

IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

The IIIT Books-In-Brief Series is a valuable collection of the Institute's key publications written in condensed form designed to give readers a core understanding of the main contents of the original. Produced in a short, easy to read, time-saving format, these companion synopses offer a close, carefully written overview of the larger publication and it is hoped will stimulate readers into further exploration of the original.

Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences, of which Elmessiri is the editor and author of the first paper, is an anthology of writings on the subject of Bias originally published in Arabic by IIIT and subsequently translated into English. This Books-in-Brief version is an abridged edition of the English translation.

The collection of papers making up the anthology, explore and critique an issue widely accepted in the Muslim academic world as an essential and defining aspect of academic knowledge despite being a western philosophy of science and thought. This is the dominance of philosophical positivism, and a near total adoption as well as unquestioned acceptance of paradigms, terminologies, and research models that are in fact alien to the socio-economic-religio realities of the Muslim world. So how credible is their application and viability? For Elmessiri, the question of bias in methodology and terminology is a problem that faces researchers east, west, north and south; however, it faces Third World intellectuals with special keenness, because although they write in a cultural environment that has its own specific conceptual and cultural paradigms, they nevertheless encounter a foreign paradigm which attempts to impose itself upon their society and upon their very imagination and thoughts. Why not establish a new science, ideally suited for the purpose, with its own mechanisms, methodologies and points of reference to deal with epistemological biases and open up the gate of ijtihad with respect to them?

The papers aim to discover some of the biases latent in our terminology, methodologies, research tools, and conceptual principles, and to propose alternative ones marked by a greater degree of independence and neutrality. This is not to belittle the human value of the West's creative contributions but to emphasise the danger of making it the ultimate point of reference and then trying to continuously play 'catch up' with it.

Abridged Edition of the Original

Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences

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INTRODUCTION

This book explores an important but neglected academic issue: the widespread adoption and acceptance of paradigms, terminologies, and research models alien to the socio-economic-religio realities of the Muslim world. Researchers everywhere face the question of bias in methodology and terminology, but this problem is especially acute among Third World intellectuals. Although they write in cultural environments with their own specific conceptual and cultural paradigms, they also encounter a foreign (Western) paradigm that permeates their societies and thought processes.

These paradigms have advantages in the West's economic and political domains but do not always connect with the reality of non-Western peoples and can therefore have a distorting effect. Scholars who abandon indigenous paradigms and biases of their own particular existential and historical situations adopt Western paradigms in the process, and start to view themselves from a Western point of view, even when it is biased against them. Any community becomes threatened when it adopts imported alien paradigms and points of view, sometimes without profound knowledge of the epistemological implications of such paradigms.

With the rise of Arab nationalist thought, talk about identity and cultural specificity has intensified, but without comprehensive and methodological study. The current lack of neutrality in the Arab social sciences could be remedied by establishing a new science with its own mechanisms, methodologies, and points of reference to address epistemological biases and invite ijtihad, or interpretation.

Bias is the combination of latent values underlying a paradigm and the procedures and methodologies that guide researchers. These values,

sometimes in the form of models or conceptual metaphors, also connect with research methodologies and are very difficult to separate. “Progress” refers to a metaphor that compares the movement of history to a straight line leading to a definite point, versus cyclicity.

Many implicit epistemological metaphors come biased and ready-made from the West, and limit freedom of research and thought. In identifying and addressing epistemological bias we may create an alternative paradigm. This book’s case studies address this issue and explore latent bias in a particular field; cite specific examples; explain how these biases work and orient research; and cite examples that have been overlooked owing to the bias of the prevalent model, and that can only be observed via a new methodology expressing a new paradigm.

In these studies, researchers would describe their own biases and propose alternatives in an attempt to increase inquiry concerning Western culture and its epistemological paradigms. These alternative paradigms would not necessarily replace prevalent paradigms but would function as more complex means to study Arab/Muslim societies. It is also hoped that the new paradigms would enrich prevalent ones and widen their parameters, transforming them from closed paradigms based on modern Western assumptions into open-ended universal paradigms. An independent Arab/Muslim paradigm would not imply denial of Western cultural values. The new paradigm might either widen the parameters of the concept of progress or dispense with it altogether. A more complex and objective method of observation could be developed and address the problem of Arab researchers’ use of Western-biased methodology and tools.

This book seeks to emphasize the creative, revolutionary character of rebutting bias and to help readers recognize and surmount it. Hopefully the science (*fiqh*) of bias will contribute to the defense of the specific, the particular, and the human against the deconstructive, the abstract, the general, and the non-human.

Chapter One

The Gate of Ijtihad: An Introduction to the Study of Epistemological Bias

Abdelwahab Elmessiri

Human life consists of gestures, deeds, behaviors, incidents, and thousands of other taken-for-granted acts. Apart from involuntary functions such as breathing, every action is a significant outcome of a conscious or unconscious choice, and reflects a person's culture and perceptions. Through the eyes of a society or individual, for example, inner defeat can transform everything into a sign of downfall, whereas for another society or individual, inner victory transforms the same objects into signs of triumph. Such an example demonstrates the significance and variance of bias.

Every human behavior is culturally significant and represents some epistemological paradigm and perspective. A paradigm is a mental abstract picture, an imaginary construct, and a symbolic representation of reality that results from mental reconstruction and deconstruction. The mind assembles some features from reality, rejecting some and keeping others, rearranging them in order of priority and to correspond to reality. The paradigm can exaggerate those elements it deems essential and underplay all others. Each paradigm is epistemological with its intrinsic and fundamental criteria, beliefs, hypotheses, and answers.

Bias, the advocacy of a particular point of view, is associated with the selective human mind and its process of perception. Bias is organically integrated with language and culture, and is language-specific, making language a biased tool. Bias is inevitable and arises from human uniqueness and freedom of choice. Despite its limits, human language can achieve successful communication to help overcome bias and build epistemological paradigms although they arise from a particular cultural experience.

Some biases are explicit and conscious, whereas others are implicit and unconscious. Unconscious bias happens when someone internalizes an epistemological system with its premises and priorities, and unconsciously sees the world only through it. Bias appears in many other forms and is not always logical in its manifestation.

Bias toward the Western cultural paradigm is one of the most widespread forms of bias worldwide. Those who abandoned our heritage did so without realizing the implication of this behavior and without any creative critical study of each heritage and culture. The Islamic world, which entered into a bitter conflict with this cultural formation from the start, was ultimately divided between Western imperialist powers. Recently, catching up with the West has motivated all so-called revival projects in the “Third World,” including the Islamic world. This can be seen most clearly in secular liberal thought, where the “Renaissance” meant primarily the importation of Western thought and theories and the adoption of the Western cultural paradigm. Arab and Muslim societies, therefore, were to be “reformed” to meet that paradigm’s standards.

Such efforts have over time caused bias among Arab intellectuals for Western heritage and neglect of their own heritage. Such educated people occupy important offices and are dangerous because they reshape the value system along Western lines and propagate the paradigm. A cultural paradigm usually embodies a full cognitive paradigm containing a value system. The modern Western paradigm, which is utilitarian and rational-materialist, underlies such examples and most of human knowledge, sciences, and attitudes. It manifests itself in human terminology, axioms, research methods, and procedures. This materialistic paradigm is the most dominant because Western imperialism has internationalized its own cultural paradigm and imposed it on numerous societies, causing the misconception that the Western paradigm is universal.

This paradigm is based on centralist assumptions about a universe that is immanent, not transcendent. Second, human and natural phenomena form one continuous whole, the same laws applying to both in equal degree. Human beings are thus an inseparable part of the material-natural order. This view produces bias toward the material and natural at the expense of the immaterial and human, as well as towards the perceptible, the measurable, and the quantitative against the imperceptible, the qualitative, and anything that cannot be measured. Western societies are considered the peak of this universal, evolutionary, unilinear, and natural process and are, therefore, a model to be imitated. However, many such assumptions have been proven invalid. It has been discovered that natural resources are limited and the human mind is finite.

Some mechanisms can help us surmount such biases. Knowing that bias is inevitable is the first step toward overcoming it. Our theoretical effort to discover bias must include the whole theoretical structure of Western philosophy. A more radical, complex, and comprehensive outlook should be based on the assumption that no single historical or cultural course exists. We should be open to different world civilizations and benefit from their cultural and intellectual traditions that could deepen our understanding of humankind, society, and nature. While eliminating bias we should form an alternative paradigm that benefits from all previous human experience, not excluding the Western.

A proposed alternative paradigm and scientific approach would stem from our indigenous Islamic heritage; work toward a comprehensive theory; start from the knowledge that humans occupy a central position in the universe; include a non-materialist category; operate in a generative (non-cumulative) manner; and allow for incomplete certainty and continuous *ijtihad*.

Chapter Two

Bias in Western Schools of Thought: Our Heritage as the Starting Point for Development

Adel Hussein

The Arab and Muslim world has entered a phase of critical revision of our traditional concepts and positions on the intellectual and theoretical levels. The social sciences long relied on stock theories that prevented our scholars from formulating their own critical observations through practice. In the epistemological realm, the predominance of Enlightenment notions meant “secularism” prevailed in social affairs. The Western approach aimed to merge social and natural sciences, and we in the East adopted the same approach. Yet for the social sciences to acquire academic legitimacy and recognition as being objective, universal, reliable, and scientific, they must be founded on solid knowledge based in all human societies and their respective histories.

In the limited (Western) scope of social sciences, theoretical models largely focused on conflict between labor and capital and secular concepts and ideas of materialistic progress. In fact, the problems and challenges faced by Western civilization in the contemporary era can