

5. "...we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." (Noam Chomsky). To what extent would you agree?
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PRESCRIBED QUESTION NO.5: "...we will always learn more about human life and human personality from novels than from scientific psychology." (Noam Chomsky). To what extent would you agree?

Jean Paul Sartre¹ once said; "Everything has been figured out, except how to live."² It seems that the biggest question of our existence is the mystery of life itself. Humans strived over the centuries finding the very purpose of life, the thirst for knowledge about our own behavior has been insatiable. The boundaries of our understanding have been widened over the last fifty years by an enormous amount of psychological research by the likes of Sigmund Freud, Stanley Milgram and John Watson, only to name a few, whom have undoubtedly contributed to our understanding of human behavior. In contrast to this, it is estimated that on average 250,000 to 1,000,000 books are published worldwide each year³; these range from novels, autobiographies, history books and other works of writing, which have also been utilized as a means of gathering knowledge on human behavior. Literature and psychology could be regarded as two extremes in terms of understanding the human psyche. Literature offers an exploration of the individual as we get different perspectives of an event. Psychology, on the other hand, is useful on a macro scale, it uses generalizations that can be applied to groups of people.

Chomsky's quote was taken from his autobiography, in which he explains further his argument on acquiring knowledge through literature and psychology, therefore in this essay I will discuss not only novels but works of literature; which I define as a piece of creative writing which could be a direct expression or imaginative reflection of someone's experience or an event. Psychology is defined as a branch of human science, which studies the mental processes of humans and their behaviour. I consider what Chomsky means by 'human life and human personality' as the comprehensive scope of human personality, emotion, behaviour, intention and their interaction within society.

To Chomsky's quote I react simply, that one will never learn nor absorb knowledge about a matter more from one Area of Knowledge than another. Yet Chomsky presents us with an interesting argument; that one will be able to learn more about human life and human personality from literature rather than learning from scientific psychology. From my past experiences, I believe that novels and other works of literature do give us an insight into human life, however this quote is an oversimplification on the matter. Moreover, Chomsky's background as an author and professor of linguistics means that he perhaps said this based on emotion and therefore the statement comes from a subjective point of view and as a result might be biased.

The 'processes' in acquiring knowledge about human qualities differ between literature and psychology. The knowledge in literature is gathered anecdotally whereas in psychology, empirical knowledge is gathered. Anecdotal evidence or knowledge in literature can help us to understand issues with sympathy (using emotion). When we read literature, we are able to not only agree but question ideas. In creating literature, writers express ideas which some could be regarded as illogical or unconventional but we believe to exist in the world (such as the feeling of bliss or love). It also has the power to inspire and motivate. Psychology uses empirical evidence, knowledge based through observation and careful reasoning. The subjectivity of any observational research is inevitable, which becomes an obstacle in psychology however an asset in literature. Science works at its best where it can be truly objective; the use of emotion in science is seen as a contribution to a lack of accuracy. This is what some could see as a weakness in psychology; cold reasoning is used to study human emotion. So then, is emotion best explored through emotion, as literature does? On the other hand, subjectivity in psychology doesn't have to be seen as a complete disadvantage. Various psychologists offer different theories and correct each

¹ French author & existentialist philosopher (1905 - 1980)

² Moncur, M. (1994-2007) *Quotation details* [Online] Available from: <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/11406.html>. [Accessed November 25 2007]

³ [no author] (2006) *How many books are published average worldwide each year?* [Online] Answers Corporation. Available from: http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_books_are_published_average_worldwide_each_year. [Accessed February 4 2008]

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other therefore the self-correcting nature of human sciences is an advantage as incorrectness is usually ruled out over time.

In literature, the nature of language itself holds advantages and disadvantages in furthering one's knowledge of human behavior. Language used in literature can have the power of influence. Words, however, often have shades of meaning. When analyzing literature, sometimes there are words that have positive overtones and negative overtones; we try to find which shade of meaning the writer is intending for. For example, these series of words;

"cop officer law enforcement officer pig policeman"⁴

the word 'cop' and 'pig' are the words with negative overtones to the neutral word 'law enforcement officer'. We can misinterpret literature and rather than understanding more of the writer's intentions, we misunderstand it completely. Literature also uses colorful imagery and symbolism. The writer's intention is to explain ideas in more spiritual depth, as things in life are sometimes hard to express with straightforward language (literal meanings are, more often than not, different than intended meaning). The interpretation is up to the reader. On the contrary, the use of symbolism and the different interpretations it offers can be a plus. Even though a word doesn't mean the same thing to every person, that personal meaning is still significant and useful to the individual reader.

Idealistically, the nature of scientific observation in psychology would carry no bias, however as we know, human sciences are prone to bias. There are outlines as to what is 'right' or 'wrong' and what classifies as one condition or another. This is most apparent in Freud's psychodynamic approach to psychology⁵, where he uses the case study method, quantitatively gathering data on their past and their behavior. He then analyzed it through interpreting the symbolism of what they said or did. His works have had a large influence on psychology and determining mental disorders. There seems to be an ongoing struggle with psychology patients and identifying their 'problems'; it is hard to classify individual predicaments into generalized cases. I recently read *The Bell Jar*⁶ by Sylvia Plath, which follows the story of a young woman named *Esther Greenwood* whom many consider to be a reflection of Plath's own life. In the novel, Esther lamented over the incompetence of psychological observation and psychiatric cure (such as shock therapy) and repeatedly criticized that the psychologists she saw never understood her. This case is common in many individuals with psychological trouble, I had a friend who went through this situation and the incompetence of psychologists to fully understand an individual human behavior evidently became a hurdle. Moreover, regarding Plath's *The Bell Jar*, it was interesting that through the figurative language I was able to understand her condition when she was going through 'psychological trouble'. *Esther* was humanized through the first-person narrative. Literature gives us the ability to look at a perspective and really be 'in someone else's shoes'. However, Freud's method of psychological observation is not so different to how we acquire knowledge from a book, through analyzing symbols. In addition, Freud believes "the task of making conscious the most hidden recesses of the minds is one which it is quite possible to accomplish".⁷ This identification of the conscious and subconscious mind is very useful. When reading literature, there is at times a blurred line between the conscious and subconscious. This thought sheds a light on my reading of the story *Metamorphosis*⁸ by Franz Kafka. There are times where *Gregor* seems to be expressing his subconscious and times where he's at his conscious, this was up to the reader, to identify. One could argue that the open-ended, individualistic personalized nature of literature is a great deal more subjective (therefore more prone to inaccuracy) than psychological research, where one tries to be objective.

In today's society, there are many approaches to psychology which have been valuable. Another approach to psychology is the social psychological approach, as carried out by Stanley Milgram. The strengths of his approach is that it is often conducted in a 'scientifically objective manner' and the fact that he looks at social influences on people and not just their emotional influence. His famous experiment in

⁴ Mc Cart, W.F., (1984) *The Elements of Clear Thinking- Accurate Communication* Educators Publishing Service, Inc.: Cambridge, Massachusetts

⁵ Glassman, William E., Hadad, M. (2004) *Approaches to Psychology* Open Uni. Press

⁶ Plath, S. (1963) *The Bell Jar*. William Heinemann Limited: London

⁷ Brenner, P., Wise, F. [no date] *The Conscious mind: Programming the Brain-computer* [Online] Available from: <http://www.theconsciousmind.com/Index.htm>. [Accessed January 30 2008]

⁸ Kafka, F. (2007) *Metamorphosis* Penguin Books: London

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1963 on obedience is something I find disturbing, however. Volunteers abide the instructions of authority figures when told to give electricity shocks (as 'teachers') to their 'students' (who were actors). I think it is unnecessary to go this far into scientific observation, although it does give us qualitative data with numbers and figures (e.g. two-thirds of volunteers continued to give electric shocks up to 450 volts⁹). In literature, we can understand human behavior through observation and reflection; we don't need experiments on humans. Then again, if we were to read a hundred works of literature on obedience, would that give us the conclusion as to how easy it is for humans to abide to authority? Does it give us a 'true' reflection of the psychological make-up of the human mind today?

In evaluation, although psychology gives us an objective observation of human life, I believe we owe it to literature to 'explain the unexplainable'. Although literature can lead us to such understandings, I believe it isn't enough for us to understand the whole human psyche. The objective reasoning in psychology is needed as well. Moreover, it is untrue to say that psychology doesn't attempt to explain the unexplainable as psychologists offer their view and analysis on this, for example Freud's psychology of love. As much as literature inspires and motivates, I believe it can affect us only so much. It doesn't change me as a person. In today's modern society, we need psychology to give us conclusions about our questions on the human psyche. As an area of knowledge, it provides us with a valuable judgment of human behavior as we exist today.

Word count: 1,599

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⁹ van de Lagemaat, R. (2005) *Theory of Knowledge for the IB Diploma*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.