

3. In the acquisition of knowledge, is following experts unquestioningly as dangerous as ignoring them completely? Discuss with reference to the human sciences and one other area of knowledge.

In the pursuit of knowledge, individuals often look up to experts as reliable sources of interpretation because they are widely considered to have a specialized level of knowledge relating to a particular subject¹. However, blindly following experts or ignoring them completely may pose epistemic danger², which is the risk of forming wrong beliefs due to inaccurate knowledge acquired. Such epistemic danger can have far-reaching consequences, particularly in the human sciences, where incorrect decisions may pose a threat to one's welfare. In history, epistemic danger may lead to ethical danger should individuals overlook or misinterpret sensitive historical events, causing them to downplay heinous crimes and disrespect the memories of victims. Hence, it is crucial to consider the circumstances of the claim to ascertain whether to follow experts' claims unquestionably or ignore them completely to minimize epistemic danger. This essay aims to delineate the circumstances in which following experts unquestionably can be both more as well as less dangerous than ignoring them completely, with reference to the human sciences and history.

The AOK of human science comprises many disciplines involved in the study of human behaviour, two of which are economics and psychology. Economics possesses greater degrees of complexity and variability, making economists' findings less absolute than psychology and more dangerous to follow.

¹ Merriam Webster. 2018. "Definition of EXPERT." Merriam-Webster.com. 2018. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/expert>.

² Broncano-Berrocal, Fernando . 2019. "Project Card | LOGOS." Wwww.ub.edu. 2019. http://www.ub.edu/grc_logos/project_card.php?idProj=92#:~:text=%22Epistemic%20risk%22%20is%20usually%20understood.

In economics, blindly following economists' findings is more dangerous than ignoring them completely when there is no comparable historical precedent for economists to rely on when making economic predictions. According to economist Ezra Solomon, "the only function of economic forecasting is to make astrology respectable", underscoring the unreliability of economic predictions³. This stems from the ever-changing nature of economics which is subject to fluctuations driven by technological advancements, changes in human behaviour and geopolitical shifts. Most economic events are unique, with little comparable historical precedent for economists to draw upon to make accurate predictions⁴. Therefore, economists rely on subjective interpretation when formulating economic predictions, inadvertently introducing bias which impedes the accuracy of the predictions. Hence, economists' predictions not based on comparable historical precedent are likely inaccurate and more epistemically dangerous to follow blindly.

One example would be the Dot-Com bubble in the 1990s. During this period of rapid development in the Internet industry, investors heavily invested in the stocks of these companies, leading to soaring stock prices. However, economists struggled to predict the Dot-Com bubble given the novelty of the internet which has no historical precedent. This made it challenging for economists to assess the true value of internet assets, causing them to rely on their interpretations to determine whether stocks were overvalued or undervalued. Academic Economist Kevin Hassett authored a book titled *Dow 36000*, which postulated that the stocks were undervalued and encouraged people to invest in the stocks to capitalize on their growth, advice that many blindly

³ board, The editorial. 2023. "The Perils of Economic Forecasting in Uncertain Times." Financial Times, May 14, 2023. <https://www.ft.com/content/e5cff3d4-af37-47e6-9d95-e8b7c55a088d>.

⁴ Sen, Abhijit. 2016. "Prediction and Economic Theory." Proceedings of the Royal Society of London 407 (1832): 3–23. <https://doi.org/10.1098/rspa.1986.0080>.

followed⁵. However, Hasset's predictions were wrong as Internet companies were overvalued, with individuals who bought the stocks suffering significant financial loss, estimated at \$5 trillion⁶. Therefore, following economists blindly is epistemically and financially more dangerous than ignoring them completely when there is a lack of comparable historical precedent.

However, in psychology, ignoring experts completely is more dangerous than following them completely when the experimental method is utilized. Psychology studies how different factors influence human behaviour by conducting psychological experiments. The experimental method is commonly performed to establish a causal relationship between external factors and human behaviour. It involves controlling all the variables except the dependent variable and performing random assignment of participants to achieve non-spuriousness⁷. This establishes a causal relationship that provides a high degree of certainty that one factor directly causes the other, as there are no other factors responsible for the observation. Thus, if the experimental method is performed, ignoring the findings completely is more epistemically dangerous than blindly following them as it involves ignoring integral psychological findings that may be beneficial to human welfare.

The Perry Preschool Project conducted between 1962 to 1967 by David Weikart and his team aimed to demonstrate the short and long-term effects of a high-quality preschool education program for young children living in poverty⁸. To establish

⁵ Thornton, Mark. 2004. "SUBSCRIBE NOW and RECEIVE a FREE BOOK! Order Today for More FREE Book Options." https://www.independent.org/pdf/tir/tir_09_1_1_thornton.pdf.

⁶ Loo, Andrew. 2023. "Dotcom Bubble." Corporate Finance Institute. February 16, 2023. <https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/capital-markets/dotcom-bubble/>.

⁷ "Causation and Experimental Design Causal Explanation What Causes What? Association Time Order Nonspuriousness Mechanism Context Why Experiment? What If a True Experiment Isn't Possible?" n.d. Accessed May 6, 2023. https://www.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/23639_Chapter_5___Causation_and_Experimental_Design.pdf.

⁸ Schweinhart, Lawrence, Jeanne Montie, Zongping Xiang, W Barnett, Clive Belfield, Milagros Nores, and W Steven Barnett. 2005. "The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study through Age 40 Summary,

causation between these two factors, the experimental method was performed, with children randomly assigned to both a program and a non-program group. The findings recorded over a span of 37 years showed that the program group had higher intellectual and social development in childhood, greater economic performance, school success, and reduced crime rates in adulthood than the non-program group. Therefore, causation is established that the preschool programme greatly improves the lives of children in the future. Hence, parents ignoring these findings completely is not only epistemically dangerous, but it may also affect the child's development and future should quality preschool education be denied to the child.

History is a multifaceted AOK which consists of both historical narratives and historical interpretation. Historical narratives are a recount of historical facts without any judgment while historical interpretations are an analysis of primary sources to interpret the causes and implications of historical events. The former merely documents, while the latter also judges the past and instructs the present.

In the AOK of history, ignoring experts' historical narratives completely is much more epistemically dangerous than blindly following them given the impartiality of historical narratives. The construction of historical narratives is heavily influenced by Rankean Positivism, a methodology championed by German historian Leopold von Ranke, which conceptualises history as an objective science free from metaphysical speculations and value judgment⁹. Rankean Positivism takes an Empiricist approach to constructing history by analysing contemporary sources which embody the experiences of people in that period and creating a historical event as true to the facts

Conclusions, and Frequently Asked Questions." https://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/specialsummary_rev2011_02_2.pdf.

⁹ "UNIT 12 POSITIVIST TRADITION Structure." n.d. <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/44454/1/Unit-12.pdf>.

as possible. Following Rankean Positivism, historical narratives are an impartial recount of historical events, free from biased interpretations which may affect its accuracy. Given its objectivity and credibility, ignoring these historical narratives can pose a great epistemic and ethical danger.

The Armenian Massacre which occurred between 1915 and 1917 involved the systematic extermination of the Armenian population, leading to the deaths of 1.5 million Armenians¹⁰. This historical narrative is backed by overwhelming evidence of the genocide such as eyewitness accounts of the massacres, which is further supported by the mass graves and significant reduction in the Armenian population. Following Rankean Positivism, historians produced a historical narrative of the Armenian Massacre which is both impartial and credible. However, 91% of the Turkish population maintains a denialist position towards the genocide, an act which is ethically dangerous¹¹. This historical negationism has a damaging impact on the Armenian community by making them feel as though their suffering is overlooked by those who committed the genocide. It disrespects the victims of the Armenian genocide and impedes the reconciliation between the Turkish and Armenian communities¹². Therefore, ignoring historical narratives is more ethically and epistemically dangerous than following them blindly.

However, blindly following experts' historical interpretations from a single school of thought poses greater epistemic and ethical danger than ignoring them completely. As

¹⁰ History.com Editors. 2010. "Armenian Genocide." HISTORY. A&E Television Networks. October 1, 2010. <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/armenian-genocide>.

¹¹ Gulf News. 2015. "9% of Turks Say Armenian Killings Genocide: Survey." Gulfnews.com. January 14, 2015. <https://gulfnews.com/world/mena/9-of-turks-say-armenian-killings-genocide-survey-1.1441049>.

¹² Bedrossian, Katie. 2021. "The Armenian Genocide and Acts of Denial." Human Rights Pulse. April 24, 2021. <https://www.humanrightspulse.com/mastercontentblog/the-armenian-genocide-and-acts-of-denial>.

historical interpretation consists of historians' subjective analysis of empirical evidence, it is no surprise that historians from different schools of thought would have different interpretations of the historical event. Therefore, following historical interpretations from a single school of thought unquestionably is more epistemically dangerous than ignoring them as it gives a myopic view of the historical events from a single lens. As other historical interpretations are not considered, individuals cannot critically evaluate the different perspectives and settle on the most logical one. Hence, individuals may blindly follow historical interpretations which are entirely erroneous, leading to epistemic and ethical danger.

In the late 1980s, the Historikerstreit was a debate between German historians on whether the Holocaust was justifiable¹³. Ernst Nolte, a prominent historian, argued that the Holocaust was justified as it was a defensive and pre-emptive measure against the perceived threat of the Jewish Bolsheviks¹⁴. This directly contrasted with the conventional view that the Holocaust was a senseless and unjustifiable crime. Nolte's views were completely wrong as they downplayed the significance of the Holocaust and absolved the Nazis of their crimes. Therefore, individuals who blindly follow Nolte's views pose a greater ethical danger as they trivialized the cruelty inflicted by the Nazis during the Holocaust and disrespected the memories of victims. While ignoring historians' interpretations of the Holocaust completely may lead to ignorance, ignorance is less ethically dangerous than skewed interpretations as ignorance can be corrected more easily. Therefore, blindly following historical interpretations from a

¹³ Kattago, Siobhan. 2001. *Ambiguous Memory : The Nazi Past and German National Identity*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

¹⁴ ———. 2001b. *Ambiguous Memory : The Nazi Past and German National Identity*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

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In conclusion, it is crucial to thoroughly assess the circumstances discussed to make a well-informed choice between unquestioningly following or completely ignoring experts. Across both history and human science, the presence of expert interpretations subjects their findings to bias and inaccuracies, hence, following them blindly is more dangerous than ignoring them. In the human sciences, blindly following economists is more dangerous than blindly following psychologists as the unpredictable nature of economics makes it challenging to make accurate predictions. In contrast, psychology is a more experimental discipline that utilizes the experimental method to deduce accurate findings with greater certainty. Meanwhile, in the field of history, the decision to follow or ignore experts hinges on the presence of interpretation which is present in historical interpretation and absent in historical narratives. This would introduce a degree of bias into historical interpretations, making it more dangerous to follow blindly. As both blindly following and ignoring experts completely are extreme options which may pose great epistemic danger, this essay recommends that individuals carefully evaluate the nature of the discipline and degree of interpretation before making a choice.

(Word Count: 1600)

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