

## THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF PREJUDICE TO HUMAN KNOWING

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### **Abstract**

*One of the major contributions of the modern era of philosophy to human knowledge was the adoption of the method of the sciences into the domain of philosophy in their quest for a knowledge that is certain, clear and indubitable. Consequently within this period of human history it was upheld that method was a guarantee for truth and any form of human knowledge that cannot be subjected to the scientific method cannot be regarded as knowledge. For thinkers like David Hume such can only be regarded as mere sophistry. The adoption of method therefore was to eliminate prejudices; doubts; subjectivities and all forms of unclarities because prejudice itself was seen by most of the modern philosophers as the source of all errors in our reasoning. This paper however differs with this position and argues that prejudice as it were is significant in our quest to know in our everydayness. It posits that the modern era of philosophy held a negative view about prejudice, thus it was prejudiced against prejudice. It further argues that prejudice is a condition for human understanding and an integral part of human knowing and understanding. The paper adopts the method of critical and textual analysis. The paper in its findings discovered that prejudice is epistemologically significant in our everyday life as it concerns our knowledge of the world, our fellow human beings and the works of man.*

**Keywords:** Epistemology, Prejudice, knowledge,

### **Introduction**

The quest for certainty; indubitability; objectivity and universality made philosophers of the modern era to negate the relevance of prejudice in the process of human knowing. For the philosophers of this era (Rene Descartes; Leibniz; Spinoza; John Locke; George Berkeley and David Hume) who predominantly were inclined to science and mathematics, truth is only attainable when we subject our reasoning process to the method of the sciences. For them the scientific method is the only way we can arrive at objective knowledge that is devoid of error, history and tradition. In their perspective, prejudice remains the source of misunderstanding in human reasoning. Thus to avoid any form of misunderstanding, man must exterminate prejudice in his reasoning process by adopting the scientific method.

This work however argues against this position and aligns our thought with that of Hans Georg Gadamer to affirm that prejudice enables us to understand the world even before we start thinking about it. Let it be acknowledged that not all prejudices lead to understanding of the world but we cannot base on this to over generalize that all prejudices lead to misunderstanding. Hence in this paper we examine critically the significant role that prejudice plays in the process of human knowing especially as it concerns the area of human sciences specifically and all other areas of human knowing.

### **Conceptual Clarifications**

**Epistemology:** Moses (2001:233) defines epistemology as “the study of the nature of knowledge and the justification; specifically, the study of (a) the defining features, (b) the substantive conditions and (c) the limits of knowledge and the justification.” Epistemology is a normative discipline that prescribes how we can know, what we can know and the conditions that can lead to knowledge. It is therefore a branch of philosophy that discusses the nature of human knowledge, the source and the extent to which man can know. For the sceptics as seen among the sophists (Protagoras, Gorgias and Thrasymachus), man cannot know and even when man knows, he cannot communicate it. The idealists and realists however maintain that man can know and that knowledge is possible. Nevertheless they disagreed on what the source of human knowledge is; is it ideas in the mind or material things out there?

**Prejudice:** This word is made up of two words pre and judice or pre – judgement. It is that initial unreflected opinions which one tends to have about a thing. Lawn and Keane (2011) affirms that prejudice is the biases or judgements made possible not by an abstract and neutral reason but a set of pre-reflective involvements with the world that stand behind judgments and in fact make them possible. Prejudice in this case must be understood as prejudgments which are the function of subjects’ particularity, historicity, finitude and situatedness. These are the presuppositions with which we apprehend reality and which structures out the picture of reality that the subject eventually builds.

**Knowledge:** Knowledge philosophically can be defined from the Platonic perspective as justified true belief. However in this context knowledge is the awareness of something or the state of being aware of something.

### **Statement of Problem**

This paper is a reaction against the claim of objectivity by the sciences based on the fact that it has a method for knowing which eliminates prejudice. Thus the paper is informed by the following questions: 'can we universally and exhaustively say that method is the exclusive means through which knowledge worthy of the name be disclosed? Further, can we genuinely say that truths accidentally known as irregular and unrepeatable are therefore essentially unfounded; and can we boldly say that what is not founded by method or what is not repeatable is suspect?

These are some of the challenges that have necessitated this research. The work takes a look at prejudice and it is an attempt at establishing its epistemological relevance in the process of knowing by human beings in our pluralistic and multicultural world.

### **A Brief philosophical Review of Prejudice**

This review aims at underscoring the point that the history of philosophy in general and epistemology in particular has almost eliminated the idea of prejudice. They saw prejudice especially in the modern era as the major source of misunderstanding in human reasoning.

The repudiation of prejudice in the history of mankind can be said to be as old as philosophy. This could be seen among the pre-socratic philosophers especially the atomists. However it became more glaring in the views of Plato when in his work *The Republic*, he made a distinction between knowledge and opinion. Knowledge for him is of the universals while opinions are of particulars. While knowledge is immutable, unchanging and eternal, opinions are mutable, changeable and temporal. Thus, attentions should be given to knowledge since opinions cannot lead to any knowledge because they are constantly changing and mutable.

The rejection of prejudice nevertheless became very pronounced from the renaissance era down into the modern era of philosophy. Francis Bacon, an English philosopher of the early modern period preoccupied himself with setting a new method for acquiring knowledge that will be free from prejudices. Bacon had discovered what he called **distempers of learning**. Stumpf (1994) notes these distempers of learning as fantastical learning, contentious learning and delicate learning. These in the views of Bacon are vices or major diseases of learning that must be cured if we must learn properly. He also identified four idols of the mind that corrupt the mind from knowing things as they are. These idols are what he calls idols of the tribe,

idols of the cave, idols of the market place and idols of theatre. These idols or what he calls 'false phantoms' are distortions of the mind.

Consequently, to cure the mind of these idols that corrupt the mind, Bacon advocates for a new method of acquiring knowledge. Stumpf (1994:223) expatiating further on this notes that to "penetrate into the inner and further recesses of nature, it is necessary that our notion ... be derived from things in a more sure and guarded way. We must lead men to particulars themselves and their series and order." To achieve this onerous task, one needs to rid himself of his prejudices and start looking at things as they are. He therefore posits that knowledge should come through experiments because for him the subtlety of experiments is far greater than that of sense itself.

Rene Descartes, a French philosopher considered to be the father of modern philosophy had a penchant for science and mathematics. Descartes (2006:18), had a singular objective which according to him was "... undertaking and searching for the true method of arriving at the knowledge of everything that the [my] mind was capable of grasping." He saw all the previous studies he had made as being very penetrable. Scruton (1995:27) commenting on this position of Descartes asserts that:

For Descartes the results of all previous speculation had to be set aside or suspended until clear and indubitable principles could be established against which to measure them. Without the aid of such principles, no system, scientific or metaphysical could warrant assent. Descartes could not find these basic principles in the works that he had read. He therefore embarked on a programme of radical intellectual reform which resulted in a change of philosophical perspective so great that scholasticism fell into lasting disrepute.

The consequence of this programme of radical intellectual reform is the repudiation of prejudice as well as anything that cannot be subjected to the principles of scientific method. For Descartes oratory and poetry are all good but they cannot be correctly repeated by others since they do not follow laid down methods like the natural sciences.

Descartes also has strong admiration for mathematics. He sees its method as that which teaches one to follow correct order. The mathematical rules confer certainty. This leads us to the major dissatisfaction which Descartes had with philosophy. Philosophy in his view is made of diverse opinions which are all

plausible. He however avers that anything plausible is false. In his pursuit for that indubitable truth, Descartes (2006:19) argues that philosophy is filled up with numerous foundations, cultures and traditions. According to him:

The first was never to accept anything as true that I did not incontrovertibly know to be so; that is to say, carefully to avoid both prejudice and premature conclusions; and to include nothing in my judgements other than that which presented itself to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I would no occasion to doubt it...

The major target of Descartes' new method is the avoidance of prejudice. Prejudice remains the major source of error in our reasoning and must be eradicated.

In this brief philosophical review, it is pertinent to state here that the above discussed philosophical as discussed above holds prejudice from a negative perspective. For them prejudice has no positive role to play in the process of human knowing rather it is the source of error in our reasoning. This narrative however changed in the philosophy of Hans G. Gadamer who saw some positive elements in it.

#### **A Short Note on Hans Georg Gadamer**

Hans-Georg Gadamer was born in Marburg on February 11, 1900 in Germany to Johannes Gadamer, a university researcher and Emma Karoline Johanna Geiese. Two years after his birth, his family moved to Breslau where his father took up a position of professor of pharmacological chemistry. His father as a natural scientist wanted him to follow his footsteps. (Gadamer 2007:4) describes how his father wanted to persuade him into the natural sciences in the following words:

During my childhood he sought to interest me in the natural sciences in a variety of ways, and I must say he was very disappointed at his lack of success. The fact that I liked what those "chattering professors" (*schwatzprofessoren*) (as Dad called them) were saying was clear from the beginning. But he let me have my way, although for the rest of his life (he died in 1928) he remained unhappy about my choice

In 1918, Gadamer began his studies at Breslau and later moved to Marburg. Here he studied with Richard Honigswald, who introduced him to neo-Kantianism, Nicolai Hartmann, whose brand of phenomenology gave a challenge to Honigswald, and the neo-Kantian philosopher Paul Natorp. In 1922 he graduated with a thesis on *The Essence of Pleasure and Dialogue in Plato*

with Paul Natorp. He wrote a second doctoral dissertation under Heidegger, and became a *Privatdozent* at the University of Marburg. Gadamer once stated that he owed everything to Heidegger, his greatest influence. Heidegger's hermeneutical approach and his idea that philosophy is inseparable from historic and artistic culture, forms the basis of Gadamer's philosophy.

In 1937 Gadamer was elected a professor of philosophy in Marburg, and in 1939 he moved to a professorship at the University of Leipzig. He took a politically neutral position in the eyes of the occupying Soviet Army, and under the new communist state of East Germany in 1945 became the Rector of University of Leipzig. In 1947 he moved West to accept a position at the University of Frankfurt-am-Main. In 1949 he succeeded Karl Jaspers as Professor of Philosophy in Heidelberg, and became Professor Emeritus in 1968, continuing to teach there for over 50 years. He was a visiting professor to Universities around the world, enjoying a special relationship with Boston College in the United States of America. He was known as a sociable and vivacious personality, and remained active until the last year of his life.

### **Prejudice and the knowing process**

Knowledge can only be said to have taken place when the knowing subject becomes conscious of the object that he attempts knowing. Hence to talk about knowledge can be seen as talking about the subject that knows, the object that is known and the process through which the subject becomes conscious of the object. The subject in most cases approaches the object with some form of already held opinions about the object. The already held views of the subject become the curtain raiser for the subject to have an encounter with the object.

These held views or opinions or prejudices could be products of authority, traditions, or even issues formed as a result of our everyday interactions with the environment. It is therefore appropriate to assert that we do not approach the object of knowledge with a *tabula rasa* kind of mindset. It is therefore not surprising when even in the natural sciences; room is made for 'hypothesis' as one of the steps in research. Hypothesis in the ordinary sense of the world means guesses one may have about a given reality. These are unverified opinions or prejudices, and they are the initiators of the quest for knowledge about the object. They serve as the platform on which the knowing subject stands on to approach the object of his knowledge. Through the process of knowing, the subject continuously tests his prejudices. According to Gadamer (1974: 236)

A person who is trying to understand a text is always performing an act of projecting. He projects before himself a

meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again the later emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. The working out of this for-project, which is constantly as he penetrates into the meanings, is understanding what is there.

The particular expectations here are formed by the prejudices the subject had before the reading of the text commenced. All efforts then become to validate or invalidate the prejudices. The ones that get validated are said to be legitimate prejudices which enables us to knowing the subject better.

Gadamer who re-invented the concept of prejudice argues that prejudice does not mean a false judgement rather it is part of the idea that a judgement can have a positive and negative value. He however reiterated that because of the negative influence of the enlightenment era and the Cartesian methodological doubt, the modern science decided not to have any place for prejudice.

Gadamer identified two sources of prejudice which are tradition and authority. Authority for him is not based on the subjection and abdication of reason, but on recognition and knowledge that the other is superior to oneself in judgement and in sight and for this reasons, his judgements takes precedence. Authority is not bestowed but acquired. Authority is based on recognition and recognition is an act of reasoning that manifests itself when we recognize or become aware of our limitations and accepts that the other person have a better understanding of a particular thing. Authority is not same as blind obedience to a command as was the case of the enlightenment period.

On tradition as a source of prejudice, Gadamer (1974:248) concurs with the rationalists that anything sanctioned by tradition and custom has an authority. He notes that "the authority of what has been transmitted and not only what is clearly grounded has power over our attitudes and behaviour." Gadamer (1974:249) also sees tradition playing a major role in education when he avers that

All education depends on this, and even though in the case of education, the educator loses his function when his charge comes of age and sets his own insight and decisions in the place of the authority of the educator, this movement into maturity in his own life does not mean that a person becomes his own master in the sense that he becomes free of all tradition.

As educated persons we are all educated in one tradition or the other no matter the course of study. Whether in the natural sciences or human sciences our areas of specializations are simply traditions that we have been groomed in.

Furthermore, Onyenekwe (2018) notes in line with Gadamer's view that tradition is an element of freedom and of history itself that needs to be affirmed; embraced and cultivated. It is basically preservation, such as is active in all historical changes. Hence when doing a research in human sciences and other fields of human endeavour, we must recognise that we stand within tradition.

Besides the above highlighted sources of prejudice, other sources of prejudice would include our everyday experiences and unverified opinions we may have about the object of our studies.

In addition, it must be stated in clear terms that Gadamer acknowledges that there are two types of prejudice: the illegitimate prejudices and the legitimate prejudices. The illegitimate prejudices are those that cannot lead to knowing while the legitimate prejudices on the other hand are those that will persist in the process of the interaction between the subject and object that will eventually lead to the fusion of horizon. Gadamer (1974:273) describes the fusion of horizon as "the attainment of a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other." The 'other' refers to the object of study which could be a text, a person, a group of people, our environment and things around it. All these things have their particular horizons. It is at this point that knowing takes place. It is the point where the past meets with the present situation, the old and new ideas continue to grow together for better ideas and meanings. The interesting thing about this state of fusion of horizons is that it is not static as our prejudices are continually being adjusted based on past experiences and are incorporated into the present horizon. On the account of this Gadamer (1974:311) asserts that "at the fusion of horizon there is a birth and growth of something reducible to neither the interpreter nor the text, nor their conjunction."

### **Prejudice as a Condition for Knowing**

Let us begin this section with this all important question, Why must a scientist begin his research with hypothesis? We are aware that the processes involved in a scientific investigation include the following steps: (a) making an observation (b) stating a question (c) formulating hypothesis (d) conducting an experiment and finally (e) analyzing the data and drawing conclusions. What in the actual sense constitute the hypothesis that a scientist makes? An



hypothesis is an unverified claim; it is the scientists pre-judgment before he actually conducts his experiment? However, another question here is, is there a nexus between the hypothesis and the result of the experiment conducted? The obvious fact here is that the hypothesis or pre-judgment or prejudice as the case may be is the platform on which the researcher stands to conduct his experiment. Stumpf (1994:224) notes that “a modern scientist knows it is necessary to have an hypothesis before one inspects facts in order to have some guide in the selection of facts relevant to the experiment.” The hypothesis of the scientists are purely the functions of his particularity, historicity, finitude and situatedness. They simply refer to those presuppositions with which he apprehends reality and that fundamentally structures out the picture of reality that he will eventually build. Thus no researcher approaches the object of knowledge with a ‘*tabula rasa*’ kind of mind set. Objects of knowledge are approached with a mindset, and the mindset is made of nothing but the earlier held prejudgments or prejudice the researcher has about the reality.

Consequently, both the natural and human sciences cannot do without prejudice. In the human sciences where the understanding of some reality would require some form of interactions, the subject and object are often opened up to each by the kind of dialogue that occurs between them. They are all led to dialogue with each other by the power of their initially held beliefs or conceptions or prejudices. Here questions are asked to either affirm or negate some prejudices. In the process of this those that are not legitimate are dropped while the legitimate ones lead to new ideas and understanding of the reality as well as the knowing subject.

Prejudice therefore is the ground we already occupy when we attempt understanding something new. Discarding of prejudice will be tantamount to the discard of the past or history or the researchers particularity. Human understanding and knowing is un-suspend-ably finite and historical. Prejudice remains the ground we occupy when we want to know a reality. Prejudice is productive as long as our knowing involves mediation, integration, assimilation and application. It remains the initiator of understanding, the motivating factor that enables our quest to know a particular reality.

### **Findings**

The following findings were made in the course of this paper:

We do not approach the object of knowledge with a *tabula rasa* kind of mindset.

We approach the object of knowledge first with the initially held prejudices or hypothesis.

There are legitimate and illegitimate prejudices.

Legitimate prejudice leads to knowledge and understanding, illegitimate prejudice leads to error in reasoning.

Prejudice plays the epistemological role of initiating the process of knowing.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has made some efforts at establishing the epistemological significance of prejudice in the process of human knowing. Even the natural sciences that so much despise prejudice and see it as the source of error in our reasoning cannot deny the fact that prejudice plays significant role in the process of human knowing. If this was not the case, they would not have given room to the use of hypothesis in their process of investigations. The point is that the knowing subject in one way or the other approaches the object of his knowledge with some form of prejudgements and most of the times he makes efforts towards the verifiability or non verifiability of these prejudgements.

The major significance of prejudice therefore in human knowing remains the fact that it is the ground which the subject occupies before venturing into knowing the object. This ground is made up of his personal experiences, i.e. his particularities, his history, his situatedness and his culture. He opens up to the reality based on where he is coming from and interacts with it from that perspective.

The work therefore calls for a re-sensitization among all those who seek to acquire knowledge and more importantly to those who are involved in the education of others. The educators must bear in mind that their students are not approaching them with clean-slate kind of mindset. We must bear in mind that even in our quest for objective knowledge, we cannot completely do away with prejudice. We must learn to see our legitimate prejudices as positive elements that we stand on in our bid to know.

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