

Decoding and Coping with the Forms of Fragmentation of Knowledge

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Received: November 23, 2024; **Revised:** January 20, 2025; **Accepted:** February 14, 2025

Abstract

This paper identified reductionism, hasty conceptual generalization, Eurocentrism, and epistemological bias as forms of the fragmentation of knowledge. The fragmentation of knowledge goes against the philosophically Greek-based Western pattern of knowledge which was mainly in the hands of polymaths. The polymathic spirit remained until the emergence of Modernity. The emergent fragmentation of knowledge received criticism from thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Ivan Illich, Howard Gardner, Jürgen Wolfgang Habermas, and Chris B. Heilig. The division of knowledge into specializations has two-fold effects: positive such as deep specialization and negative as the loss of holistic understanding and fragmentation. There are four forms of fragmentation: (1) reductionism, (2) hasty conceptual generalization, (3) Eurocentrism, and (4) epistemological bias. Reductionism is epistemological and theoretical. Epistemological reductionism suggests that all knowledge can be reduced to a single form of explanation, whereas theoretical reductionism suggests that one theory can be reduced to or explained by another, more fundamental theory. Hasty conceptual generalization happens when a concept is extended beyond its appropriate scope, leading to the loss of the essence of the phenomenon to which the concept is applied. Eurocentrism is mainly to understand and interpret the world from a European perspective. Epistemological bias is the criticism of many epistemological errors that can be corrected by adopting mixed methods, proper hermeneutics, reflexivity, observer participation, and erosion of gender bias.

Keywords: Holistic knowledge, Fragmentation, Eurocentrism, Epistemology, Religion

Introduction

This paper is aimed at decoding a few forms of fragmentation of knowledge such as reductionism, hasty conceptual generalization, Eurocentrism, and epistemological bias. First, the author will briefly mention how knowledge developed from a holistic view that polymaths and university settings had and moved to departmentalization. Then, secondly, the author while mentioning the positive side of departmentalization of knowledge explores briefly the fragmentation of knowledge. Thirdly, the new forms of fragmentation of knowledge are discussed, starting with reductionism and to illustrate it a brief is provided on how this fragmentation developed and raised in the study of religion. The second form of fragmentation is a hasty conceptual generalization, and the author explains its disadvantages and illustrates it by the example of the use of fundamentalism in religious studies. The third form of fragmentation is based on theorizing and judging the world from a narrow perspective which is historically unique and geographically different, and it is illustrated by Eurocentrism which is prevalent especially in humanities and social sciences. Lastly, epistemological bias as a fragmentation of knowledge is explored. It is a multifaced category that includes observations about methods, reflexivity, power, and gender.

Holistic Knowledge and Departmentalization

The pattern of knowledge particularly in the West and, to some extent, the rest of the world is in principle rooted in Greek philosophy as it used reason, observation, and systematic inquiry. In Greece, philosophy, religion, and science fermented together. Aristotle could be said to be the best example who combined all these three disciplines in his scholarship. The main scholarly figures in Greece were polymaths. Among the philosophers then, Aristotle set an example as an outstanding polymath writing on biology, physics, metaphysics, logic, ethics, politics, etc. There were other polymaths such as Archimedes, Pythagoras, Hippocrates, Plato, and Thales of Miletus (Diogenes Laertius, 1853). Being a polymath was a trend for being a wise man. The same trend was dominant in Medieval times, and many famous polymaths appeared. For example, Avicenna (Ibn Sina) wrote on philosophy, medicine, astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, and theology. The other notable polymaths were Hildegard of Bingen, Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Alhazen (Ibn al-Haytham), Boethius, and Raymond Lull. Finally, in the time of the Renaissance (14th–17th centuries), the concept of “Renaissance Man” became popular. Renaissance men were well-rounded, educated polymaths who had a grip on various disciplines and could discuss many subjects. Some of the notable among them were Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo Buonarroti, Galileo Galilei, Nicolaus Copernicus, and Raphael Sanzio (Johnson, 2000).

After the Renaissance came the Enlightenment and subsequently the advent of modernity, and though in the early period, the universities provided holistic knowledge, later they slowly moved to specializations and departmentalization of knowledge as academic disciplines and subjects. For example, The first European universities, such as the University of Bologna (1088), The University of Paris (1150), And the University of Oxford (1167), were initially modeled on broad-based learning. The disciplines they taught were general and interconnected, and specialization was limited (Verger, 1992). However, the Enlightenment in the 18th century emphasized reason,

empiricism, and progress, thus it laid the groundwork for the systematic study of various fields of knowledge. In addition to that the Industrial Revolution, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, created a demand for specialized knowledge and skills, leading to the establishment of technical and engineering schools. The University of Berlin, founded in 1810, pioneered a model of academic organization based on departments, each focused on a specific field of study (Kirby, 2022). Its influence spread throughout Europe and beyond. In the United States, the establishment of research universities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries reinforced the departmental structure. This model became popular at the worldwide level. The universities are now patterned on specializations and departments.

As a result of the departmentalization of knowledge and specializations, fragmentation and compartmentalization of knowledge occurred. Thinkers and scholars have criticized it and have spoken on its misgivings. To name some, Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Ivan Illich, Howard Gardner, Jürgen Wolfgang Habermas, and Chris B. Heilig have contributed to this criticism. Among noteworthy and influential scholars who gave a focused treatment of the subject, C.P. Snow in his famous lecture and book “*The Two Cultures*” (1959) explored the growing gulf between science and humanities. He argued that the gap between the scholars of sciences and humanities leads to misunderstanding, biases, and failure to address complex societal challenges. He emphasized the importance of bridging the gap, promoting dialogue, and fostering a more integrated understanding of the world (Snow, 2012). Another influential, notable scholar, Edward O. Wilson advocated in “*Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge*” (1999) for the integration of knowledge across disciplines. Wilson introduces the concept of “consilience”, which refers to the “jumping together” of knowledge from different fields. He suggests that by integrating insights from diverse disciplines, we can gain a more comprehensive and coherent understanding of the universe (Wilson, 1999).

Fragmentation of Knowledge

Departmentalization of knowledge which leads to specializations produces fragmentation of knowledge. The division of knowledge thus into specialized, disconnected disciplines or perspectives, often leads to a loss of holistic understanding. Though specializations have positive advantages in academic disciplines such as deep specialization; however, there are disadvantages too such as fragmentation and lack of interdisciplinary communication. The risk of specialization is two-fold: one is when a specialization dominates the whole discipline and is considered the only major field to explain away everything of such a discipline. It can be illustrated by Neoclassical Economics in Economic Theory as it emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on rational choice theory, mathematical modeling, supply and demand, and market equilibrium. As a specialization, it dominated the entire discipline and attempted to explain all phenomena within it and it marginalized alternative theories such as Marxist, Keynesian, and institutional economics. The second risk of specialization is when it is universalized even though it is shaped in a particular context, be that geographical, cultural, or socio-economic. There are many examples to illustrate it. For example, Western psychological theories such as Freudian psychoanalysis and cognitive-behavioral therapy emerging from Western individualistic society are applied globally. The other forms of fragmentation of knowledge are methodological

and fractionalization of the subject matter. Methodological fragmentation happens when a phenomenon is subjected to methods that may not encompass and analyze the whole reality or constitution of the phenomenon. Using such a method leaves out crucial details unexamined. For example, studying human behavior solely through psychology thus excluding social, cultural, and historical contexts in shaping human behavior. The fractionalization of subject matter happens when the totality and wholesomeness of a subject are fractionalized and certain fractions receive microscopic investigation, however, the rest of the subject is either ignored or the fraction that is amply investigated is considered a representative or the complete representation of the subject. For example, considering GDP as the sole indicator of prosperity. The neoclassical economic model often relies on GDP (Gross Domestic Product) as the primary indicator of a nation's economic well-being and it ignores the crucial elements such as inequality, socioeconomic disparity, environmental sustainability, and social well-being.

Decoding Forms of Fragmentation

The forms of fragmentation such as concepts, theories, perspectives, methods, etc. are present in academic disciplines and will continue to emerge and grow. However, these forms while being present do receive criticism but go unnoticed and undetected as fragmentations. Thus, it becomes imperative to unravel the subtle and often overlooked forms of fragmentation that permeate various aspects of thought, society, and discourse. Therefore, I will discuss some of the forms that should be considered as fragmentation and should be approached with utmost seriousness. These forms of fragmentation are (1) reductionism, (2) hasty conceptual generalization, (3) Eurocentrism, and (4) epistemological bias.

Reductionism

Reductionism leads to fragmentation and oversimplification, and it is the opposite of holism, which suggests a phenomenon or system should be studied as a whole. Several types of reductionism that have found their presence in knowledge would eventually solidify the position that they amount to fragmentation. Among types of reductionism, I would briefly mention epistemological and theoretical reductionism. Epistemological reductionism suggests that all knowledge can be reduced to a single form of explanation, whereas theoretical reductionism suggests that one theory can be reduced to or explained by another, more fundamental theory.

Epistemological reductionism reduces a complex phenomenon to an allegedly basic unit which by understanding can explain away the whole phenomenon. This leads to fragmentation in which a phenomenon is fractionalized, and a fraction is treated as representative of the whole phenomenon. It might be like analyzing and understanding a seed of a plant which blinds us from understanding the plant. The positive side of this fragmentation is that a component of a phenomenon receives sufficient treatment, and efforts are spent in understanding it, but the negative side of this is that the depth of the phenomenon becomes oversimplified. This can be illustrated by classical Marxist historiography that reduces historical changes to economic factors, particularly to class struggle and modes of

production. Theoretical reductionism leads to fragmentation as it takes the autonomy of a discipline or a subject under study and investigation away and subjects it to methods and theories of another discipline. The positive side of it is that it highlights an aspect of a discipline or phenomenon, but the negative side of it at the same time is that it dominates other aspects of the phenomenon and represents itself as the sole feature of the phenomenon. To illustrate this cognitive psychology has increasingly been reduced to neuroscience. It assumes that human thought, behavior, and emotions can be explained solely through brain activity and neural mechanisms.

Thus, reductionism is the fragmentation of knowledge. It is a fragmentation that is more serious as it leads to a narrow understanding of a phenomenon. Reductionism is present more obviously in biology, psychology, economics, religious studies, and philosophy of mind. For example, materialist philosophers argue that consciousness is merely a byproduct of brain activity, but this form of reductionism struggles to explain phenomena like free will and self-awareness.

In academic disciplines religion or religious studies deserves more discussion as an example to highlight this fragmentation and reductionism.

Reduction of Religion

An exemplary subject of reduction is religion. The academic approaches to religion such as anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches have viewed religion from the perspective of their disciplines and have thus committed to reduction. Anthropologists reduced the origin of religion to something that does not hold given the nature of religion. E.B. Tylor reduced the origin of religion to animism (Tylor, 1871). James Frazer reduced religion to an evolutionary phase from magic to religion (Frazer, 1890). Emile Durkheim believed in the social projection of religion (Durkheim, 1915). Clifford Geertz sees religion as a cultural system (Geertz, 1973). On the other hand, sociologists believed in the social construction of religion. Thomas Luckmann and Peter L. Berger while discussing the social construction of reality claimed that religion is a social construction (Berger & Luckmann, 2011). Rodney Stark holds that religious beliefs and institutions are products of social and economic exchanges (Stark, 1997). The psychologist Sigmund Freud also reduced religion to the projection of unconscious desires and fears (Freud, 2008). On the other hand, in all these approaches anthropological, sociological, and psychological approaches some scholars commit another form of reductionism and that is functionalism, reducing religion to certain functions. Against this line of thought, which is reductionist, phenomenologists of religion defended the autonomy of religion and stressed that religion should be treated as it is. Max Scheler, W. Brede Kristensen, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, C. Jouco Bleeker, Mircea Eliade, and Ninian Smart are major figures of the phenomenology of religion. In brief, the following characteristics are of the phenomenology of religion: “a comparative, systematic, empirical, historical, descriptive discipline and approach; antireductionist claims and its autonomous nature; adoption of philosophical phenomenological notions of intentionality and epoché; insistence on empathy, sympathetic understanding, and religious commitment; and claim to provide insight into essential structures and meanings” (Allen, 2010: 214).

Though phenomenology treats religion as *sui generis* and remains in opposition to social science approaches to religion; however, in the academic study of religion it has received harsh criticism, and it is sometimes accused of being a theological approach in disguise. There are sometimes job advertisements for academic vacancies in religion and phenomenologists are not encouraged to apply. Most of the scholarship conducted in the field of religion still largely originates from the anthropology, psychology, and sociology of religion.

So, to look at this problem, it becomes necessary to consider interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches, while keeping the autonomous nature of a subject or discipline intact. At the same time, university humanities, science, and social science experts should be in touch with each other to enrich their experience and share insights about the subjects that may be under their study. In the field of approaches of religion, cognitive science which is interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary has some promise about religion. However, the cognitive science approach to religion has become more dependent on evolutionary psychology and it fractionalizes religion and studies its components and does not make any general definition or position on religion at least as far as current research in the field is concerned.

Hasty Conceptual Generalization

Hasty conceptual generalization is a faulty generalization of concepts, where a person might hastily extend a conceptual framework or idea beyond its appropriate scope. This problem also leads not only to fragmentation of knowledge, but its distortion. When concepts are hastily generalized and applied to a phenomenon, they filter the features of the phenomenon and in the filtering, the dissimilarities get lost. The phenomenon loses its uniqueness and gets categorized wrongly under some concept, so they receive criticism, praise, or blame mistakenly as their originality gets distorted by applied concepts to them. Many examples can illustrate this form of fragmentation such as the claim the concept that modernization leads to secularization: the secularization theory that religions will become very weak. Though this is very true about Northern Western countries, however, it is not like that in the U.S., India, Iran, and many other countries. Another example would be claiming that all ancient societies were patriarchal when in fact there were societies that were matrilineal and matriarchal such as the Iroquois Confederacy, the Minangkabau of Indonesia.

One such concept which leads to fragmentation in religious studies is the concept of fundamentalism. Being a fundamentalist is not only limited to religion, but it is used in politics and the parties could be labeled by it and therefore criticized. Such a label if unjustifiably used can put people at a disadvantage. What then is fundamentalism? Henry Munson referring to monumental Fundamentalism Project, directed by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, states that they “describe fundamentalism as primarily the militant rejection of secular “modernity.” They stress that fundamentalism is not merely traditional religiosity but rather a religious response to secularization and “modernization.” They argue that this response is inherently political, even though the political dimension may be dormant at times...they contend that fundamentalism contains “it a totalitarian impulse” insofar as “fundamentalists seek to replace existing structures with a comprehensive system emanating from religious principles and embracing law, polity, society, economy, and culture” (Munson, 2012). Though Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby have made a great contribution

and have listed and compared many religious conservative movements, Henry Munson holds that the label fundamentalism does not fit many of these movements in addition, he states that “Moreover, they have spurred many scholars to ask how the various movements commonly called fundamentalist are both similar and distinct. But Marty and Appleby themselves focus too much on alleged similarities and not enough on important distinctions. Many scholars have criticized the Fundamentalism Project on this ground (see Juergensmeyer 1993; Munson 1995). The other main criticisms have been as follows. First, the term “fundamentalist” is polemical, for it implies that all those who refuse to dilute the fundamental tenets of their religions are bigoted fanatics. Second, the term is of Protestant origin and distorts the non-Protestant movements to which it is applied. Third, the term is used to refer to a wide range of movements in which religion plays quite different roles. In light of these criticisms, many scholars have tended to avoid using the term “fundamentalist” outside its original Protestant context” (Munson, 2012).

Eurocentrism

Eurocentrism is a perspective that places Europe and European culture at the center of the world, often viewing non-European cultures as inferior or irrelevant. It can involve ignoring or undervaluing the contributions of non-European societies and interpreting their histories through a European lens (Eurocentrism, 2024). In terms of fragmentation of knowledge, eurocentrism more precisely reflects “a tendency to interpret the world in terms of European or Anglo-American values and experiences” (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Eurocentrism is based on bias, and it tends to consider European history, perspectives, values, and socio-political experience and theories as universal, but these characteristics of Europe are, in fact, culturally specific.

For example, European historical and political experience of religion and therefore its attitude toward it differs significantly from those of non-European countries, especially Asian countries. The European political and social alternative of secularism to religion does not fit, given the diversity of religions and roles, to the rest of the world. When European experience is universalized, important dimensions of reality are lost, leading to an oversimplified, fragmented understanding. This problem can be stated as a lens problem: seeing the world through a European lens which is essentially limited to its horizons. This narrow vision of reality outside the geographical demarcation of Europe mises the important characteristics and features of reality, and religion, political systems, culture, and social systems are some of the most visible examples of such a reality.

Eurocentrism gives a distorted vision of non-European societies which leads to fragmentation as the societies, their evolution, and special characteristics remain overshadowed. Furthermore, European theories and values are imposed on contexts where they may not apply. The nature and overall structure of a context thus get deconstructed and fragmented. This problem is particularly present in political and social discourses and indigenous knowledge systems and non-Western worldviews are often marginalized or dismissed. While universal laws may apply in the natural sciences, social theories are context-bound. A theory developed in one society may not translate well to another, and applying foreign theories uncritically can lead to misunderstandings and inappropriate solutions.

This fragmentation of knowledge can be corrected by having a context-sensitive approach to knowledge. This approach should focus on the unique experiences and histories of different cultures. There is a need to decolonize knowledge to dismantle the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks and to recover the rich intellectual traditions that have been suppressed or ignored in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

Epistemological Bias

Epistemology is by its nature a difficult subject. It is about the possibility of knowledge, what we can know, how to know, how much we can know, and the ways to know. The discussion in epistemology raises questions about our claim to knowledge. The highest goal in epistemology has been to know as things are, therefore, objectively; hence, the most acceptable and reliable method to know for that was considered the scientific method. Hence, natural sciences are considered objective, but this position is problematized by theorists such as Thomas Samuel Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend. Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, argued that instead of linear accumulation of knowledge, science evolves as a paradigm shift, where dominant theoretical frameworks are replaced rather than refined (Kuhn, 2012). Feyerabend, in *Against Method*, problematized the notion of a unified scientific method, advocating for epistemological pluralism (Feyerabend, 2010). On the other hand, in humanities and social sciences, knowledge is about humans and created by humans, so knowing reality becomes more problematic and complex. Knowing in human sciences and social sciences is multifaceted. We may adopt any method and methodology it would still not be like studying natural science by a scientific method. It is because human beings are not like researching and studying objects but subjects: human beings with intentionality, inner self, motivations, history, worldviews, and unpredictability.

The fragmentation of knowledge happens from an epistemological point when a subject or discipline is not treated by a comprehensive method. The broader categories of understanding include objectivity and subjectivity. Objectivity is to know things or phenomena as they are, and subjectivity is our private knowledge of things that may not be available to others. In making subjectivity methodologically more reliable intersubjectivity has found its way in academic discourses. It is when a group of people confirm the meaning of a phenomenon and agree with each other on such a meaning. The methods that are used are quantitative and qualitative. Pure quantitative research leans toward objectivity and purely qualitative towards subjectivity based on human experiences, meanings, and interpretations, which can vary based on personal perspectives. However, the validity is sought in qualitative methods by in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, reflexivity, triangulation, and intersubjectivity. However, research that provides a deeper and more comprehensive understanding is best conducted using mixed methods because it integrates the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods while compensating for their respective weaknesses. Therefore, mixed methods, including quantitative and qualitative, are useful for meaningful social sciences and humanities research. In the same way, in the insider/outsider approach to culture, anthropology, and religion, better understanding and more reliable research is expected from a participant observer than a complete observer.

Whether engaging in social science or humanities, researchers make interpretations, in other words, they use hermeneutics: the art and theories of interpretation. This interpretation is unavoidable both in quantitative and qualitative research and scholarship. Every research design is hermeneutical. A questionnaire set in quantitative research and conclusions from the analyzed data carry meaning or interpretation which is a hermeneutical aspect and on the other hand qualitative research is more obviously hermeneutical as it explores meaning of interviews and linguistic expression of experience. Hermeneutics is a method and art of interpretation. The key concern is to what extent a researcher can achieve accuracy in interpreting issues within the humanities and social sciences. There are some precautions which researchers and readers need to take under consideration, such as “hermeneutics of suspicion” a term coined by Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1970); in brief, it is essential to identify the speaker, understand their background, and determine their perspective. Readers should not just go by the face value of research. Connected to this concept is reflexivity. Particularly in humanities and social sciences, researchers should critically reflect on their influence in the research process. It ensures transparency in the research process. Furthermore, both researchers and audience should understand the relationship between “power and knowledge”, an idea developed by Foucault: that it is the power that creates knowledge (Foucault, 1972). It is clear how political environments, social pressure, and corporations influence knowledge generation.

The epistemological problems can be further understood when taking postmodernity and postmodern philosophical and academic ramifications into consideration. Postmodern thought among other things develops skepticism of everything, grand narratives, and perspectives but simultaneously puts everything on the same footing. It positively creates a space of not being dominated by a single thought and creates opportunities for another point of view to be heard. This is important as in our social sciences and humanities, researchers should not lose touch with Indigenous scholarship, wisdom, knowledge, and their own culture. Scholars and researchers should overcome academic and ideological inferiority complexes and should work out perspectives on developing social sciences and humanities that are context-sensitive, culturally relevant, and historically well-informed. Connected to the debate is appreciating the perspectives of marginalized sections of society. It is just a tragedy of Enlightenment that men dominate knowledge, and theories in social sciences and humanities are man-haunted. It is that man who has defined things and theories. But there is a need to listen to other genders. Knowledge should not be sexualized or genderized. There may be things hard for men to accept and things for women not wishing to go that far extent, but one thing is necessary to know how and in what way women understand things and what their perspectives are. Women should not be erased and marginalized; in the same way, knowing their views is essential to understanding the total reality. This is not just about women but about marginalized groups in terms of religion, race, color, region, society, and social class.

Conclusion

This paper identified reductionism, hasty conceptual generalization, Eurocentrism, and epistemological bias as forms of the fragmentation of knowledge. It considered Greek philosophy as the origin of the pattern and types of knowledge as developed in the West and adopted by most of the countries of the world; however, different from the contemporary time, knowledge until the advent of modernity was treated as wisdom which was more trusted in the hands of polymaths. The departmentalization of knowledge leads to useful specializations, however, unfortunately, the holistic nature of knowledge diminished. This gap calls for interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary academic discourse and research. Regarding the forms of fragmentation as dealt with above, the author concludes that reductionism is epistemological and theoretical. Epistemological reductionism suggests that all knowledge can be reduced to a single form of explanation, whereas theoretical reductionism suggests that one theory can be reduced to or explained by another, more fundamental theory. Epistemological reductionism can be removed by accepting the autonomy of subjects and disciplines and subjecting them to the appropriate and suitable methods. Hasty conceptual generalization happens when a concept is extended beyond its appropriate scope, leading to the loss of the essence of the subjected phenomenon. Hasty conceptual generalizations can be fixed by taking the diversity of phenomena under study, recognizing exceptions, and paying attention to differences. Eurocentrism is mainly to understand and interpret the world from a European perspective. It calls for cultural exchange for progress on one hand, and on the other recognizing that many issues related to human and social sciences are deeply rooted in history, culture, and religion and a beneficial scholarship for various countries and societies should not ignore this reality. Epistemological bias is the criticism of many epistemological errors that can be corrected by adopting mixed methods, proper hermeneutics, reflexivity, observer participation, and erosion of gender bias.

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