



States of Mind III; Those Who Stay, by Umberto Boccioni,

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:States_of_Mind_III:_Those_Who_Stay_by_Umberto_Boccioni,_1911.jpg

Do We Need Custodians of Knowledge?

Nietzsche suggested “There are no facts, only interpretations.”¹ This raises questions surrounding the subjectivity of knowledge, and therefore the need for people who can accurately interpret data and findings to formulate what can be identified as knowledge. A custodian is somebody with the responsibility of taking care of something, and – in the context of this essay – can be understood as a person or body that serves as a guardian, arbiter, or facilitator of what qualifies as knowledge; they determine, maintain and teach what is “fact”. This includes

academic researchers, librarians, and teachers. The following essay will consider whether we need custodians of knowledge, with reference to the areas of knowledge of history and the natural sciences. On the one hand, it may reasonably be held that custodians are necessary to strictly ensure knowledge is and remains accurate, based on empirical evidence and kept safe. On the other hand, there is the danger that this may result in strict censorship, and that this begins to infringe upon free speech.

One may argue that both history and the natural sciences are dependent on custodians of knowledge. In both, there are objective truths that can be verified either through primary sources or experimentation, but information and data from either of these require skilled professionals and academics who are able to interpret it. We expect qualified experts, who have spent years training, to be the ones overseeing

¹ (Nietzsche)

and conducting research in the natural sciences, particularly in the field of medicine. The Thalidomide tragedy of the mid-20th century provides an example of why this is important. Thalidomide was a drug widely used in the 1950s-1960s to treat nausea in pregnant women. It first came to market *without* the prior backing of thorough scientific scrutiny, and ended up leading to severe birth defects in infants.² This emphasises the importance of having custodians of knowledge in the form of expert scientists to ensure rigorous experimentation and testing is conducted to warrant the accuracy and reliability of knowledge in the natural sciences. In history, too, experts try to ensure valid knowledge is established from the accurate interpretation of empirical evidence, and then passed on. Consider, for example, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914.³ While the event itself is a historical fact, the interpretation of its significance and of the political dynamics that led to WW1 require expertise. Historians serve as custodians, analysing primary sources such as diplomatic archives to provide an understanding of the consequences of such an event. Without the guidance of these custodians of knowledge, there is a risk of oversimplifying or misinterpreting historical events – demonstrating the necessity of qualified historians to preserve the depth and accuracy of historical narratives.

People who are considered experts in both history and the natural sciences can be wrong, though; individual biases are inevitable, and mistakes are possible too. The case of phrenology provides an example of this in the natural sciences. Franz Joseph Gall, the founder of phrenology, was a well-regarded neuroanatomist between the 18th-19th century: a custodian of knowledge at the time.⁴ Yet, and despite its

² (Kim and Scialli)

³ (Cambridge University Library)

⁴ (Jones, Alfaro-Almagro and Jbabdi)

endorsement by further credible contemporary figures, phrenology has since been disproven, highlighting the susceptibility of supposed experts in the natural sciences to erroneous theories. Similarly, in history, narratives presented by different historians are inevitably shaped by individual backgrounds and biases. For example, historical scholars on either side of the Arab-Israeli conflict give different perspectives on the historical background: Israeli historian, Anita Shapira, for instance, aligns with the Zionist perspective – that the Jewish people have a historical right to the current Israeli land.⁵ Whilst Palestinian-American historian, Rashid Khalidi, asserts that Palestinians have faced historical injustices and dispossession, advocating for their “right of return” to the land that is present-day Israel.⁶ Both Shapira and Khalidi possess bias, influenced by their respective backgrounds. The difference between their two views demonstrates the inherent challenges of achieving a mainstream, majority-accepted historical account. This is less so the case for the natural sciences, where all scientific claims can be held to empirical evidence. However, strict custodians of knowledge are needed in the generation of knowledge in the natural sciences to ensure theories or discoveries are accurate and stem from proper experimental procedure, *preventing* pseudosciences like phrenology from coming into fruition. The objective nature of natural science makes this possible; whereas the elements of subjectivity in history make it problematic to have a small group of custodians establish a single historical storyline.

However, custodians of knowledge do play an important role in the *preservation* of information. Archival institutions that protect and maintain primary sources,

⁵ (Shapira)

⁶ (Khalidi)

experimental data and original research papers are central to the continuity of knowledge. This applies to the natural sciences and history, but the implications of such preservation hold distinct weight in the latter. If all historical primary sources and documents were to vanish, that knowledge would be lost forever. Although the same would *delay* the development of scientific knowledge, eventually we could deduce and rediscover scientific theories through experimental means. For example, the Library of Alexandria once held a major collection of sources and documents pertaining to the Ancient World. Unfortunately, the institution was damaged by fires in 48BC and the 4th century, before facing total destruction in 640AD.⁷ This resulted in the irreversible destruction of thousands of artefacts, creating an unbridgeable gap in our understanding of the past. If custodians of this historical knowledge were present at the time and had protected the library, the permanent eradication of a large part of humanity's history could have been prevented. Whereas, the loss or absence of knowledge in the natural sciences can likely be rediscovered over time. A notable example is the re-discovery of Gregor Mendel's work on genetics between the 19th and 20th century. Three individual scientists, all unknown to each other – Hugo DeVries, Carl Correns and Erich von Tschermak – were each conducting research that led to the discovery of the laws of inheritance. They independently reached the same scientific conclusions, and when each conducted a literature review before publishing their results, discovered Mendel's paper that, too, found the same scientific conclusions, published thirty-five years earlier in 1865.⁸ The empirical nature of the natural sciences allowed these scientists to independently reproduce and validate Mendel's findings, demonstrating how scientific knowledge can persist and eventually resurface,

⁷ (El-Abbadi)

⁸ (Roberts)

even if original work and findings are lost or overlooked – unlike historical knowledge. Therefore, I would argue that custodians of knowledge are not as necessary to preserve existing knowledge in the natural sciences, but most certainly are in history.

In having custodians preserve existing knowledge in either area, one must be wary of the potential problems that could emerge. Custodians who care for existing knowledge may become wary of anything that might disrupt that knowledgebase; they are likely to be advocates for the status quo, and risk becoming resistant to change. An example of this in the natural sciences lies in a story that my IB Physics teacher recently told me about a research project he undertook whilst at university. When selecting which topic to conduct the project on, a narrow selection of options was given by his supervisors – but he wished to choose a topic outside of this scope, as it was something he was interested in. He was strongly discouraged to do so on the basis that it was too difficult, and subsequently did not receive any help in the project. Although he successfully completed it in the end, the lack of help and guidance made the project much more difficult and frustrating to carry out, and led to a form of academic inertia. Beyond this, resistivity of change displayed by custodians of knowledge risks infringing on free speech if they begin to dictate what can and cannot be done or said, particularly in history. For example, the constitution of Austria enshrines “any form of approval, denial or trivialisation of the Holocaust or other crimes of the Nazi regime” to be a criminal offence.⁹ Whilst this is done to try and prevent the platforming of misinformation and discrimination against the Jewish people, I would argue that it risks having the opposite effect. If someone in Austria were to suggest that the Holocaust did not happen and were subsequently arrested, this could fuel

⁹ (European Parliamentary Research Service)

further conspiracy theories by causing others to suspect that perhaps that person, now imprisoned, was on to something and therefore silenced. Alternatively, confronting people who refute mainstream historical accounts and discussing why we think our knowledge is more accurate than theirs, and what evidence we have to support this, could be a more effective way for custodians of knowledge to preserve accepted historical accounts and combat unfounded conspiracy theories.

To conclude, expert custodians of knowledge have a role to play in both natural sciences and history in establishing objective knowledge, be it through interpretation of primary sources or guaranteeing the accuracy of experimental procedures. However, the subjective nature of historical interpretation cautions against allowing a select few custodians to dictate historical narratives, as this may result in biased and superficial interpretations of events – and after all, to quote my old history teacher, “it is not the truth that matters, but people’s *interpretation* of the truth.” Custodians of knowledge are welcome in both areas of knowledge in preserving objectivities, particularly in history where institutions that protect historical artefacts and primary sources are vital. We must be vigilant, though, in preserving accepted knowledge, to avoid a form of resistive orthodoxy. For this can create academic inertia, suppressing further research and development of knowledge, whilst it also risks restricting free speech which causes more problems than it solves.

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