**TOK ESSAY: INTUITION**

**Question:** When should we discard explanations that are intuitively appealing?

Intuition, one way of knowing, could be described as a combination of creative insight and hunches, or the ‘Eureka’ moment when something just inexplicably makes sense to us. We have three main types of intuition: core intuition, subject-specific intuition and social intuition, that govern the way we think about life, the universe, specific subjects and other people. It could be said that although we can defend explanations using reason and logic, if a person were to ask ‘*why?’* enough times the response would eventually become that what they just said is intuitively obvious. Therefore it could be argued that everything we “know” is based if not directly, indirectly, on our intuition. However intuitions differ from person to person and can often lead us to reach false conclusions about the world and the people in it. Therefore it is important to be aware of when and how we use our intuition and even ask ourselves whether there are circumstances in which we should discard explanations that are intuitively appealing. When considering when this may be necessary it is important to ask to what extent intuition depends on culture or perspective and whether these factors should influence what can or should be discarded as well as to be wary that some areas of knowledge may produce more explanations that are intuitively appealing than others. These questions can be very important to ask in the study of biology and English Literature.

It could be argued that more subjective areas of knowledge such as English Literature produce more explanations that are intuitively appealing than more objective ones such as biology. This is because readers are very rarely given exact statements about the events of a story or the character’s within them. Very few writers are likely to say that ‘Tim is bad,” or that “something bad is about to happen.” Instead they reveal the nature of a character through their actions and foreshadow future events by leaving clues in their texts. In order to interpret these clues and make judgements about character readers must use their intuition. For instance in the play “A Streetcar Named Desire” which we are currently studying, we must read between the lines of the playwright’s stage directions to understand the nature of the different characters. In one scene after overhearing her insult him, Stanley grins at Blanche over the shoulder of his unsuspecting wife. Whilst logically there is no reason why his smile could not be well intentioned our intuition tells us that this is a cruel smile, and foreshadows the fact that Stanley will also be cruel to Blanche in the future. Although later scenes confirm the suspicions we built as a result of intuition, it may have been equally likely that the smile was friendly and that Stanley would have been kind to Blanche. If no other evidence had been provided to better confirm or deny our intuitive suspicions our intuition may have led us to inherit ideas about the character that the writer did not intend his readers to have, and we may conclude that the play spreads a particular message the writer did not in fact wish to spread. Literature therefore relies heavily on the basis that readers share a more or less universal intuition. However, this may be questionable as intuitively appealing explanations could rely quite significantly on a person’s culture and perspective. For instance in the United States a man sitting with the base of his shoe visible is a commonplace sight, meanwhile in some Arabic cultures it is considered to be extremely rude. Therefore to someone in an Arabic country might intuitively assume that a character who comes home and puts his feet up on the table in front of his wife disrespects her where we may just assume that the man is merely tired, or lazy. Therefore our intuition may lead us to make false assumptions about a character’s personality, if we are not knowledgeable about the location and the customs of the country in which a story is set. As a result it may be the case that we should discard intuitively appealing explanations if they are not backed up by similar intuitive explanations from other people (including those who share the same culture as the characters and/or the writer), or by statements made by the writer about their work or “proof” through action and statements found earlier or later in the text.

However, it can also be argued that intuition is central to the purpose of literature, as it is often written to be open-ended or interpreted as the reader chooses. One of the main purposes of literature is entertaining and eliciting an emotional reaction from its readers. Whether or not the text achieves this effect may be closely linked to the ability of a reader to relate to the story and its characters. This special link is often a result of the reader’s chance to come up with explanations that they find intuitively appealing. For instance if you were a divorced woman who still loved her ex-husband, you may intuitively assume that the reason the divorced character of a novel still lives in the same neighbourhood as her ex is in order to remain close to him. Whereas a reader who despises their ex-husband may intuitively decide that the character hates her ex but is in the same neighbourhood because she can’t afford to move elsewhere. These explanations cannot both be true and may both be wrong. However, whether or not these explanations match the original ideas of the writer, they serve the purpose of allowing the readers to become emotionally attached to the work and therefore likely to become more emotionally concerned with the more major themes of the text which the writer is likely to provide more obvious or concrete statements about. This can also be said for readers who attribute social pressures common in their culture to a character from a different culture, as it allows them to have an emotional connection with the text’s characters. Therefore it could equally be concluded that intuitively appealing explanations should never be discarded when studying English Literature as they are essential to the entire purpose of reading, and in forming a strong emotional feeling towards the text.

On the other hand, it could be argued that sciences, such as biology produce the fewest explanations that are intuitively appealing. This is because scientists are rarely allowed to observe their surroundings and make their own scientific conclusions based on mere intuition. Instead they are required to provide evidence for their intuitive explanations by carrying out experiments that provide data to supports this explanation. It is also likely that their ideas will not be accepted until other scientists carry out identical tests to see if they too produce similar or identical results. Therefore new research papers or theories are not conclusions based on intuition but conclusions based on specific data recorded over several experiments. For instance in biology I intuitively decided that enzymes must work well in thirty seven degrees Celsius as they are found in our bodies and our body temperature is approximately thirty seven degrees. However this conclusion would not be accepted if I and my other classmates had not conducted experiments that provided data to show that enzymes work well at that temperature.. Based on this method of producing scientific explanations intuitively appealing explanations should be discarded if they are not supported by experimental evidence that can be reproduced time and time again by different scientists.

However, it can also be argued that many areas of scientific study are very productive of intuitively appealing explanations. An example of one of these areas is evolution. The reason why evolution may produce more explanations that are intuitively appealing than other areas in biology is because the conclusions made about evolution aren’t often based on the results of experiments but on the finding of patterns in the fossil record. Unfortunately this system is far from perfect as there are huge gaps in the fossil record, that mean that there are huge periods of time in Earth’s history we know close to nothing about. With very little concrete data or other evidence to support their findings scientists that study evolution must often rely on their educated intuition to make conclusions about their findings. For instance if a fossil was to be found that had similar bone structures to the modern day rats, intuitively scientists may theorize that the two creatures share a similar ancestry. However, due to these gaps in the record and the lack of other existing evidence makes it very hard to confirm or disprove these intuitive explanations. This can be dangerous if other scientists then base new ideas on these potentially false conclusions. Therefore it may seem appropriate that if no other evidence that supports the intuition is found the finding should not be published or taken into account when evaluating new findings. However, this system of discarding intuition, might mean that the study of evolution may become stunted as it would be very difficult to make and release any conclusions about new findings. It could be argued that the study of evolution will always have to rely at least partly on intuition and therefore it should be allowed as long as it is accepted that our theories about evolution, and these other areas of scientific study, are never certain.

It can also be argued that intuitively appealing explanations in sciences like biology are much less dependent on culture and perspective as science, unlike arts like English Literature, primarily deals with concrete objects rather than ideas and more abstract objects such as emotion and personality. Where the understanding and appreciation of abstract ideas and objects may change drastically from one culture to another or even from one person to another the understanding of concrete objects is much more universal. For instance if you were to ask anyone around the world whether they would expect the water in a river to flow downstream or upstream the universal intuition would be to say that the water will flow downstream, because it doesn’t matter where you are in the world this fact of nature is always obeyed. Meanwhile if you were to ask multiple people around the world to decide whether the couple presented to them are really in love their answers are likely to differ due to their different intuitions about the nature of love. Many of the different things studied by scientists remain the same no matter where you are in the world and therefore it could be said that intuitively appealing explanations in science are much less dependent on culture and perspective. As a result it may not be necessary to discard intuitively appealing explanations about science simply because they are made in places different from the one in which you live.

In conclusion, intuition is likely to find its way into any area of knowledge from the study of arts like English Literature to the study of sciences like biology, regardless of how objective it may seem. This is due to our core intuition which determines what we know about the most basic aspects of life. However intuition seems to depend far more on culture and perspective when dealing with more abstract ideas and objects such as personality and emotion, which are dealt with much more in English Literature than in biology. Therefore it can be concluded that English Literature is more productive of intuitively appealing explanations than biology and that these intuitions are more dependent on culture and perspective. However, despite taking this into consideration, it may not necessarily be beneficial to discard more of the intuitively appealing explanations you produce when studying English Literature than those you produce in biology, as these intuitions may be more helpful than dangerous in the study of texts. Meanwhile intuitively reached conclusions in biology could be considered more dangerous as they may be used in future conclusions, however it can also be argued that some areas of biology must rely on intuition in order for the study of it to continue.