"Disinterestedness is essential in the pursuit of knowledge." Discuss this claim with reference to two areas of knowledge.

Theory of Knowledge Essay
1506 words

From the title "'Disinterestedness is essential in the pursuit of knowledge.' Discuss this claim with reference to two areas of knowledge", it is clear that the words "disinterestedness" and "essential" are important to clarify. "Disinterestedness" is another word for "impartiality" or "a lack of bias", rather than the definitions "lack of interest" or "boredom" that more intuitively come to mind. Moreover, "essential" here means "necessary" rather than "a constituent of', otherwise the title does not make a statement of any value, because a lack of bias is obviously an element of pursuing knowledge. Therefore, this title suggests that impartiality is necessary in the pursuit of knowledge, implying that knowledge cannot be pursued with interestedness. Considering the variety of methods that knowledge can be pursued in the natural sciences and the human sciences, I disagree with the title.

I need to explore how disinterestedness can contribute in the pursuit of knowledge before I can conclude whether disinterestedness is essential or not. The distinguishing attribute of the sciences in comparison to the non-sciences is the scientific method, based on inductivism, where the aim is to develop testable models which capture reality's essential features. Among other characteristics, experiments following the scientific method need to have high repeatability, which means that other people that repeat the experiment need to confirm the results from the first experiment, solely to ensure that the results have objectivity. Jan Hendrik Schon, a German physicist, rose to prominence in the early 2000s after a series of breakthroughs, in which the data he provided and the conclusions he made claimed large positive implications for the size and cost of semiconductors made of organic materials. However, many scientists and professors in universities repeated Schon's experiments in an attempt to reproduce the results but failed to do so for many years straight. By the time a formal investigation was made showing fraudulent

experiments and multiple misconducts by Schon, he had already received several recognitions and awards like the Otto-Klung-Weberbank Prize for Physics and the Outstanding Young Investigator Award of the Materials Research Society, although these were later rescinded (Reich). Clearly, the scientific method has made disinterestedness an important factor in determining whether a scientific law can be produced from an experiment for good reason; if it had not been the case that scientific works need to be peer reviewed, Schon's bias towards his own work would have led to the acceptance of false scientific knowledge. The disinterestedness shown by his peers across the world contributed in exposing fraudulent behavior and preventing further pursuit into falsely proven knowledge.

Although disinterestedness can contribute greatly to both the natural sciences and the human sciences, how does the way the knowledge is pursued affect the importance placed on disinterestedness? Clearly, for the natural sciences, disinterestedness is seen as a vital feature in the scientific method, which is still regarded as the only satisfactory approach to pursuing knowledge in the natural sciences. However, that is not the case for the human sciences. The human sciences have several schools of thought regarding how knowledge is to be pursued, for example the positivist and the interpretivist approaches. The positivist approach, pushed by French sociologist Emile Durkheim, seeks to pursue knowledge using purely objective evidence, similar to the scientific method. Durkheim studied topics like suicide from a distance to the subjects and only looked at purely the quantifiable data that was available, which contributed to his findings about the effects of moving from a rural to an urban area on people's minds, something which had not been properly understood until then (Peyre). However, the interpretivist approach involves developing an empathy with the people that are being studied to understand the

reasons and motives they themselves put on their actions. Clearly, if someone else was to analyze the individuals through this approach, they would get different results due to the subjective nature of this view, yet as humans are complex beings that are not always perfectly rational, hence disciplines like behavioral economics exist, this approach has value.

It seems that knowledge can be pursued without an emphasis on disinterestedness, yet disinterestedness plays a big part in the pursuit of knowledge, which raises the question “Can we truly be disinterested?”. Like shared knowledge, personal knowledge plays a role in our lives, including in the pursuit of more knowledge. However, that brings up certain issues regarding the nature of personal knowledge and disinterestedness. My father and I regularly have long debates on topics like capital punishment, and in almost none of them do we ever reach a conclusion that both of us agree on. Almost entirely due to things like our character and experience, we place a strong bias on our own views regarding the topic, and regardless how many facts and figures either of us bring up supporting our view, we simply cannot understand why the other will not understand how we are correct. Maybe due to the injustice or hardships my father has seen or experienced, or due to me being a student that, therefore, believes in second chances, both of us have a bias that is inescapable regarding the answer to the question of capital punishment.

Not only does the pursuer’s character, cultural background, and experience limit personal knowledge, and by carry forward pursued knowledge from being truly unbiased, but also the nature of the methodology used in pursuing knowledge prevents true disinterestedness. The first principle of the scientific method is observation, but if everything was to be observed then scientists would be overloaded with observations and never make any progress. Hence, there is a

selective nature to observation, which can result in situations like confirmation bias causing new discoveries to be overlooked or find evidence for imaginary discoveries. Rene Prosper Blondlot, a distinguished physics professor, claimed to discover another form of radiation called n-rays in 1903, after the recently discovered x-rays. The mysterious properties of this radiation were then claimed to be observed by other scientists, confirming the discovery. However, this discovery was purely the professor's imagination, as proved by Robert Wood, when he secretively removed the crucial aluminum prism from the experiment, in theory fully preventing n-radiation from being seen, yet Blondot claimed that he could observe the rays (Pilkington). By believing in the rays, and specifically looking for it, scientists observed non-existent radiation, even when following the scientific method, which highly emphasizes disinterestedness. Truly being disinterestedness seems to be impossible.

However, that does not mean that knowledge is not or cannot be pursued. Pharmaceutical companies across the world discover, develop, and produce drugs that relieve symptoms, prevent, or cure diseases. However, these companies are for-profit organizations, which means that their primary goal is to have global sales and generate revenue. Hence, a great bias is created when it comes to deciding which disease to focus their efforts and research on, as many diseases like life-threatening cancer are preferable in comparison to, for example, non-threatening diseases like dermatitis, or cures to diseases that are less profitable because they are only present in a select few less economically developed countries. Although their aims are more monetary than philanthropic, and that some solutions that can be pursued are put on the back-burner, that does not mean that their pursuit is not producing knowledge that benefits humanity. Adalimumab, also known more commonly as Humira, is the bestselling drug of 2017, generating almost 18.5 billion dollars of revenue for

pharmaceutical companies globally, yet, in the process of creating a revenue generating product, these companies have funded the creation of a medication that treats a large variety of autoimmune disorders, which include rheumatoid arthritis and Crohn's disease ("Adalimumab Injection: MedlinePlus Drug Information"; Dezzani). Furthermore, the cost of researching such a medication cannot be an ordinary amount, so if profit was not an incentive, it would be unlikely that people would willingly partake in the research and production of such drugs. Even though pharmaceutical companies are pursuing knowledge for specific applications, which results in biases, it is also beneficial in terms of financial, the well-being of people, and even the advancement of the natural sciences.

Although disinterestedness can play a vital role when knowledge is pursued, by allowing the knowledge to be more valued and widely accepted, not only is interestedness unavoidable in the pursuit of knowledge but can also provide vital nuance for the pursued knowledge, as the multiplicity of interested parties stacked together allows for knowledge to be pursued by a variety of approaches. By taking a variety of approaches, and by the incentive interestedness provides, knowledge can be pursued in a more complete fashion compared to a disinterested pursuit. The essentiality of disinterestedness depends on the area of knowledge due to the difference in the nature of the knowledge pursued. While in the natural sciences the goal is to understand natural phenomena, something that is "universal" and "the same for everyone", disciplines in the human sciences, like economics and sociology, can thrive in interestedness, even between experts. Therefore, the claim that disinterestedness is essential in the pursuit of knowledge is incorrect, although disinterestedness is a positive attribute.

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