

## Is that All There is to Know?: The Limits of “Eurocentric” Epistemology

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Knowledge is typically seen as something that is contingent on impartiality and fully independent from the knower. We are told that science depends on a “self-distancing”, in which the seeker of knowledge must distance themselves from bias in order to proceed the search for objective knowledge. This understanding of knowledge assumes that a specific type of knowledge will take the same form for any knower, since knowledge in this framework is conceived as something that is entirely separate from the knower. In this paper I will be arguing that the understanding an individual has of a piece of knowledge changes depending on their circumstance and context. In developing this argument, the limitations of the unbiased and impartial conception of knowledge will be examined and critiqued. In particular, I will be critiquing the idea that science can have an impartial, unbiased component, and suggest that this “unbiased” perception of knowledge is, in fact, only the viewpoint of a “dominant knower” imposed on the masses. In other words, I am skeptical towards the attempt scientists make at distancing themselves from their own prejudices and beliefs in hopes of arriving at what are deemed “objective” conclusions. I will primarily be in dialogue with Patricia Hill Collins’ piece “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought”. The ultimate aspiration of this paper will be to begin an argument for the necessity of subjective epistemologies to be taken into account in dialogues regarding epistemology while still maintaining some form of positivism for the sake of maintaining a degree of objectivity. In this paper I am not making any epistemological statements regarding what knowledge is, but rather what I have perceived to be the function of

knowledge. I then attempt to relate that perceived function to its validation, which differs between individual to individual, social group to social group.

The understanding of a particular piece of knowledge can change depending on who the knower is. This relationship between knower and what is known may differ between knowers depending on their respective cultural, social, or geographical positions. Collins identifies a trend in the typical methodology of epistemology accepted by the heads of western academia; a trend that does not take into account the subjective context of the knower but rather attempts to arrive at a generalized conclusion as to what knowledge is, disregarding the knower in question. This trend is dubbed by Collins, likely as a rhetorical ploy more than anything else, as “Eurocentric masculinist positivism”, and goes on to accuse this system of knowledge validation as reflecting solely the interests of its creators (751). The nature of the problem with this unbiased and impartial approach to knowledge, when it becomes the only epistemology considered worthy of consideration, lies in the implicit assumption built into its methodology (especially if we are to agree with Collins’ premise that epistemologies reflect the needs and desires of their creators).

This implicit assumption lies within the negligence of any sociological consideration in the validation of knowledge claims, thereby making only generalized statements of the world valid knowledge. It is equatable to stating something along the lines of: “Everyone must experience the world the way *I* experience it, and therefore everyone can acquire and interact with knowledge about the nature of the world in the same way that *I* do”. In making this implicit assumption, what this epistemological viewpoint does is *not* enforce a separation between one’s subjective viewpoint and their inquiry. On the contrary, it enforces the subjective viewpoint of the “dominant knower” (that being the framework adopted by those in power) upon everyone

else. Such an assumption does not take into account the sociological dimension involved in the creation, discovery, and obtainment of knowledge.

To the person in power who is imposing this methodology of searching for knowledge, the collection of “objective” facts and generalizations about the empirical world, as that person or group sees them, forms the totality of what there is to know with certainty in the world. Considering that this person in power is not able to fully separate themselves from their sociological position, they are not able to take into account how perceived and experienced reality can interact with people located in different positions throughout the social strata. As Berger and Luckmann state in their text *The Social Construction of Reality*, in referencing Marx: “Man’s consciousness is determined by his social being” (5). To suggest that the relationship between knower and the thing known has no effect on how the thing known is perceived by the knower (or even employed by the knower) also greatly constrains the type of knowledge us as knowledge-seekers can look for. In “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought”, Patricia Hill Collins describes what she perceives as the dominant epistemological framework as “[An approach that] aims to create scientific descriptions of reality by producing objective generalizations” (754). The employment of this methodology heavily constrains what can be considered “knowledge”, since “knowledge” in this framework can only be “true” if it can be applicable to everyone in every circumstance. This feature becomes a problem that has led to the impractical exclusion of various alternative forms of knowledge validations processes, particularly those epistemologies that address issues of social knowledge. In making knowledge an exclusivist endeavor, in that for anything to be considered knowledge it must follow the rules of the dominant knowledge validation process, then we are ignoring the knowledge that is

produced by people in varying social and personal contexts. These knowledges come about from unique situations that pertain to a smaller group of people than the knowledge created by generalized accounts about the world. In the current state of knowledge validation, the utility of knowledge is seemingly being ignored.

Why do people spend time attempting to acquire knowledge? I suggest one of the primary reasons for looking for knowledge is because knowledge helps us operate in the world more efficiently. If that is the case, then we should be asking “How do people generally operate in the world”? This question does not have one sole answer either, but most people tend to look for knowledge that would be most useful *to them in their respective contexts*. Collins writes that “All social thought, including white masculinist and Black feminist, reflects the interest and standpoint of its creators... Scholars, publishers, and other experts represent specific interest and credentialing processes, and their knowledge claims must satisfy the epistemological and political criteria of the contexts in which they reside” (751). In this passage, Collins provides an epistemological account different from the others presented so far in this paper. To Collins, epistemology looks something more like the following:

1. There is no one valid epistemology, but rather *epistemologies*
2. Each of these epistemologies belong to particular social groups
3. Each of these social groups develop epistemologies for the purpose of serving their own interests

It should not come as a surprise that individuals search for knowledge that pertains to their ends. The epistemology of the “Dominant Knower”, discussed earlier, does this as well, despite being

under the guise of “searching for truth”. What we should now discuss is how knowledge changes from the context of people across different social positions and contexts.

If we gather knowledge for the sake of knowing how to better interact with our respective contexts, then it must be acknowledged that the knowledge someone possesses who inherits the wealth of his millionaire father deviates, in certain regards, from the knowledge an impoverished mother may possess. Certain daily activities such as work, maintaining wealth, acquiring food, and moving about society take different shapes and hold different meanings for each respective individual. The mother may have to walk to work in a dangerous neighborhood, putting her life at risk for the sake of providing food for her children. The son who inherited millions perhaps gets driven to work and, upon returning home, arrives to an already made dinner. Both know stress and worry, but they vary to such a degree that they figuratively live in different realities, and the stress they respectively experience is hardly similar. As Berger and Luckmann state in their *The Social Construction of Reality*: “The ‘knowledge’ of the criminal differs from the ‘knowledge’ of the criminologist”, for the same reason that “What is ‘real’ to the Tibetan monk may not be ‘real’ to the American businessman” (3). In other words, much of what I deem to be both “real” and “useful knowledge” is largely dependent on my position in society (Berger & Luckmann 22), a point that Collins also makes. There is a subjectivization of knowledge that occurs depending on one’s place in society that is not completely relying upon objective, universal facts. Similarly, Collins is stressing this same insight but applying it to the experiences and consequent knowledge of Black women living in the U.S. For this reason, a pluralistic approach to epistemology is a more viable alternative for arriving at useful knowledge than having a single, dominant knowledge validation process. However, the antidote to this problem

is not to have these epistemologies compete against each other (as Collins almost seems to suggest), but to attempt to synthesize them in an effort to produce a more efficient means of interacting with the world. If the goal is to look for objective generalizations about the world, what do these other epistemologies, such as Black Feminist Epistemology, attempt to do or discover?

I believe part of the answer to this question can be found in the book *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande*. In this book, early 20th century anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard makes an observation regarding the epistemology of the Azande, a people who reside in the Northeastern region of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The epistemology of the Azande includes a concept that Evans-Pritchard translates into English as “witchcraft”. It is a concept he identifies as being used by the Azande to explain tragic events for which they have no other explanation. However, he notes that the Azande people do not attribute witchcraft to be the sole cause of these events:

It is an inevitable conclusion from Zande descriptions of witchcraft that it is not an objective reality... Nevertheless, [witchcraft] provides them with a natural philosophy by which the relationship between men and unfortunate events are explained and a ready and stereotyped means of reacting to such events... It was obvious they did not attempt to account for the existence of phenomena... by mystical causation alone. (63;67)

An example provided by Evans-Pritchard involves a young boy who cuts his toe on a log and, as a result, gets a mild infection. When Evans-Pritchard asks the boy how he got the infection, the boy simply states that he got the infection because he cut his toe. However, when

Evans-Pritchard asks the boy why he got a cut on his toe, the boy replied by stating that witchcraft had prevented him from spotting the log in his way (65-66). As we can see from the quote and the example provided, the Azande are not ignorant of certain knowledge that would satisfy positivist criteria. The child Evans-Pritchard speaks to knows, for all intents and purposes, that his cut was caused by the log, and his infection was thereby caused by his cut. However, it is clear that this knowledge alone does not satisfy the Azande's felt need for understanding about the world. The Azande are clearly not only asking "how?", but are also asking "why?" (or even "why did this happen *to me*?"), a question that cannot be solely answered by objective generalizations about the world: "[To the Azande] the facts do not explain themselves, or only partly explain themselves. They can only be explained fully if one takes witchcraft into consideration" (71). In order to meet the Zande criteria of knowledge validation, there needs to be a credible empirical account of how an event occurs complimented by a satisfactory subjective explanation of why an event occurs and how one should react accordingly. But what exactly does the "*why*?" component do?

I am going to attempt to explain what I believe the Azande people to be doing with the subjective component of their epistemology, and I am then going to make a comparison between the Zande epistemology and Collins' argument in "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Epistemology" for the validity of Black Feminist Thought. I believe that both the Zande epistemology and Collins' Black Feminist epistemology demonstrate features that are essential for a more complete human understanding of the world that generalized accounts lack. When Evans-Pritchard attempts to explain the Zande epistemological concept of witchcraft, he posits that it is ultimately an attempt at explaining coincidences (70). While I agree, I believe the answer

does not completely satisfy the question. The concept of “witchcraft” is an attempt at answering existential questions, sometimes caused by tragic coincidences. In each of the examples that Evans-Pritchard provides in which Azande cite witchcraft as a source of misfortune, all the Azande involved state that the witchcraft occurred despite their best efforts to avoid it (70). This epistemology that the Azande have constructed is their attempt at explaining the significance of tragic events. It describes a layer of knowledge about an event that a generalized explanation cannot arrive at. This layer of knowledge can best be equated to *meaning* or *significance*, which is entirely contingent on the knower.

Take, for example, a wife’s death. Their mourning spouse is given a list of facts regarding the cause of death. In that moment, the list of facts are almost useless. What is instead more significant to the person mourning is the knowledge regarding the significance of the lost loved one, and if they have a child, the knowledge regarding the change in the family unit. Ultimately, what the Azande seem to know that the epistemology Collins and I criticize does not is that some events, although they may happen to many, also possess a social significance that varies from group to group, and even individual to individual. In a sense, the subjective knowledge gained from what can be deemed as objective events can transcend its objectivity and be charged with significance. The ascription of witchcraft to certain events in particular is their means of validating the significance of these events. To return to the child that Evans-Pritchard speaks of, his knowledge of infection is informed not only by what he has empirically learned about cuts and infections, but also by his own experience of getting an infection in his environment. As a result, his people’s epistemology has given him the means of wording this



piece of knowledge that is both informed by a crude empiricism and his own society. In a similar fashion, the Black feminist epistemology that Collins espouses fulfills the same need.

In Collins essay, she discusses how Black feminists employ “Concrete experience as a criterion of meaning”:

Carolyn Chase, a thirty-one-year-old inner city Black woman, notes, “My aunt used to say, ‘A heap see, but a few know.’” This saying depicts two types of knowing, knowledge and wisdom, and taps the first dimension of an Afrocentric feminist epistemology. Living life as Black women requires wisdom...

African-American women give such wisdom high credence in assessing knowledge (“Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought” 758)

Throughout what follows from that passage, Collins discusses the criterion of knowledge through lived experience needed to produce and validate *wisdom*, a form of knowledge that Collins states black women need in order to survive in the world. In what Berger & Luckmann would call black women’s social standing, the knowledge most pertinent to them cannot be found through the generalized objective account of knowledge validation (Collins 759). Contrary to how science asks for self-detachment in order to arrive at new knowledge, within the context of Black women’s day-to-day lives Black feminist epistemology sees the futility in self-detachment and instead suggests that embracing one’s identity and knowledge gained from past experiences to make consequent decisions is a better course of action. The everyday experiences of Black women require that they be fully aware of the way *they* in particular experience the world; through that awareness they produce knowledge that helps them to

maneuver the world in a way that takes both their survival and the significance of their experiences into account.

Yet, Black Feminist epistemology is not touching on experiences that are solely significant to the Black female experience. In fact, Collins appears to be inviting others into this conversation by bringing up experiences that are universal, but have no single response or interpretation. Collins quotes an essay written by June Jordan on the death of her mother, and how she is attempting to find the best way to understand her death. Collins insight into Jordan's essay highlights what is necessary about epistemologies that are concerned with non-empirical, scientific approaches to understanding events: "While Jordan has knowledge about the concrete act of her mother's death, she also strives for wisdom concerning the meaning of that death" (760-761). Although writing from the perspective of a Black woman, she is writing about an experience that is universal: the death of a loved one. Jordan, as well as Collins, finds value in the concrete experience and how it interacts with one's self, as well as understanding knowledge that cannot be quantified or measured. In making this point, Collins emphasizes the inadequacy of only having a positivist approach to knowledge. Black feminist epistemology, like the Azande epistemology and other alternative forms of epistemology, are not attempting to overthrow or replace scientific observations about the world, but rather they are supplementing them with knowledge that is integral to the human experience.

This paper has been an attempt at demonstrating why a single dominant epistemology as an approach for understanding *all* knowledge is inadequate. I have attempted to emphasize how such an approach to knowledge can lead to an erasure of the sociological aspects of knowledge (i.e. the social impact of a family member's death). I have also attempted to criticize the process

of an un-sociological approach to knowledge by specifically highlighting the impracticality of trying to distance oneself from their identity in the search for knowledge. Future work on this topic will have to involve further elaboration on the nature of “meaning”, as well as how it interacts with other concepts such as “truth” or “reality”. Is what is meaningful necessarily true? Is meaning only real to the person who allots it or finds it? Furthermore, it would be beneficial to see how “wisdom” exactly helps people operate in the world more efficiently. How does knowing how to better understand the death of a loved one help me? Why does it help me? Finally, the question of how to best balance the search for objectivity with the necessity of understanding the subjective will also be a question for future thought and research.

Works Cited

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