

Book Review

Thomas Kelly. – *Bias: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford University Press, 2022, Hardback, x + 267 pp., ISBN-13: 978-0-19-284295-4

Accusations of bias provide a way to rationally dismiss a person's opinion. Only a philosopher would think that philosophers should rule. Consequently, we should hold with suspicion Plato's arguments suggesting that the rightful leader will be a philosopher. Attributions of bias are as common as accusations of bias. A coin, a voting system, a thermometer, a media outlet, a person, and a society may all exhibit bias. Sometimes a bias may be a good thing. The visual system has a bias to resolve ambiguous data in a way that produces true beliefs in our environment.

When is a bias a good thing? Are accusations of bias rational? What in general is a bias? These questions, among others, are the focus of Thomas Kelly's excellent study on bias. Kelly argues for the norm theoretic account of bias according to which "a bias involves a systematic departure from a genuine norm or standard of correctness" (p. 4). The norm-theoretic account is the central organizing idea around a multifaceted discussion of bias. Kelly identifies five themes in the book (see pp. 231–2): (1) a robust pluralism about bias; (2) the significant relationship between bias and norms of correctness; (3) the perspectival character of bias attributions; (4) the objectivity of bias and bias attributions; and (5) externalism about bias. The norm-theoretic account entails (2). Given that account and a robust pluralism of the kinds of things subject to norms, (1) follows. Given first-order disagreements about putative facts and disagreements about norms, we'd expect bias attributions to assume substantive first-order claims and claims about norms; hence (3). But given the actual facts, including facts about norms, whether (e.g.) a person is biased is an objective matter; thus (4). Finally, given the perspectival character of bias attributions and some routine facts about human psychology, we'd expect a bias blind spot in which people have a tendency "to see bias in other people in ways that we fail to see it in ourselves" (p. 7). Kelly takes externalism about bias in an anti-Cartesian direction: the biasing mechanism may have nothing to do with the relation between belief, the will, and the evidence—it may be external to a person's cognitive home; so (5).

Kelly's book is divided into three sections: Conceptual Foundations (chapters 1 and 2), Bias and Norms (chapters 3-7), and Bias and Knowledge (chapters 8 and 9). The book closes with a helpful summary of major themes and a Tractarian thesis by thesis accounting of the major claims in each chapter, numbered from (1) to (125). The first chapter "Diversity, Relativity, Etc" discusses basic structural features of bias. Kelly argues (e.g.) that a person may be biased in one context but unbiased in another depending on the social role they occupy (p. 22). Chapter 2 "Pluralism and Priority" argues for a robust

pluralism about bias according to which “(i) many different types of things are genuinely biased, and (ii) no one of these types is fundamental in every context in which something is biased” (p. 44). Chapter 3 “The Norm-Theoretic Account of Bias” develops his account of bias. A key part of his view is that the norm theoretic account is an account of bias in the pejorative sense. A bias systematically departs from a genuine norm and so carries a negative evaluation. Below, I’ll investigate how this account fits with Kelly’s claim that a bias may be a good thing.

Chapter 4 “The Bias Blind Spot and the Biases of Introspection” argues for externalism about bias on which “one’s biases do not supervene on one’s internal states and the causal relationships among those states (p. 237). It follows that there is a bias blind spot that holds, not only for some contingent facts about the self, but on account of the metaphysical nature of bias. Chapter 5 “Biased People” is a nuanced discussion of bias in a person. He argues, for example, two people may share a bias against Xs even though they do not share any X-related mental states, dispositions, or actions (p. 114). In chapter 6 “Norms of Objectivity,” Kelly considers norms about bias. He identifies norms of preemption, norms of remediation, and constitutive norms of objectivity. This chapter closes with a valuable discussion of biased reasoning in connection with the norm to follow the argument where it leads (pp. 136–144).

Chapter 7 “Symmetry and Bias Attributions” examines challenges to the norm theoretic account. Kelly is explicit that the norm theoretic account isn’t a reductive analysis of bias. There are counterexamples in both directions. Moreover, he identifies a subtle challenge to the norm theoretic account from non-pejorative uses of bias (more on this below). Chapter 8 “Bias and Knowledge” argues that a biased person can still know even when they believe in accord with their bias; a person’s bias may not be operative in the case where good evidence produces and sustains the belief. Kelly argues that a token belief isn’t knowledge when it is the manifestation of a tendency to systematically depart from a genuine epistemic norm. In Chapter 9 “Knowledge, Skepticism, and Reliability,” Kelly considers several claims relating to bias, knowledge, and skepticism. He argues that even if someone is biased about a moral issue it doesn’t follow that they fail to know that or that they should set it aside in reasoning. As with the argument in chapter 8, the key claim turns on whether the bias is operative in producing and sustaining the token belief. Chapter 10 “Bias Attributions and the Epistemology of Disagreement” aims to dismiss a compelling skeptical argument that given facts about bias and the bias blind spot, we should be less confident in our judgments about bias. Kelly defends a view that fits with his defense of the right-reasons view of disagreement. There is no general requirement to set aside one’s first-order views in one’s judgments about bias.

This book is a rich philosophical exploration and defense of the norm theoretic ac-

count and related themes. In the following I briefly explore the connection between Kelly's account of bias, fairness, and symmetry. On the face of it the norm theoretic account doesn't have a connection with fairness, evenhandedness, or symmetry, all of which seem to figure centrally in bias. The status quo bias is a tendency to favor acts that maintain the status quo over other acts that are better options (see p. 5). The bias blind spot is a tendency to see bias in others but not in oneself (p. 7). A visual system with a light from above bias resolves data that is ambiguous between a concave and a convex object in a way that favors convexity (pp. 177-8). The norm-theoretic account states that a bias, in the pejorative sense, is a systematic departure from a genuine norm. Yet, as Kelly observes, some systematic departures of genuine norms aren't biases—see Unbiased Serial Killer (pp. 149–150). Moreover, some biases are not systematic departures from genuine norms. A person in a Buridan's Ass situation that systematically chooses the right hay bale is biased but doesn't fail a genuine norm. These cases highlight a challenge to the norm theoretic account—symmetry violations are central to biases.

Kelly tackles these challenges in Chapter 7. He observes, "We are happy to attribute bias to an agent when they systematically depart from a contextually salient standard, particularly when their departure is naturally conceptualized as a symmetry violation" (p. 162). In the cases of non-pejorative biases—the light from above bias and the choose right bias—there is a systematic departure from a symmetry standard. Putting together bias in both the pejorative and non-pejorative senses leads to this account.

A bias is either a systematic departure from a norm (in which case it is a bad thing) or a systematic departure from a contextually relevant symmetry standard (in which case it is not a bad thing).

This is a disjunctive account of bias that includes symmetry violations only in the second disjunct. The disjunctive account doesn't fit with the central role that Kelly gives to symmetry considerations. In the Tractarian thesis by thesis summary of chapter 7, Kelly writes,

Symmetry considerations play a central role in our thinking about bias . . . When a person is disposed to systematically depart from a norm, the more then norm is naturally conceptualized as a symmetry standard, the more natural it will be to consider the disposition a bias, all else being equal (p. 241)

On Kelly's view, the pejorative sense of bias is a special case of a more general phenomenon in which the symmetry standard is a genuine norm (see thesis (97) on p. 241).

This suggests an account of bias that takes systematic departures from symmetry standards as the conceptual core of bias. Thus,

A bias is a systematic departure from a symmetry standard.

This symmetry account fits well with Kelly's major themes. There is a robust pluralism about symmetry standards. Given the facts about introspection, we'd expect symmetry violations in reports of bias in oneself and others. Moreover, given disagreements about facts and standards, bias attributions exhibit a perspectival character. Bias, in the negative sense, has a deep connection to the correctness of symmetry standards.

The symmetry standard account naturally captures the idea that there may be good and bad biases. A good bias systematically departs from a symmetry standard in a way that promotes values, while a bad bias does not. Take, for example, a grandfather who exaggerates his grandchild's achievements (see p. 126). The grandfather is biased to his grandchild. To the extent that this embellishment promotes value, one would think it is a good bias. The case then fits with the light from above bias—in some environments it promotes truth (and so a good bias), in other environments it promotes falsehood (and so is a bad bias).

A case in favor of Kelly's norm theoretic account over the symmetry standard account would be a bias, in the pejorative sense, that does not violate a symmetry norm. Is there an argument that such cases fail to obtain? If there is perhaps it lies in the idea that a bias exhibits directionally. A bias is *against* one option and *for another*. But again this is an observation that Kelly makes. "Any bias has a *direction* or a *valence*" (p. 232). The symmetry standard account may be a simple way to recombine the norm-theoretic account with Kelly's many valuable insights throughout the book.

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References

Kelly, T. (2022). *Bias: A Philosophical Study*, Oxford University Press.