

“Avoiding bias seems a commendable goal, but this fails to recognize the positive role that bias can play in the pursuit of knowledge.” Discuss this statement with reference to two areas of knowledge.

Word count: 1554

To me, avoiding bias in the pursuit of knowledge is a romanticized concept. As a society, we have come to see bias as unequivocally bad—a sure-shot way to be perpetuated as inaccurate, misleading, morally unethical, one-sided, and thus inherently partial—and so we undertake every possible measure to eliminate this bias. However, I believe that avoiding bias is, and forever will be, just an impossible feat, an ambition, or, as recognized by the statement, a goal, and its role in the acquisition of knowledge will always be substantial. When I make this postulation, it’s crucial to recognize the four systematic pillars of bias: We, as humans, are intrinsically partial, solicit refuge in personal experiences, perceive through our cultural conditioning, and have an evolutionary pressure towards competitiveness. These four systematic pillars comprise our human tendencies to review, classify, and sort knowledge about the world around us, and there is no one human without these four natural tendencies. It’s not unjustified, then, to say that there cannot be pursuit of knowledge without bias, and insight and recognition of the roles of bias can be vital in the production of new knowledge. Hence, by exploring these four systematic pillars of bias and how they lend themselves to different areas of knowledge, we can gain an imperative understanding of the roles of bias in the pursuit of knowledge, whether beneficial or detrimental. Finally, it is also important to realize that "pursuit of knowledge" doesn’t refer to factually correct knowledge. Rather, it alludes to knowledge as an understanding of something. For example, whether or not the urban legend of Bigfoot is real, an understanding of it is considered knowledge.

Innately, as religious knowledge systems are an area of knowledge deeply entrenched in moral ideals and cultural parameters, biases play a valuable role in the quest for religious knowledge. For many, religious knowledge offers the meaning of human existence, decipherings of human behaviors, and, in the case of Laleh Bakhtiar, teachings on how humans should live. The Quran, written in classical Arabic,

deviates from the modern standard Arabic that is extensively spoken today. As the structure and words of the language have changed over time, Islamic scholars often clash over the Quran's true meaning, and thus the Quran's translations are considered interpretations rather than actual adaptations. Laleh Bakhtiar, who was an American-Islamic author and translator, took issue¹ with a verse of the Quran which dealt with how a husband should treat a rebellious wife, which stated that wives should be 'beat' until their conduct improved. Bakhtiar admitted that, at first, she was biased. She refrained from believing that the God she loved—who condemned violence, practiced peace, conveyed love—would advocate for brutality. Despite the many interpretations of the Quran, Bakhtiar's deeply ingrained biases, which were conditioned by her societal and cultural surroundings, led her to continue believing that Allah had in fact created 'the religion of peace,' reaffirmed by the peaceful Islamic way of life led by her friends, family, and community at large. As Bakhtiar's convictions and deepest beliefs about Allah conflicted with the interpretations of the Quran, she inferred that 'idrib'—the classical Arabic word for 'beat'—must have had multiple meanings, and later discovered that 'idrib' has links to words like 'leave.' In this case, Bakhtiar's bias urged her to take to language as a way of knowing to uncover her own interpretation of the Quran. Whether or not Bakhtiar's interpretation was correct, her bias sanctioned her to explore language as a way of knowing through interpretation, proving beneficial in her pursuit for knowledge and production of new knowledge.

With that being said, it's necessary to address perspectives where biases play a detrimental role in the acquisition of knowledge. For example, my uncle, who used to be a science undergraduate at the University of Texas, began his conversion to Christianity during his time in college. My uncle began to see the Bible as the true representation of God's word and will, and believed it to recite him the truths of everyday life. At first, in his pursuit of religious knowledge, religion and science coexisted. However, as he became versed with the inner workings of the Bible, his religious knowledge grew and began to clash with his scientific knowledge. From the biblical account of the creation of humans conflicting with the

¹ MacFarquhar, N. (2007, March 24). *New Translation Prompts Debate on Islamic Verse*. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/us/25koran.html>

Darwinian theory of evolution, to the biblical account of the flat shape of earth contradicting the spherical earth concept, my uncle had to question which was the truth, God's word or the veracities of contemporary science. In the absence of clarity, biases have their most profound effect. Instead of accepting both religious and scientific knowledge claims in his pursuit for knowledge, my uncle faced the natural human tendency to be partial and, hence, was biased. Anchoring bias predisposed my uncle to be one-sided, forcing him to believe in only one of the claims made rather than accepting both as knowledge. My uncle's pursuit of religious knowledge was impeded by his predisposition to believing what he had been believing all his life. In this case, even though the religious claims and the scientific claims were intended to coexist as separate entities of knowledge, my uncle's biases led him to a halt in his pursuit of religious knowledge and hence proved detrimental in his acquisition of knowledge.

Another aspect of the roles of biases in the pursuit of knowledge can be seen in ethics—another area of knowledge with deeply embedded roots in biases. In an area of knowledge dictated solely by moral principles, personal experiences, and competitiveness, biases tremendously govern the ethical decision-making process and shed light on the authentic roles of bias in our society. One facet of ethics integral to demonstrating the roles of bias is in the courtroom. The court² is an institution with the jurisdiction to resolve legal disputes between opposing parties. Moreover, the court system is facilitated by two primary sources of evidence known as the defending attorney and the prosecuting attorney. Rather than using a relatively unbiased individual, who has no involvement in the case, to collect and provide knowledge to the judge and jury, the court system makes an interesting deliberation wherein it provides biased individuals, who both want to 'win' their cases, the main role in providing this knowledge. Ultimately, this ethical decision-making process is driven by judgment and interpretation. Hence, the two very distinct perspectives in the courtroom, the two attorneys, are what propel the discussions and developments through their arguments and desire to win. This competitiveness thrusts the attorneys to be biased, encouraging them to layer objective knowledge in the construction of scenarios and stories using

² *How a Case Moves Through the Court System*. (n.d.). AZ Courts.
<https://www.azcourts.gov/guidetoazcourts/How-a-Case-Moves-Through-the-Court-System>

varied perspectives, and thus develop deep and relevant insights into the case for the judge and jury to evaluate. It can then be seen that biases, when employed in a systematic method, can in fact provide valuable exchange and development in the pursuit of knowledge.

In my own personal experience, however, biases have, at times, also played a constricting role in the acquisition of knowledge. Personal experiences often fuel biases, creating a distorted view of the world, wherein these biases can cause us to make misguided assumptions and hamper our abilities to acquire objective knowledge. For example, witnessing, firsthand, the violent seizures and side-effects faced by my sister after a vaccination at the age of five, I never found it easy to express that vaccines are ethically justified or good. Here, my intuition as a way of knowing was exploited by the availability heuristic bias—the human tendency to estimate the probability of something happening based on the number of personal experiences that come to mind. As opinions on vaccinations, in today’s world, are becoming more and more ethically charged, an objective interpretation of facts and reasons is required to have a comprehensive understanding of the risk versus benefit analysis of vaccines. However, in my case, my ability to acquire this knowledge was tremendously hindered by intuition to believe that vaccines are dangerous and unethical. To me, the ethical dilemma—the risks versus the benefits—of getting vaccinated was heavily skewed because in my experience the side-effects of getting vaccinated were more profound than statistics, expert opinions, and literature had revealed. Had I grown up in a household where a vaccine didn’t cause my sister to have epilepsy, I may have accepted the objective knowledge and facts about vaccinations more readily. In this sense, biases, at times, can play a detrimental role when our personal experiences distort our ability to accept facts, and thus can prove to interfere in the pursuit of knowledge.

To a large extent, biases play a significant role in our pursuit of knowledge. As illustrated by the four systematic pillars of bias—cultural conditioning, partiality, evolutionary competitiveness, and personal experiences—different types of bias can be attributed to disparate roles in the pursuit of knowledge. While biases have proved to be fruitful, they are only effectively utilized if their limitations

and drawbacks are acknowledged, which range from unintentional partiality in face of knowledge, to a warped sense of reality driven by personal experiences. To me, avoiding bias is not a commendable goal, but rather an improbable one—one that, at times, can play an immensely beneficial role, from allowing us to explore our own unique interpretations and perceptions of the knowledge that surrounds us, to employing our diverse perspectives to uncover purposeful insights into the workings of our world.

Bibliography

How a Case Moves Through the Court System. (n.d.). AZ Courts.

<https://www.azcourts.gov/guidetoazcourts/How-a-Case-Moves-Through-the-Court-System>

MacFarquhar, N. (2007, March 24). New Translation Prompts Debate on Islamic Verse. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/25/us/25koran.html>