4. With reference to two areas of knowledge discuss the way in which shared knowledge can shape personal knowledge.

Shared knowledge can and does shape personal knowledge. Throughout life we persistently harness knowledge. We accumulate information from diverse sources in copious ways and then interpret such acquisition through our knowledge matrix, individual filters of emotion, memory, sense perceptions, language and intuition, so that we can comprehend and internalize it. We can divide knowledge into two areas: shared knowledge, which is imparted to a group or community, and personal knowledge, which is acquired through individual experience and personal involvement. I will discuss how shared knowledge shapes personal knowledge with reference to religious knowledge systems and the arts. My contention will be supported with evidence using examples from Judaism as a religion and music as a creative art. These examples both demonstrate how personal knowledge, unique to each individual both biologically and experientially, can be profoundly influenced by the communal constraints of shared knowledge.

In order to validate my assertion, I shall flip the supposition; does the personal shape shared knowledge? A group requires many individuals and such individuals are responsible for knowledge that is then shared. Ultimately, shared scientific knowledge is a collection of individuals’ personal knowledge and contributions. It is also reasonable to contend that personal knowledge, creativity and individual experiences constitute essential influence on religion and the arts as well. However, just as individuals ultimately forge new dimensions in shared knowledge they must contribute in concert, so to speak, within an historical, cultural and linguistic context. Effectively, shared and personal knowledge are inextricably linked.

Knowledge in religion systems is often contentious. Some deny the existence of god or fervently adhere to the doctrines and rituals of their distinct religion. The creation stories and laws contained
in scriptures or handed down through oral tradition, and the proscribed rituals of religious practices embody what would be considered shared knowledge. It is faith and the feelings of revelation that must exist as personal knowledge. Religion explains concepts that science cannot. While science explains the world from a “What” and “How” perspective, religion explains it from the “Why”. Religion also raises ethical awareness; the community teaches individuals how to be good people through doctrine, ritual and communal bonding festivals.

To comprehend how shared knowledge shapes personal knowledge in religion, we must consider the source of religious knowledge. Revelation, whether direct or indirect, constitutes an array of religious knowledge, because it is directly linked to emotion as a way of knowing. People who witness miracles or have mystical or spiritual experiences sense strong emotions, which justify their beliefs. Religious authorities ostensibly possess more knowledge of and adherence to their religion than others in the community. They are responsible for interpreting teachings and traditions and also determining which variations of interpretation are permissible and which are regarded as heretical. In other words, they decide what counts as religious knowledge (scripture, rules, existential explanations) and what doesn’t. Traditions and rituals may be called the memory of a religious community and the physical embodiment and expression of religious knowledge. All these aspects of shared knowledge in a religious system are the foundation through which individuals filter and then express their unique experiences.

Judaism is a monotheistic religion with the Torah (the Old Testament) as its foundational text. As a Jew, I have witnessed how communal tradition plays a deep role in maintaining the Jewish community. In Judaism shared knowledge undoubtedly shapes personal knowledge. Shared knowledge in Judaism is transmitted between generations both through written texts, shared daily rituals and observance of many holy days. Jews fast on Yom Kippur, the day of repentance, observe
Kashrut (strict dietary laws), commemorate historic holidays such as Hanukah and Purim and men pray several times a day and usually in groups of ten. Prayer involves highly ritualized chanting of Hebrew scripture and the adornment with standardized accoutrements (tallis, kipot and tefillin).

Traditions, beliefs and commandments in the Torah are considered sanctified by the word of God. This is where personal knowledge is shaped. As Jewish individuals are exposed to religious knowledge, it informs their personal understanding of Judaism and God. The personal knowledge in religion is the individual’s faith. This is the trust and confidence in something for which there is no incontrovertible proof. One tenet of Judaism actually maintains that it is not necessary to ‘believe’ without doubt, or to have total faith. The obligation in Judaism is to observe the laws (there are 613 mitsvot or laws in the torah). The rabbis have understood that faith is personal and cannot be forced, but rather through ritual and adherence to rules of conduct individuals can develop faith. The physical act of prayer and the emotional utterance of gratitude for both the basic necessities in life and urgent aspirations can in and of themselves psychologically elicit individual experiences of faith and revelation.

The arts provide an interesting opportunity to study the nature of knowledge, because they necessarily embody creativity and draw upon a broad spectrum of disciplines. All artistic production draws on emotion and imagination combined with inner logic and rationality to create something new. It must therefore spring from the domain of personal knowledge. Nonetheless, it builds upon a foundation of shared knowledge, a body of aesthetics and values agreed upon culturally. Again, the shared shapes the personal.

To study the roles of shared and personal knowledge in the arts, one must consider the ways in which art is viewed. This is done both communally and personally, which means that art can be
assessed according to criteria and qualities that are independent of the observer (form, genre, style, texture, shape, color, tempo and language within an historical context) and judged based on personal preference (how it elicits emotional, intuitive and sensual responses). An individual’s aesthetic preference will be highly influenced by the society that sets the criteria. Artistic diversity is fostered as individuals are inspired by sources they are exposed to and, as unique voices, harness their own intuition, emotion and imagination in the creative process. The shared knowledge imposes form on the personal.

The arts satisfy our sense perception and accordingly entertain or inspire. Music is a special art form as its medium is sound. It is comprised of acoustic elements such as pitch, rhythm and dynamics. Song can also include verbal art, poetry specifically. Musical knowledge varies dramatically around the globe. The movement of musical traditions as humans migrated and diffused has inspired novel forms of music, hence the development of genres and subgenres.

All musical knowledge is affected by culture; the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. It begins with a shared set of traditions and expectations in the family/community/region/country. For example, Western music has a scale of 12 notes per octave that are equally separated by equal tones or semitones. A moveable seven-note scale is, however, used in Indian classical music with frequent intervals smaller than a semitone. Instruments are widely diverse, and even the physical use of voice can be totally different. For example, in Tibet they practice throat singing that produces a unique double sound. There are global differences in tempo, dynamics and pretty much every factor in music across cultures.

To further illustrate my thesis I will refer to a composition performed with my choir. Mozart’s Requiem is a Christian mass and the composer’s last composition. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart lived
in central Europe during the late 1700’s, an emerging era of Classicism. Like every Christian mass at that time, Requiem was written in Latin due to the influence of the Catholic church. Mozart incorporates contrapuntal complexities similar to those of Bach’s during the Baroque era, however, the central traits of Classicism are present in Mozart’s requiem. These include variations in keys, melodies, rhythm and dynamics (before there were no gradual changes in dynamics, only jumps between soft and loud) and frequent changes in mood and timbre that are expressed with clarity, balance and transparency compared to the dignified gravity and impressive grandeur of the Baroque era. Furthermore, the harpsichord continuo fell out of use and orchestras increased in size. Overall, Mozart’s Requiem is defined by its historical and cultural context. Evidenced by the composition, Mozart’s knowledge of composing is within the boundaries of what was taught in Classical Europe.

Personal knowledge of Mozart’s Requiem is revealed through an individual’s input in performance. Every musician has a unique sound, especially singers. Biologically, everyone’s voice differs with pitch, timbre, texture and tone. The shared knowledge affects people differently, therefore the aesthetic nuance greatly impacts performance. A performance of Mozart’s Requiem by Cantores Minores will sound different from a performance by King’s College Choir not only in articulation, but in all other factors. Ultimately, the personal knowledge (the musicality) is shaped by the written music, which is the shared knowledge. Though music is based in cultural tradition it is also always a product of personal experience and creativity. The quality of tone and strength of emotion are always a unique expression of individual human endeavor.

In conclusion, shared knowledge must shape personal knowledge. In religious knowledge systems like Judaism Torah study and proscribed rituals help individuals gain individual faith. In the arts shared knowledge in music, dictated by historical and cultural context, shapes how individuals

1 The relationship between voices that are interdependent harmonically yet independent in rhythm and contour.
express the music aesthetically with their unique set of skills. One of the greatest drummers of all
time, Buddy Rich, once said: “I consider every drummer that ever played before me an influence, in
every way”. Shared and personal knowledge are inextricably linked. However, shared knowledge is
the foundation upon which personal knowledge is built.

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