

Prescribed Title 6: “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: 1593 words

Open-mindedness and liberalism are seen as important traits to possess in today’s rapidly diversifying world. This concept is also upheld in the IB, where being open-minded is valued as one of the attributes of an IB learner. Bias manifests itself in many different forms, but here I relate bias to how one views things and forms opinions, and can be defined as a prejudice against an idea or a thing that is often without a sound rationale. The presence of bias can prevent the knower from seeing things for what they really are, obstructing the acquisition of knowledge in its raw form to take place. From this view it seems obvious that avoiding bias is a commendable goal, as the knower seeks to acquire raw, unfiltered knowledge in all areas of knowledge. However, I doubted that the answer would be black-and-white, leading me to question the validity of this claim. Humans are historical beings and it is impossible for a knower to view the world objectively. Prior knowledge and the biases formed through it inevitably influence a knower in the pursuit of new knowledge. This influence manifests itself differently in different AOKs; for instance the human sciences aim to understand human behavior and find objective truth using reasoning, and bias can be detrimental to this process of finding objective knowledge. In contrast, the Arts aim to represent the artist’s perspective through an amalgamation of personal and shared knowledge, and the use of bias in the form of emotion and intuition aids the knower’s understanding of the message of the artwork, guiding them in the pursuit of knowledge. By exploring the chosen title with the AOKs of **Human Sciences and the Arts**, I

have explained how bias hinders the pursuit of knowledge in its raw form, but alternatively, can also play an essential role in acquiring new, original knowledge that is just as valuable.

In the human sciences, maintaining an objective view while forming a conclusion about something is essential, as the sciences seek to get as close to the truth as possible. **Bias can limit the ability of the knower to see the truth.** In psychological research, researchers and participants are highly influenced by their cognitive biases, personal values, emotions and intuitions that can distort knowledge, making it harder to form valid conclusions. For example, culture bias or ethnocentrism occurs when other cultures are judged and evaluated based on the standard of one's own culture, which leads to perceiving other cultures in a biased light. The infamous intelligence tests developed in the US by Robert Yerkes' in 1917 required a certain level of education and understanding of American culture to answer, due to which certain groups of society had an unfair disadvantage while answering the test (Gould, 1981). Eugenicists argued that the overall intelligence of the population was lowering due to interbreeding with these sects of society and this argument was used to support forced sterilization in America (Reddy, 2008). As a result of biased research, inaccurate knowledge is produced and insight into the truth is hampered. This is especially important in scientific fields as available knowledge is used to guide the pursuit of new knowledge in research. Especially since blind faith is often put into the reliability of information from experts, the incorrect knowledge can be widely accepted as the truth, leading to further problems in the pursuit of knowledge in the long run.

Recognizing biases can instead provide a basis for gaining new knowledge, leading to intellectual progress and greatly benefiting the process of knowledge production. If there is a predisposed bias to a conclusion being made in the human sciences, this can be recognized and rectified to form new and more accurate knowledge. In response to the Western cultural bias

that dominates mainstream psychological research, ‘indigenous psychologies’ have developed across the globe, which focus on understanding human behavior in context of one’s culture, instead of imported Western psychological concepts. For example, recognizing the knowledge gaps produced when using psychological tests from Western cultures, Chinese psychologists developed the Chinese Personality Assessment Inventory, a personality assessment instrument that makes up the personality structure of Chinese people (Cheung et al., 1997). They were able to identify a personality trait, Interpersonal Relatedness, which could not be previously encompassed by existing Western personality theories. In this way, by identifying the presence of bias in research and the knowledge gaps produced due to it, the knower gains a useful tool to drive meaningful discussions that help gain a deeper understanding and insight into a subject, thus facilitating intellectual development.

To sum up, the presence of biases in the human sciences can be problematic as it hampers one’s insight when one aims to gain objective knowledge or the truth. But even then, a knower can learn from the presence of these biases and use them to guide the pursuit of new knowledge that is just as valuable.

While it is widely agreed upon that inherently biased ways of knowing such as emotion and intuition are needed to fully comprehend the Arts, **overreliance on these biases can lead to unfair judgments.** The view that art is wholly subjective is believed by many, but if it is assumed that there are objective truths in art as well, these biases would hinder the acquisition of those truths. Belief, considered the propositional statement of truth, plays a vital role in influencing biased judgment. When I first started learning about art I remember being a critic of ‘readymades’ that artists such as Duchamp and Andy Warhol are famous for, as I was unfamiliar to them and personally believed that they were too simple to be considered “art”. However, as I

started branching out to new forms of art I overcame my personal bias influenced by these beliefs and began to understand how readymades can be used as a tool for self-expression and conveying knowledge through story-telling. Chinese conceptual artist Ai Weiwei was heavily criticized for his piece *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995) that depicts him destroying a rare artifact with significant cultural value from the Han Dynasty era. Ai explained that the piece actually served as a symbolic act representing the government's destruction of Chinese history and culture in exchange for modernization during China's Cultural Revolution, quoting Mao Zedong, "The only way of building a new world is by destroying the old one" (Public Delivery, 2020). Ai's artwork was an insightful piece of historical evidence that shared knowledge about China's past with those who did not experience it. But clouded by their moral biases, critics were unable to comprehensively understand and appreciate the significance of the message and hence made unfair judgments of the artwork based on their ethical beliefs, hindering the acquisition of knowledge.

On the other hand, the Arts require the knower to employ a more subjective perspective when assessing artworks. **Knowledge is constructed based on the inherently biased emotions of the knower.** Emotions are influenced by the way one subjectively perceives the world and are thus biased, so when they are used in the process of acquiring knowledge it only makes sense that the resulting knowledge would be biased as well. New knowledge is produced for the artist as they create and for the viewer of the art when they experience it. Performance artist Marina Abramovic's *The Artist is Present* (2010) consisted solely of the artist sitting at a table in a museum where onlookers were free to join her, lock eyes and communicate with her in silence. While aesthetically the work was nothing extraordinary, what helped shape meaning to the work and brought it acclaim were the emotions that viewers felt while watching the performance. By

using empathy and previous knowledge in the form of personal experiences to feel the emotions being exchanged with each participant, they were able to interpret the meaning of the performance. According to Bogart (2007), in performance artworks like this, the audience or knower begins to carry out self-reflection because of the vulnerability and shared humanity present between performer and audience. They allow the knower to share their emotions and experiences with others and derive meaningful personal knowledge that the knower deeply connects with from the initial shared knowledge.

Therefore, the presence of bias in the form of emotion allows the knower to gain original and valuable information in the Arts. However, stubborn personal biases can lead to personal knowledge so strong that the knower fails to recognize the importance of knowledge that can be gained from different art forms.

To sum up, avoiding bias is indeed a commendable goal when one seeks to obtain objective knowledge or the truth, but its presence can also aid the process of acquiring new knowledge as by providing a deeper understanding of the complex human mind and activities. The Arts and the Human Sciences are two vastly different AOKs and the use of bias in each presents a different meaning. The arts explore the experience and reality of what it's like to be human, and thus welcome the use of subjectivity and a humanistic approach to understanding it in order to truly appreciate the meaning of an artwork and create a kind of originality within the AOK. But too much reliance on this bias keeps the knower from appreciating unfamiliar forms of art. On the other hand, in the human sciences bias in research can lead to the production of inaccurate knowledge, which can be harmful as scientific findings are often viewed as the "objective truth". But although avoiding bias benefits the pursuit of knowledge in this AOK, its presence is inevitable and can instead be used to facilitate intellectual progress.

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