

"Robust knowledge requires both consensus and disagreement." Discuss this claim with reference to two areas of knowledge.

When new information is found and knowledge is obtained, it is likely that there will be both consensus and disagreement regarding the given information. However, the term 'disagreement' isn't usually associated with progress and thus it may seem surprising that there is an interplay between knowledge and disagreement. In a subject area like History for example, disagreement is inevitable because our understanding of history is constructed by various fragments of the past and thus it is likely that certain facts are disregarded or overlooked, thereby creating different 'versions' of the past. Disagreement in the subject of history, however, is crucial to the pursuit of knowledge in history. With disagreement, historians, and the general public, are exposed to more theories, interpretations, and thus ultimately gain a broader understanding of a historical event or figure. The same is seen in areas of knowledge like the Natural sciences, as both scientists and the general public ultimately gain a more well-informed view of a particular theory or phenomenon through the existence of diverging viewpoints and beliefs. In order to fully understand how disagreements aid in the pursuit of knowledge in history and the natural sciences, we can consider *the ways in which* disagreements aid the pursuit of knowledge in history and the natural sciences.

One of the initial disagreements that arise in the study of history, is disagreement on what method of approach to take. Through reading E.H. Carr's work on the approaches to studying history, I learned that there are essentially five different historical schools - the first one being *The Scientific Objective School*. This historical school is led by the German historian Leopold von Ranke, who states that the task of the

historian was 'simply to show what actually happened'. That is, Rankin's approach to studying history aimed to separate the past from the present. This is known as the scientific professional objective approach, as these historians abandon the present and study the past on its own terms. As such, this method of studying history avoids moralising and lays significant emphasis on the basis of primary sources as a means of obtaining information. It is argued that the merit of this approach is that it enables the historian 'to understand the past from within' (E.H. Carr). This school of thought employs reason as the primary way of knowing, as the means by which the historian acquires knowledge is based on logic and rational explanation. In stark contrast to this approach is The Relativist Subjective School. The mentality of this Historical school is rooted in the idea that 'all historical judgements are interim judgements to be reassessed and modified in the light of new evidence and changing perspectives' (E.H. Carr). Moreover, relativists believe that complete impartiality in the writing of history simply isn't possible, as there is a deeply entrenched bias of the historian and his cultural context. It can be said that using this approach, the historian analyses the historical situation within context, as the overarching objective is 'to assess its significance in the light of changing human experience' (E.H. Carr). In this way, it can be argued that this approach to studying history allows more room for subjectivity and thus the individual may employ ways of knowing such as intuition, emotion and sense perception, when obtaining the knowledge.

As can be seen here, whilst these are two different approaches to studying History, they both have their own merits. In fact, in the wider world of history, the fact that there are various contrasting methods of approaching History is beneficial as historians, students and the general public obtain a more multidimensional perspective on history. If, for instance, historians only used a single approach to studying history - like The Scientific Objective School approach, for example - our knowledge and understanding of history would be one-dimensional.

Disagreement surrounding what method of approach to take when obtaining or corroborating new information is likewise seen in other areas of knowing like the natural sciences. There is often much disagreement over scientific theories and phenomena like theories on the origin of cells, the theory of evolution, or theories on global warming for instance.

With theories about global warming, for instance, there is an ever-going dispute about how global warming is caused, how much of it is due to human interference with the environment, and whether global warming will have a profound and lasting impact on our world today. With important scientific theories and phenomena like these, disagreement over which method of approach to take in proving a theory is fundamental in ensuring that the knowledge we derive is reliable and well-informed. Using different methods of approach when proving a theory or phenomenon is important as, if results are consistent using various different methods of approach, then there is more evidence to prove a particular theory or hypothesis correct. In contrast, if results using different methods don't line up, then one can confidently prove a theory incorrect.

Through studying History in IB, I found that another common area of dispute in History is within the interpretation of a particular event, as critical analysis and interpretation is a fundamental part of the study of History. When analysing a historical event, I find that it is impossible to view the event without some sort of bias or prejudice. These judgements that we form about history are informed by the methods and tools that we use when obtaining historical information. When we use reason, we look at the past on its own, untainted by our current opinions and emotions, and therefore reach the most 'impartial' interpretation of history. In contrast to this, when we are influenced more by our emotions

our interpretations are potentially more subjective and perhaps biased. We often have emotion as the primary way of thinking about an event if we have some personal connection to the event.

For instance, as a Higher level History student, one of the topics we explored was the Partition of India in 1947. One of the events of partition that has been hotly debated for years is the Amritsar Massacre in 1919, when troops of the British Indian Army under the command of General Dyer fired machine guns into a crowd of unarmed protesters. The brutality of this action stunned the entire nation, although some still argue that the violence used by the British was justified, as the Indian population had been forewarned that all group gatherings had been banned on that particular day. As someone of Indian origin, growing up with a family that follows Indian custom and tradition, my preconceived notions about the massacre certainly colored my perception of the event. I, for instance, view the Amritsar Massacre as a horrific act that was completely the fault of the British and consider the episode a decisive step towards the end of British rule in India. However, some of the other students in my history class didn't have such an extreme opinion on the event, perhaps understood the British Indian Army's actions, and didn't see the event as one that would have major repercussions for colonial rule in the long-term.

As can be seen here, various judgements can be formed about a single event, depending on what informs our judgements and interpretations. When studying History, we often find a balance between a range of these historical interpretations and then decide which one of the interpretations we agree with. Through this experience I had in my history class, I found that it was essential for me to assess and evaluate alternative perspectives in order to reach a well-informed conclusion.

In the natural sciences, however, there is less room for discrepancies between interpretations as conclusions are drawn from concrete data and statistics, and because reason is given primary emphasis. Whereas in history, emotion can often cloud the ability to think rationally. Much of the information we gain from the world of natural sciences is deduced from actual evidence and research, rather than information that is pieced together by interpretation. However, although it is unlikely that there will be disagreement over the interpretation of a particular theory or hypothesis, there may be disagreement over the significance of the research. The knowledge we gain from the natural sciences is propelled by curiosity, and so it is crucial that people take interest in a particular theory or case study in order for research to progress. If scientists shared a collective opinion, then research would be stagnant as a large majority of ideas would be dismissed as 'irrelevant' or 'unimportant'. The fact that scientists have different views and interests regarding the relevance and importance of new information, is what drives new research.

As can be seen here, disagreement does play a pivotal role in advancing knowledge in both History and the Natural sciences. The realization that disagreement does in fact play a pivotal role in the pursuit of knowledge has triggered a paradigm shift in the way in which shared knowledge is obtained and exchanged. Disagreement broadens our understanding of a particular topic or concern, forces us to consider other views and explanations, and thereby allows us to reach the most well-informed conclusion.

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