

African Epistemology as a Critique of Western Epistemology

Dr. Adeleye, Joseph Olusola

and

Bamikole Kehinde Oluwaseun

Bamidele Olumilua University of Education, Science and Technology,
Ikere Ekiti
adeleye.joseph@bouesti.edu.ng

Abstract

Many African epistemologists consider themselves as either Universalist or Relativist about theories of knowledge. Despite the instinctive appeal of the former and latter, many of their advocates are at crossroads about the relevance of both positions to African philosophy. This paper focuses on the plausibility of both positions, in order to see if African epistemology can be used to critique western epistemology. First, we argue that it is important to make a distinction between the former and later- one which is more communal and the other which tends to be individualistic. Second, after making the distinction between both, we postulate that the Universalist position attribute knowledge as the same across all cultures. This makes it problematic for theories of knowledge. Third, there is the recommendation that any relativist position must begin by defending the uniqueness of African epistemology, on the grounds that it employs a social epistemology that is situated in African ways of knowing, and this is one of the philosophical benefits which African epistemology offers. This paper concludes that there is no reason to doubt the view that African knowledge systems are rational enough to critique western theories of knowledge, which are deemed to be Eurocentric, Egocentric, Racist, and this critique is a positive appraisal rather than a negative appraisal.

Keywords: African, Western, Epistemology, Rationality, Relativists, Universalists, Knowledge

Introduction

The objective of this paper is to:

- (a) define what epistemology from a Western and African perspective is;
- (b) examine the differences between Western epistemology and African epistemology;
- (c) critically examine the critique which African epistemologists have made against western epistemology;
- (d) to argue for the benefits of African epistemology over Western epistemology.

In the first section of this paper, the meaning of epistemology will be examined. In addition, the differences between the Western epistemology and African epistemology will be examined. The rationale for the exploration of the issues in this section is to argue against the view that Western epistemology is the only viable epistemology and that non - Western epistemology does not constitute a rational epistemology. This is because of the failure to understand that Africans have their own ontology through which they view reality and how they know and interact with reality.

The second section of the paper deals with the position that African epistemology can be used as a critique of Western epistemology. The argument that will be employed here is the cultural relativist's argument that there is no universal epistemology that constitutes the standard for all ways of knowing across cultures and that different cultures have their own unique way of knowing. The main argument for the cultural relativist's position is that there could be a unique form of epistemology that is critical and rational enough that can be equated with Western epistemology and which indeed can be used to critique Western epistemology, and it shows that there are some benefits of African epistemology over Western epistemology. The argument here is that African epistemology is not entirely individualistic and that is why it is capable of uniting people across different social strata of the society.

What is Western Epistemology?

In its etymological meaning, the word Epistemology is coined from two Greek words, 'episteme' - to know, and 'logos' -study. Thus, in its full meaning, epistemology means theory of knowledge as a branch of philosophy. Its focus is: how we can know, what can we know and the extent of what we can know. The problem in stating a precise definition is because each individual employs its own theories of knowledge about the world, its meaning can then be absolute or relative based on the cultural background of the knower(s).

Consequently, the nature of Western epistemology deals with the fundamental ground rule that knowledge entails "justification, truth and belief" (Hamlyn, 1970). But this paradigm, results in scepticism, to the effect that the analyses of these terms cannot provide a rational basis for knowledge. Donney Willis explained that such rule is guided by two constraints, the Cartesian constraint and the reasons argument. According to him, the Cartesian constraint relates to Descartes' argument in the *Discourse on Method and Mediations* (1, 2, 3, and 4) which supports the view that we can always be deceived by a malignant demon into believing what is false. On the other hand, the reason argument is about the necessary justifications for knowledge and in certain occasions, this might be very difficult, due to the different individual and cultural background of the knower(s); in connection to this, Western epistemology has been done by focusing on the analyses and discussions about three terms: justification, truth, belief (JTB).

What is Justification? Justification in epistemology denotes evidence; to claim that one has knowledge; you must provide different reasons why you know. This is referred to as evidential justification in traditional epistemology, which is the first condition for knowledge. For example, we as human beings have forms of justification:

- (i) religious justification,
- (ii) evidential justification,

- (iii) non inferential justification, etc. What the epistemologists are really concerned with is that there should be sufficient justification for claims towards knowledge.

What is Truth? Truth in traditional philosophy could not be defined, due to the different types of truth. However, as Russell Bertrand's has pointed out in *The Problems of Philosophy*, there are three points to note in discussing the nature of truth:"

- (i) Any theory of truth must be as such as to admit of its opposite, falsehood;
- (ii) truth and falsehood are properties of beliefs and statements and,
- (iii) the truth or falsehood of a belief always depends upon something that lies outside the belief".

Accordingly, in western epistemology, there are three classical theories of truth. These are the correspondence theory, the coherent theory and the pragmatic theory. The correspondence theory of truth, affirms that truth must correspond to a fact; the coherence theory of truth admits that truth must be coherent or consistent with a set of beliefs and the pragmatic theory of truth, focuses on the usefulness of knowledge and that if it is not applicable for understanding the external world, it is not useful. This is supported by pragmatist such as John Dewey, William James, Charles S. Pierce, and Richard Rorty.

What is a belief? In western epistemology, belief is the third condition for knowledge. For us to know, we must entertain one belief or the other. However, for us to know, our belief must be well grounded. For instance, it could be that the knowledge we have about something or someone could be due to our own subjective conditionings of our environment. For instance, Plato recognized that we should be able to separate such 'knowledge' from 'opinion', because knowledge belongs to the Forms, and opinion belongs to matter or physical reality. One cannot have knowledge without forming belief.

In other words, the concepts of justified, truth and rational belief, along with the notion of knowledge, form the core subject of western epistemology. Moreover, it can also be argued that the theory of (justified true belief), is divorced from everyday assessment of different opinions, which tend to emphasize whether we have been responsible in forming our beliefs rather than the satisfaction of the prerequisites of knowledge (Foley, 2012). According to his view, instead of 'knowledge as justified belief', it should be knowledge 'justified reasonable belief', because it is capable of giving expression to the everyday concerns we have in evaluating our own and each other's beliefs- this will allow one to switch attention from whether we have met all the prerequisites of knowledge, but rather to whether we are reasonably careful, reasonable cautious, and reasonably thorough in our opinions, whereby the standards of reasonability can vary from one belief to another.

However, Chundoff Elijah has noted that the issue with Western epistemology is that it requires us to "articulate conditions that suffice for knowledge, even if those conditions are non-explanatory". For example, he asserts that such problems in Western Epistemology has a solution, if and only if there is no analysis of knowledge. In his view, two methodological issues can be taken up regarding the case. The first methodological issue is about what evidence can be given in favour of a theory of knowledge, or knowledge of some kind, since this method will allow us to give up looking for necessary and sufficient condition in favour of looking for explanatory condition which allows us to check it against intuitions about cases, i.e. intuitions

about the presence or absence of knowledge in real or imagined situations. The second approach, is that there should not be enough reason for us to allow methodical doubt, when we subject our knowledge to criteria's of truth, belief and justification.

More so, in western epistemology, there are three types of knowing- knowing by acquaintance, knowing how, and knowing that- which is called propositional in epistemology. But according to various literatures in epistemology, introducing theories of knowledge itself is only contributing to the problems of knowledge. This is because if knowledge is already identified why put theories, which will only seek to overemphasize, restructure all the conditions, origin and sources of knowledge. Ayer Alfred remarks that:

Likewise, it is also maintained that these theories of knowledge, themselves, fail their own test because they are too circular, that is, they often go in full circle, which leads to another problem of regress, which all avoid the details which are needed to offer a satisfactory condition of knowledge in the first place. (200)

In summation, two schools of thoughts are predominant in western epistemology. Rationalism argues for knowledge by deductive proofs and rules of logic; in that one does not need to look for external sources in the world, before one can acquire knowledge, you can trust your intuition for claims of knowledge. Empiricism postulates that our sense-experience is easily accessible to us, and it can also be empirically tested and verified by other sources. Why are they important? First, both schools of thought are needed because it helps one understand the rationality behind our claims to knowledge. Both reason and experience are needed for our conceptual knowledge. Second, western epistemology is a laden concept, because it is used to explain and understand the facts of a phenomenon; Reason and Experience are applied to conceptual knowledge. Third, it provides a way for comparative purpose to see the better one for acquiring knowledge; reason is valuable to provide reasons for our claims to knowledge and experience is valuable, since it focuses on the individual's knower's culture, religion and ethnicity.

What is African Epistemology?

The question of what African epistemology is cannot be described without the meaning of what African philosophy is. A negative response to the former denotes negative response to the later. To say that there can be African philosophy denotes that there is an African epistemology. The meaning of African epistemology has been in contention for different scholars in African philosophy, however the general view is that there is something that can be referred to as African philosophical thought, which means there is an African ethics, aesthetics, and metaphysics. Simply, Odera Oruka explains, there have been four schools of thought in African philosophy in response of what African epistemology is. These are classified as: "*Ethno Philosophy, Philosophic Sagacity, Politico- Ideological philosophy and professional philosophy*"

Accordingly, the positions among the four schools of thought connote the meaning of African epistemology. The ethno philosopher tries to understand the characteristics of African culture i.e. language, and religious celebrations, for evidence of a theory of knowledge. The

philosopher sage sought answer to question about epistemic knowledge in Africa through elders of his or her community. The politico- ideological is socially oriented in his or her approach to knowledge. The professional philosopher looks for answers by critically studying a global epistemology to update him or herself on the present debate on epistemology- this is a contextualized epistemology that shows characteristics of social epistemology that understands knowledge has been culturally relative.

To understand what African epistemology is, the ethno philosopher's approach towards knowledge is more favoured here. The reason is because an epistemology that is African is needed to be understood through its social context. Epistemology itself is seen as the theory about the nature and limits of know, however the important point here is that any person, human being from the world, irrespective of their culture, tribe or race which makes knowledge to be relative.

Accordingly, from this analysis above, social epistemology is then the tool which African epistemology is suitable to as a claim towards rationality. First, African epistemologists then create a concept of rationality that is appropriate to the African society. Second, African epistemology then is a critical awareness of the intellectual and cognitive traditions of African philosophy, which does not make a negative description of its people.

What then is implication of these analyses for what African epistemology is? This means that a general understanding of what an African epistemology is causes oversimplification of diversity that focuses on African traditional culture and modern Western culture only as two significant terms. The position of the Universalist and relativists as mentioned in the abstract applies here. Universalists in African philosophy argue that African cultures, like all others, participate in a shared human rationality or moral understanding. Relativists holds that **truths, values, and moral principles are culturally dependent**, and must be understood within their specific cultural or historical context- relativists emphasize the uniqueness of African worldviews, languages, customs, and systems of thought that can't be reduced to Western categories.

Concurrently, the subject matter of African epistemology is this. First, it is a presentation of well-established general beliefs, concept and theories of African people. Second, it is a presentation of African favoured ways that are institutional in acquiring knowledge and evaluating facts and truth about the African situation. Third, it is the wisdom passed on in the form of proverbs, myths, folk, and tales. Fourth, it is the presentation of African language as African knowledge base. Fifth, it is the presentation of customs and practices in the aspects of religion, judiciary, law and Governance.

To conclude, the task of African epistemology is a long way. First, for one to claim that African epistemology is to be taken in consideration as a theory of knowledge, then the similarities and differences of concepts of knowledge and truth in all cultures on the African continent must be considered. Truth is applicable across a culture, given the fact that there is not difficulty in translating the word 'cultures itself, it is a matter of similitude of meaning, and particulars in as much it is a philosophical concept. Second, for African epistemology to be relevant to modern Africa, it must acknowledge and acquire advancements made in science and technology of the west. Third, the belief that age and gender are used to determine how knowledgeable the knower(s) is, denies the epistemic authority to the young and power to the

old, and this needs to be questioned. An epistemic reasonability then needs to be taken note of by African knowers through critically questioning the traditions which are backward and retaining those knowledge that are valuable.

African Epistemology as a Critique of Western Epistemology

African epistemology is a universal subject that deals with knowledge of individuals based on their different social context. The claim that African epistemology can critique epistemology is more of a possibility rather than a postulation. This is because our claims to knowledge are evidently based on the knower's social process that uses evidence for his or her claim. This type of evidence needs not only to be rational, but it could also be from other sources of knowing like emotion, feeling, revelation, folktales. In comparison, Western epistemology tends towards rationality and sense experience. When one examines Western Epistemology, Michael Williams argues that it often tries to isolate placeholders of knowledge from their social contexts. He comments: "The argument that western epistemology needs to be 'naturalized', that is, made continuous with one or more of the sciences is confusing and paradoxical in the philosophy of (Kant, 1785; Russell, 1956, Stroud, 1984, Quine, 1970)".

Moreover, in my own view, this denotes that Western Epistemology, undermines indigenous thinking, and valuing rationality. For instance, African epistemology is rational enough to critique western theories of knowledge through an appraisal that is of positive contribution to philosophy. The questions to be asked then are:

- (i) what are the critiques African epistemology leveled against western epistemology?
- (ii) How can these critiques contribute to theories of knowledge?
- (iii) Why are these critiques needed for both African epistemology and western epistemology?
- (iv) Are these critiques possible at all?

In relation to my first question, the critiques which African epistemology levels against its counterpart are fourfold:

- (a) rationality as a restriction in understanding the emotional African knower,
- (b) devaluation of indigenous knowledge by western epistemology,
- (c) western epistemology as *Racist, Eurocentric, Egocentric*,
- (d) western epistemology open and close predicament misconception.

First, about (a), rationality is known to be systematic, logical in evaluation of epistemic judgments of knowledge and emotions is often considered as a sort of sentiment by the west in acquiring knowledge. The rational is seen as more important than the emotional for the Western knower. This misconception only serves to contribute to devaluation of the African ways of knowing. For example, the folktales in African philosophy are classified by the west as not philosophical, but at close inspection, it consists of ethics, logic, aesthetics, and epistemology.

Second, about (b), indigenous knowledge is seen as the unique ways of knowing that is relevant to a culture or tribe. Western epistemology has subject to skepticism this type of knowledge. Moreover, African indigenous knowledge is the raw and original ways of knowing that is acquired through revelation, omens, dreams, divination, oral utterance that shows

instances of logic. For example, when Western Ethnographers came to observe African culture, they saw such epistemology as religious, which for them was not a form of Philosophy. Succinctly, these indigenous ways of knowing in Africa is quite important, since it shows the intersectionality of race, color, politics and ontology which cannot all be disproved as factors of theory of knowledge.

Third, on (c), there is a criticism that Western epistemology is Racist, Eurocentric and Egocentric. *Eurocentric* in the sense that its epistemology is from a congenital European philosophical tradition, like that of G.W.H. Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Bertrand Russell; these philosophers in their epistemologies were skeptical and debating whether African epistemic system was relevant as a theory of knowledge. *Racist* in the sense that there was racial profiling system used to evaluating African ways of knowing; Racism itself has always been an issue that African philosophers dealt with, and for Western philosophers to consider the African race as less developed in its production and acquisition of knowledge permeated a lot of disregard for indigenous thoughts that is much original.

Fourth, on (d) the false accepted view that Western philosophy and epistemology is open towards knowledge, and that African philosophy is closed, opens the former for criticism. African epistemologists saw this conception as wrong, because the former and latter has different conceptual schemes of reality and knowledge. Such openness is that there is acceptance of different systems of knowing, and closeness suggests that there is no headway for any alternate source of knowing. African epistemologists argue that its epistemic system is more open than ever because it interacts with other cultures through war, colonialism, globalism, language, music, art.

Moreover, the philosophical benefits that African epistemology offers against the problems posed by western epistemology, through an epistemological revision of cultural traditions and knowledge in Africa is by two factors: (a) academic exploration, (b) cross acculturation. Firstly, Academic explorers are those who are referred to as the cognitive revisionists who make persuasive arguments in their inner mind and African society subscribe to their thought. Secondly, the cross culturalists are African philosophers who became aware of their own culture and others, and this opens conceptual possibilities. For instance, Horton Robin in his '*closed and open predicaments*' argument argued that traditional culture was closed, and modern culture was opened (Horton, 22). But his idea was epistemological irresponsible, since Africa was indeed open in its interactions with other cultures by way of trade, wars, and invasion, and African epistemology is developing not Euro-centrally but afro-centrally in theories of knowledge.

In conclusion, African epistemologists can be credited for trying to defend the heritage of the African knower. For example, we see instances of paper written to appraise traditional thought through philosophical criticism by African philosophers in Africa and in the diaspora. It should not be a case that we still argue about whose philosophies and knowledge is valued more, but how those thoughts could contribute to the development of theories of knowledge. The criticism or critiques leveled are not negative, but only a stern suggestion that Western epistemology should clear away its misconceptions about African ways of knowing; its knowledge(s) are then valid and rational, if there is warrant available to support it through JTB.

Conclusion

Our final thoughts on this matter, is that Western epistemology has been on for a very long time and it has been responsible for the growth of epistemology as a branch of philosophy. However, this does not suggest that it is the only form of epistemology that is worth embracing. As it has been shown in this paper, African epistemology is another form of epistemology that constitutes a viable alternative to Western epistemology. The world of knowledge itself is becoming globalized, and as such, knowledge can be gained by any person in the world regardless of their race, religion, color, and socialization. The idea that a group of people's knowledge of Eurocentric orientation is only valid is wrong; a more relativists approach towards knowledge is needed.

However, a universalized approach is only positive if there is 'equality and equity in reverence of all knowledge as important, but it becomes negative if it debases other cultures as not knowledgeable. A relativists approach is positive, if it tries to study knowledge based on the cultural, political and social conditions of the knower. The problem about western epistemologists relates to its exclusion of other forms of epistemology as constituting viable forms of knowledge. Experience has shown that the world is made up of different cultures, and hence different modes and ways of knowing and perceiving reality.

Works Cited

- Chudnoff, Elijah. "The Nature of Intuitive Justification". *Philosophical studies*, vol153, no.2 2011, pp.313-333.
- Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on Method and Meditations*. United Kingdom: Harmondsworth and PenguinBooks, 1968.
- Foley, Richard. *When is True Belief Knowledge?* United States: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Gettier, Edmund. "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis*, vol. 23, no 4, 1963, pp. 121-123
- Hamlyn, D.W. *The Theory of Knowledge*. United States: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1970.
- Horton, Robin. 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science'. *Africa*, 37, vol. 1-2 (1967) and in *Rationality*, B.R Wilson (ed), Oxford: Blackwell, 1974.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. United States: Vail Ballow Press, 1785.
- Kaphagawani, Didier, N. and Jeanette, G. Malherbe, "Epistemology and the Tradition in Africa" in *the African Philosophy Reader* (2nd ed.) P.H. Coetzee and A. P. J. Roux (eds.) New York Routledge, 2003.
- Oruka, Odera H. "Sagacity in African Philosophy". *International philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XXII, no 4, 1983, pp.220-250.
- Quine, W.V. "On the Reasons for indeterminacy Translation". *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol 67, no. 6, 1970 pp. 178-173.
- Russell, Bertrand. *History of Western Philosophy*. United States: Routledge, 1946.
- Russell, Bertrand. *The Problems of Philosophy*. United States: Oxford University Press, 1980.
- Russell, Bertrand. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1956.
- Ryle, Gilbert. *The Concept of Mind*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949.
- Stroud, Barry. "Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge". *Journal of Philosophy* vol.81, no.10, 1984, pp.545-551.
- Williams, Michael. *Problems of Knowledge: A Critical Introduction to Epistemology*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Wills, Donney. "Descartes Conception of Perfect Knowledge". *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 8, no.4, 1970, pp.387-403.