (IB Guide).
- Does there exist a neutral position from which to make judgments about competing claims from different groups with different traditions and different interests? (IB Guide).
- To what extent are our familiar areas of knowledge embedded in a particular tradition or to what extent might they be bound to a particular culture? (IB Guide). Literary canon.
- To what extent should the justification of knowledge rely on experts and authority figures and institutions?
- What impact do the AOKs have on our individual lives and the way in which we view the world? How does the AOKs form or change our perspective? (IB Guide).
- Is it possible for historical writing to be free from perspective? (IB Guide).
- How can one gauge the extent to which a history is told from a particular cultural or national perspective? (IB Guide).
- To what extent does the fact that early literature on indigenous knowledge systems was written from a non-indigenous perspective affect its credibility? (IB Guide).
- What is knowledge? Propositional knowledge (knowledge claims, knowledge that..), experiential knowledge, know-how. Take a more inclusive line.
- To what extent do the different theories of history suggest different types of knowledge? Can different accounts be equally true?
- What kind of history is being undertaken and how will this influence conclusions drawn? (Military, social, economic)
- Could the existence of universal emotions form a basis for shared knowledge?
- Could the existence of objective rationality or agreed norms in an AOK form a basis for shared knowledge?
• What are the implications of applying a knower’s perspective in one AOK to a different discipline?
• It is claimed a good historian cannot be neutral. To what extent is individual perspective a positive factor in the pursuit of knowledge in history? What are the implications of this for history?
• To what extent are a knower’s emotions essential in the pursuit of knowledge?
• To what extent does our culture determine or shape what we believe or know? (Examiner’s Preparation Notes, November 2012).
• To what extent are we aware of the impact of culture on what we believe or what we know? (Examiner’s Preparation Notes, November 2012).
• Is there anything which is true for all cultures? (Examiner’s Preparation Notes, November 2012).
• Who is best placed to attempt to evaluate a culture (and its impact on knowledge or belief) objectively? (Examiner’s Preparation Notes, November 2012).
• Does proximity to a culture produce a better understanding of it?
• What similarities and contrasts are generated when the arts and a different AOK tackle the same topic? E.g. ‘Guernica’ but not!
• To what extent do the perspectives that are fostered through membership of a particular culture exert positive or negative influences on our knowledge?
• To what extent do intuitively appealing explanations depend on culture or perspective, and how do these factors influence what can or should be discarded?
• Is the individual knower a product of their personal and shared perspectives?
• Is mathematics a universal language that is independent of any culture? (Piraha tribe of north-west Brazil have no words for numbers.)
Commentary on Possible Treatment

As discussed in the nature of the title, candidates should begin by attempting to fruitfully outline the concept of a 'knower's perspective'. The IB Syllabus Guide provides the most authoritative point of departure:

‘Shared knowledge as membership of our cultural, ethnic, gender and other groups might influence our worldview. This is what we call perspective.’

‘Personal knowledge, on the other hand, depends crucially on the experiences of a particular individual. It is gained through experience, practice and personal involvement and is intimately bound up with the particular local circumstances of the individual such as biography, interests, education, values, and so on. It contributes to, and is in turn influenced by, an individual’s personal perspective.’ (IB Guide).

‘Acknowledgment of such perspectives is an important goal of the TOK course.’ (IB Guide).

Here we have the concept definitively summarized. Therefore, the main focus of the essay should concern the distinction between personal and shared knowledge as they relate to the AOKs and WOKs. This distinction is heavily dealt with in the IB Syllabus Guide and students and teachers would do well to investigate this source for further guidance. Students might wish to pay particular attention to how both perspectives change over time.

Also, candidates should also be advised to carefully look at the Knowledge Framework (KF) of the AOKs they are analysing, and to refer to the various categories of the KF, which themselves constitute different perspectives of the AOK. Moreover, arguably the biggest factor currently influencing IB students’ perspective is their education; hence, they should write about what they are learning in their departmental subjects!

An obvious choice of AOK for this title would be history. Firstly, candidates should take care to distinguish the past from the study of the past. Candidates might begin by giving consideration to knowledge questions such as: to what extent are a knower's emotions essential in the pursuit of knowledge in history? Equally, other WOKs can be substituted and explored, noting that specialisation in history leads to more defined perspectives and the range of historical theories (Great Man, Marxist, Feminist, etc.) could be examined. Pluralist approaches should also be considered. The counterclaim is that historical perspectives are something produced by or imposed upon a community.

Personal knowledge and shared knowledge are also highly relevant to the Arts. Candidates might explore what individual talent means, and how the individual is influenced by tradition. T.S. Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' would be an interesting source. Within the Arts there are also 'socially established methods for producing knowledge...norms for what counts as a fact or a good explanation, concepts and language appropriate to each area and standards of rationality.' (IB Guide). Candidates could successfully investigate which knowledge questions are raised by this account of shared knowledge.

Initially, Maths and the Sciences appear to be least influenced by ‘perspective’, but practitioners
in these fields adhere to norms, and from this angle it is difficult to see knowledge as completely independent of “cultural” processes. On the other hand, the arts and ethics seem inexorably bound up with cultural perspective and yet seek to produce universal truths. An interesting comparison would be to look at evolutionary theories of emotions, e.g. as tools of survival rather than from the poet’s perspective of emotions as tools for transcendence.

Candidates may wish to reverse suggested causational direction of the title, i.e. it is the AOK that shapes perspective. E.g. if I am inclined towards the Arts, then this predisposition could shape my perspective of the world. Cartographers produce a particular type of map to serve specific needs i.e. Mercator’s mariner’s bias. This could then be used to link perspectives with paradigms and the implications of paradigm shifts could be investigated.

Walter Kaufman’s translation of Nietzsche’s *Will to Power* states: ‘In so far as the word "knowledge" has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretable [emphasis in original] otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings.—"Perspectivism." This quotation could be successfully related to language as a WOK. Candidates may wish to consider the impact of language, as a component of culture, and how examples such as multilingualism affect the pursuit of knowledge.

Looking at emotions, feeling “indignation” about a moral issue depends on our beliefs, or in other words our perspectives (with their components of assumptions, values, selected or familiar information, processes of validation and implications).

The range of possibilities with this title is vast.