Article

"Way-Centered" *versus* "Truth-Centered" Epistemologies

Kai Horsthemke

Bildungsphilosophie und Systematische Pädagogik, Katholische Universität Eichstätt, Ostenstraße 26, Eichstätt 85072, Germany; Kai.Horsthemke@ku.de; Kai.Horsthemke@gmail.com; Tel.: +49-4513-9773-945

Abstract: In recent years, a criticism of "indigenous knowledge" has been that this idea makes sense only in terms of acquaintance (or familiarity) type and practical (or skills-type) knowledge (knowledge-how). Understood in terms of theoretical knowledge (or knowledge-that), however, it faces the arguably insurmountable problems of relativism and superstition. The educational implications of this would be that mere beliefs or opinions unanchored by reason(s), such as bald assertions, superstitions, prejudice and bias, should not be included in the curriculum, at least not under the guise of "knowledge". Worthy of inclusion are skills and practical knowledge, as are traditional music, art, dance and folklore (*qua* folklore). Moreover, anything that meets the essential requirements for knowledge-that could in principle be included. Against this understanding of knowledge, and its educational implications, it has been contended that indigenous knowledge places no special emphasis on "belief", "evidence" or "truth", but that, according to indigenous practitioners, it is rather "the way" that constitutes knowledge, harmonious interaction and appropriate models of conduct. It has been argued, further, that cognitive states are (to be) seen as "maps", as useful and practical action-guides. This is why (so the argument for "polycentric epistemologies" or "polycentric global epistemology" goes) divination, rain-making, rain-discarding, shamanism, sorcery, ceremony, ritual, mysticism, *etc.*, must be acknowledged as ways of knowing (and as educationally valuable) alongside animal husbandry, botany, medicine, mathematics, tool-making, and the like. The present paper investigates whether the "way-based" epistemological response is a plausible reply to the "truth-based" critique of indigenous knowledge (systems).

Keywords: belief; indigenous knowledge; justification; practical knowledge; theoretical knowledge; truth; truth-centered epistemologies; way-centered epistemologies

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1. Introduction

I came across the following story some time ago. Although it is contrived (unsurprisingly; it is in the nature of jokes that they tend to be contrived), I repeat it here, because it arguably resonates with some of the central ideas this paper is concerned with.

> It was October and the American Indians on a remote reservation asked their new Chief whether the coming winter was going to be cold or mild. Since the Chief grew up in a modern society, he had never been taught the old ways and secrets. When he looked at the sky he couldn't tell what the winter was going to be like. Nevertheless, to be on the safe side he told his people that the winter was indeed going to be cold and that the members of the tribe should collect firewood in anticipation of the cold season ahead. But, being a practical leader, after several days he had an idea. He went to the next phone booth and called the National Weather Service and asked, "Is the coming winter in this area going to be cold or mild"?

The meteorologist responded, "It looks like this winter is going to be quite cold".

So the Chief went back to his people and told them to collect even more wood in order to be prepared.

A week later he called the National Weather Service again, "Does it still look like it's going to be a cold winter"?

"Yes", the meteorologist replied, "it's actually going to be a very cold winter".

So the Chief went back to his people and told them to go and find every scrap of wood they can find. Two weeks later he called the National Weather Service again: "Are you absolutely sure that the winter is going to be very cold"?

"Absolutely", the man said, "it's looking more and more like it is going to be one of the coldest winters ever".

"How can you be so sure"? the Chief asked.

The weatherman replied, "Our satellites have reported that the Indians are collecting firewood like crazy, and that's always a sure sign".

I have not been able to determine the original source of this story, of which several versions have circulated over the past few years. Nor have I been able to verify whether a Chief who has not been educated in or initiated into the "old ways" or traditions can be designated or elected leader of an aboriginal community (this does seem rather unlikely). What is noteworthy about this story is that the traditional, rural community (*i.e.*, the Chief speaking for the indigenous people) and the scientific establishment (*i.e.*, the meteorologist speaking for the weather bureau) appear to rely on each other, with regard to their epistemic justification. Each takes the assumed "knowledge" of the other as the basis for their own predictions: which not only raises something like the "chicken-or-the-egg" question, but also causes one to doubt whether or not we are actually dealing with *knowledge* here. The joke is derived from the implication that, at least in this instance, it is both indigenous truth claims and scientific truth claims that constitute myths.

I want to argue the following: science (for example, meteorology) can, with some degree of accuracy, on the basis of available evidence, make predictions (e.g., about the impending seasons). Similarly, non-scientists (that is, people not formally schooled or trained in science) can, with some degree of accuracy, on the basis of their own and others' experiences, make certain predictions (for example, about the weather). However, can one really, and meaningfully, distinguish between "mainstream" and "indigenous" knowledge? I do not think so; and I will attempt to show in this paper why not.

2. The Idea of "Indigenous Knowledge"

What is "indigenous knowledge"? What accounts for its emergence during the last few decades, and what is its advocacy meant to achieve? (Although the manifestation of what is taken to be indigenous knowledge could presumably be traced back roughly to the origins of humankind, the idea of indigenous knowledge is a relatively recent phenomenon. It has arguably gained conceptual and discursive currency only during the last thirty to forty years. Especially in recent years, it has been the subject of numerous congresses, conferences and meetings, as well as countless papers, articles and reports.) I will deal with the first of these questions, pertaining to the nature or essence of "indigenous knowledge", a little later, after discussing the possible reasons for the attention it has received and continues to receive.

Dismas Masolo lists several reasons for the "re-emergence of interest in indigenous knowledge in recent years" [1] (p. 25; emphasis mine). First, the effects of industrialization "in the Western sphere or the global North", namely "[o]zone depletion and environmental poisoning, ... have made once-scorned simpler ways of life and controlled scales of industrialisation more attractive for their stances towards biodiversity and their general friendliness to the environment, at least at the

intellectual level" [1] (pp. 25–26). Clearly (and here I concur with Masolo), "Western" industrialization has led to, or has had as a significant goal, the subjugation of nature, and so far has been devastatingly efficient. The pursuit of nuclear energy, wholesale deforestation and destruction of flora and fauna, factory farming of non-human animals for human consumption, vivisection and genetic engineering are deplorable and, indeed, irrational [2] (p. 33), as is the relentless preoccupation with and pursuit of "growth". Second, with the end of the Cold War,

> the politics of numbers in the scramble for alliances and geopolitical spheres of influence is a thing of the past, thus making the sustenance of the dependency of distant nations and peoples a far less attractive policy and a sacrifice for regimes and taxpayers in developed nations. There is neither political nor economic gain for such sacrifice. Consequently, the current focus of aid agencies ... is on helping the disadvantaged governments of economically and technologically disadvantaged nations establish self-reliant and internally sustainable programs [1] (p. 26).

I am not altogether clear about the intended force of this argument: after all, aid provision has a substantial downside that is well documented [3,4]. Nonetheless, there are additional factors that account for the (re?)emergence of interest in indigenous knowledge systems. With the rise of multiculturalism, the trivialization of indigenous peoples' practices, skills and insights has, to a large extent, been unmasked as arrogant and of dubious "rationality". There has also developed a strong tendency to view current attempts by leading industrial and technologically-advanced nations to (re)colonize or appropriate for commercial gain these practices, skills and insights as exploitative and contemptible.

With regard to the question of what the focus on indigenous knowledge hopes to achieve, there are several related ideas that appear again and again [5–7]: reclamation of cultural or traditional heritage; decolonization of mind and thought; recognition and acknowledgement of self-determining development; protection against further colonization, exploitation, appropriation and/or commercialization; legitimation or validation of indigenous practices and worldviews; and condemnation of, or at least caution against, the subjugation of nature and general oppressiveness of non-indigenous rationality, science and technology.

To return to the initial question: what actually is "indigenous knowledge"? "Inspired by the claim that knowledge takes place in and reflects the social worlds of its creators in expression and use", according to Masolo, "formerly suppressed systems liberated themselves from foundationalist claims and monolithic canons and called for different, more rigorous, and comparative approaches to the epistemological enterprise in the latter part of the twentieth century" [1] (p. 18).

> Like its cognates (local, native, original, old, or insider [one could also add "Māori", "African", *etc.*]) and its antonyms or counterparts (migrant, alien, new, settler, or outsider) the term "indigenous" is used to define the origin of an item or person in relation to how their belonging to a place is to be temporally characterised, especially in comparison to other contenders in claiming belonging. ... The term "indigenous" has not always had positive connotations for those to whom it was intended to introduce and create awareness of distant worlds. ... Implications of diversity persist even as the idea of indigeneity acquires more positive connotations. As pluralism takes centre stage in contemporary thought and practical orientations in both the public and private realms, indigenous systems are not only encouraged to remain and show more autonomy, they are also thought to have the capacity to sustain themselves [1] (p. 21).

"Indigenous knowledge", then, is generally taken to cover local, traditional, non-Western beliefs, practices, customs and worldviews and frequently also to refer to alternative, non-formal kinds of knowledge, by its advocates and practitioners. Rather perplexingly, while much has been said and continues to be said about the idea of indigeneity [5–7], there have been very few writers or

authors willing to furnish an explanation of their understanding or concept of "knowledge". Although (or because?) the terms "knowledge" and "epistemology"/"epistemological" are used in liberal abundance, characteristically no account is given of the actual meaning(s) of the terms. Thus, there is a general failure among theorists to appreciate and engage with the ramifications of these concepts. Instead, "indigenous knowledge" is unquestioningly employed as an umbrella concept to cover practices, skills, customs, worldviews, perceptions, as well as theoretical and factual understandings. In fact, the common assertion (for example, by sociologists, social and educational theorists) that knowledge is "contested" seems to draw its strength entirely from this lack of definition and conceptual clarity. Once an account of different uses of the term "knowledge" and circumspect definitions are furnished, much of the putative basis for "contestation" will have been eroded.

This paper attempts to provide the necessary conceptual clarification. In everyday thought and practice, including ordinary language, a distinction is commonly made between three different types of knowledge: familiarity, or acquaintance-type knowledge (knowing a person, a place, etc.), practical knowledge (knowing-how) and propositional (theoretical, factual, declarative) knowledge (knowing-that). In education, the focus tends to be on practical, as well as on propositional knowledge. The former is usually taken to be synonymous or at least strongly, if not inextricably, associated with "skill". It is the definition of the latter, often also referred to as declarative, theoretical or factual knowledge, that requires considerably greater circumspection. The traditional definition of propositional knowledge can certainly be traced back to Socrates and Plato, whose dialogues *Meno* and *Theaetetus* contain the essence of this understanding. It should be noted that in Yoruba, too, pertinent distinctions are made. *Gbàgbó* (belief) may become *mò* (knowledge). *Gbàgbó* that is not open to verification and must therefore be evaluated on the basis of justification alone (*àlàyé*, *papò*, *etc.*) cannot become *mò* and, consequently, its *òótó* (truth) [1] (p. 45); [8] (p. 81). It should be noted further that in isiXhosa, "knowledge" is rendered as *ulwazi*. The Nguni language root is *ulwa*: "s/he is fighting/struggling". Knowledge, then, is something one struggles or fights for, unlike belief, which usually happens to us, with little or no control on our part. Traditionally, "knowledge" has been defined as comprising three individually necessary and jointly sufficient components: belief (or opinion; this is its subjective component), truth (its objective component) and justification (which serves a bridging function between the subjective and objective).

In recent years, this definition has come under some attack, mainly with regard to the interpretation and scope of the justification condition, *i.e.*, the requisite degree and kind, as well as the context of justification (the classic objection is found in Edmund Gettier's paper [9], where the author asks us to imagine certain cases where all three conditions of knowledge are met, but where one would nonetheless be hesitant, if not altogether unable, to infer knowledge). Again, space does not permit elaboration on this debate, nor is it essential for the concerns at hand. A working definition, somewhat modified, should suffice for present purposes. Knowledge, as I propose to use the term, is constitutive of belief, truth, justification and an additional requirement, that the justification for the belief in question is suitably connected with its truth (which includes the requirement that justification for believing something to be true does not involve any false beliefs). The modified justification condition that now emphasizes *adequate* justification is significant. It permits knowledge-ascription or -attribution to be sensitive to context. In other words, the context of younger learners or members of a remote rural community permits greater leniency in appraising their knowledge than the context of individuals who are, supposedly, cognitively and rationally more mature, where standards of the justification adequacy are applied more strictly.

What remains significant (and this is especially relevant with regard to education), however, in all of these cases is that knowledge, in order to be "knowledge", has its objective anchor in truth. Although attribution or ascription of knowledge is context sensitive, in that it must respect diversity and acknowledge lived experience, the truth condition ensures the universality and objectivity of knowledge. In other words, however lenient or strict the application of standards regarding their justification, the beliefs of young learners and remote rural folk must be true, in order to count as

"knowledge". When Didier Kaphagawani explains that, in his home language Chewa, "(w)hat is true is what is seen . . . or perceived by either an individual or a collection of individuals" [10] (p. 241), he clearly confuses truth and justification. Observation and perception are sources of justification and knowledge. Given observational error and perceptual relativity, they are not identical with truth as such. Even consensus among all individuals about what they perceive does not amount to truth, the way things really are (others, like Kwasi Wiredu, have treated "belief" and "truth" as identical [11–13]).

3. Problems with "Indigenous Knowledge" in the Sense of "Knowledge-That"

The proposed definition renders possible an analysis of "indigenous knowledge". If the latter is taken to refer to "knowledge" in a practical sense ("skill"), it makes a certain amount of sense. However, if taken to refer to "knowledge" in a propositional/theoretical sense, the idea faces significant problems, such as superstition and relativism (about knowledge and about truth).

Peter Crossman and René Devisch claim that "differential knowledge-practices are particular to authoritative knowledge-bearers in culture-specific roles and status, such as healers, bards, soothsayers, diviners, messengers or even judges, journalists and so on" [14] (p. 117). An illustration of Crossman and Devisch's claim is provided by traditional healer and prolific cultural chronicler Credo Mutwa's account of the *tokoloshe* and *mantindane*, mythical, malevolent and fear-invoking creatures that occupy a fairly significant space in sub-Saharan worldviews:

> The *tokoloshe* is real—it does exist. . . . When Africans fear the *tokoloshe* they are not fearing a figment of their imaginations. . . . There is another creature which is not unlike the *tokoloshe* in its love of inflicting bodily harm, and which is also greatly feared. . . . I have personally fallen victim to *mantindane*—not once, but three times—and I still carry the scars on my body to testify to the truth of what I say [15] (p. 32).

Mutwa's account is noteworthy, in the present context, for its implicit acknowledgement of the conditions that are generally assumed to have to be in place when we make knowledge claims: belief, truth and appropriate justification (observation, testimony, *etc.*). Clearly, "many black men and women throughout Africa" [15] (p. 32) believe that the *tokoloshe* and *mantindane* are real, that they exist. Equally clear, beliefs in these creatures might be put to educational use in terms of comparative studies of cultural creativity and myth-making (I return to this point in the next section). However, do these beliefs constitute and can (and should) they be taught as "African knowledge"? Before one can even begin to answer these questions, one ought to be clear about what is involved in judging others' knowledge claims, especially if these "others" adhere to what would appear to be substantially different epistemological traditions. I suggest here, not uncontroversially, that such attestations, and accusations of (white or Western) non-believers of unwarranted skepticism, place Mutwa's views squarely in the realm of "superstition and fertile imagination", to use his own words. None of his anecdotes establish the "truth" of his assertions. Further examples of superstition are the beliefs about ancestral blessing and absolution, about witchcraft and around "the technique of rainmaking and rain-discarding" [16] (p. 24): "Respected and sometimes renowned physicists and chemists, once they leave their laboratories, do not hesitate to consult local rainmakers to ensure that their guests will not be rained upon during, for example, marriage, burial or other family celebration they wish to organise" [16] (p. 23).

In some instances, then, "indigenous knowledge" is taken to cover all kinds of beliefs, with what is at best a casual reference to truth or justification. This elevates to the status of knowledge not only mere assumption and opinion, but also rain-making and rain-discarding, divination, soothsaying, "shamanism, sorcery, . . . mysticism" [17] (p. 60), and the like. In the absence of any explicit mention of and grounding in truth, then, the applicable idea would be that of "indigenous beliefs". Yet, given the philosophical definition of knowledge, belief, even justified belief, does not amount to knowledge. The major problem here is that emphasis on "indigenous knowledge" does not appear to render possible a distinction between knowledge and non-knowledge, between science and superstition.

Writers often also refer to the (need for) "validation" or "legitimization" of indigenous knowledge or to "warranted" and "valid" knowledge [18] (p. 35); [19] (pp. 7, 12); [20] (pp. 13, 17, 24). All of these references are tautologies. Considering the centrality of justification, knowledge is necessarily valid, legitimate and warranted. There simply could be no *other* knowledge, for example knowledge that is invalid, illegitimate or unwarranted. It would not be *knowledge* then. This is not to deny that knowledge can be and often is subjugated. A pertinent consideration here would concern the impact of the first significant astronomical discoveries on a flat Earth, geocentric worldview or of the theory of evolution on an orthodox, god-fearing mindset and the subsequent suppression of these views. However, here, the emphasis has changed, subtly, to incorporate *truth* (it should be noted that reference to "true knowledge", too, involves a tautology).

In other instances, reference to truth is explicit, the underlying assumption being that with a multiplicity of indigenous cultures and subcultures, there exists a multitude of truths, none of which are superior to any other [18] (pp. 27–28); [19–21]. This position is exemplified in Semali and Kincheloe's "rejection of a transcultural referent for truth such as the Western scientific method" and of modernism's "one truth epistemology" [18] (pp. 17, 27):

> this Western modernist way of producing knowledge and constructing reality is one of a multitude of local ways of knowing—it is a local knowledge system that denies its locality, seeking to produce not local but translocal knowledge. Such knowledge is true regardless of context . . . and is used to wield power over people without access to such knowledge. . . . The denigration of indigenous knowledge cannot be separated from the oppression of indigenous people [18] (pp. 28–29).

This kind of view leads directly to epistemological relativism and to relativism about truth, with all their attendant difficulties. Why is relativism problematic? Briefly, to be a relativist about knowledge is to maintain that there is no objective knowledge of reality (or better: of *realities*) independently of knowers from relevant social groups. In other words, different social communities have different epistemic norms and systems, and there are no facts that would establish one of these norms and systems to be more correct than any of the others. Yet, it is difficult to make sense of this claim. In particular, it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand or interpret the notions of an epistemic norm and an epistemic system in a way that would render consistently dependable a relativistic conception of justification. The difficulty for relativists is to avoid the inconsistent claim that the relativistic thesis is itself an item of objective knowledge. Thus, when Crossman and Devisch claim that "knowing does not entail an objective and fixed knowledge in any scientific sense" [14] (p. 110), they fail to anticipate the obvious response that this particular knowledge claim is, presumably, not "objective and fixed" either.

To be a relativist about truth, similarly, is to maintain that there is no universal truth, that there is only a multitude of truths. Apart from practical considerations around the relativistic construal of truth, the difficulty for relativists is to avoid the inconsistent claim that the relativistic thesis is itself universally (translocally/transculturally) true. In a related sense, to "take issues of locality, cultural values and social justice seriously", as Semali and Kincheloe urge [18] (p. 51), to condemn "denigration of indigenous knowledge" and "the oppression of indigenous people", is to adopt a translocal or transregional standpoint and to assume that there is at least one transcultural value, that of respect (which might be taken to include non-oppression).

Empirically, too, embracing relativism has undesirable consequences. These become obvious when, for the sake of argument (and bearing in mind that this cannot coherently be done in any non-relative fashion), we assume that relativism is true. What would be some of these consequences? First, we could not judge that the beliefs and practices of other societies are epistemically and veritistically inferior to our own. We could not say that something is a false belief or a superstition, or that something is a laborious, time-wasting practice. Second, we could decide whether beliefs are true or false and which practices are the correct or incorrect ones simply by consulting the standards of our

society or epistemic community at the time. Third, the idea of progress (scientific and other) is called into doubt, as is the idea of "reform". We would not be able to say that a new paradigm constitutes an improvement on the older paradigm it has replaced. In view of these consequences, not even considering the paradoxicality of denying the objectivity and universality of knowledge and truth, it arguably makes more sense to assert that there is considerably less disagreement than is apparent and that social and ethnic groups share a considerable body of factual and practical knowledge.

4. Epistemological Implications

The implications should be obvious now. "Indigenous knowledge" involves at best an incomplete, partial or, at worst, a questionable understanding or conception of knowledge. It might, fairly uncontroversially, refer to indigenous acquaintance- or familiarity-type knowledge and to indigenous practical knowledge. If, on the other hand, it is intended to convey "knowledge" in the propositional (factual, theoretical or declarative) sense, then one might doubt either whether it is essentially "indigenous" (because the knowledge in question would hold not only locally, but translocally/transculturally) or whether it is a matter of "knowledge" (as in the case of belief in witchcraft or in ancestors' agency, that sexual intercourse with a virgin prevents or cures HIV/AIDS, and the like). Thus, what is called "indigenous knowledge" in this sense is interpreted more plausibly either as knowledge proper (that is, not essentially "indigenous") or as mere (indigenous) belief(s), in the absence of truth and perhaps even justification. As a tool in anti-discrimination and anti-repression discourse, in the struggle for decolonization of the mind (the seat of cognition and *knowledge-that*), then, "indigenous knowledge" is largely inappropriate. (This is not to maintain that "Western" scientific theories are never incomplete, partial or questionable. Most self-respecting scientists would claim at most a provisional "truth" status for their knowledge-claims, but the difficulty of establishing something as final, ultimate, perennial truth does not bear on scientists' ongoing *quest* for truth and their attempts to learn from and avoid errors.)

If something is referred to as "indigenous knowledge" in the sense of propositional, factual or declarative knowledge, it must meet the requisite criteria: belief, truth and adequate justification. If it does, it is relevantly similar and, indeed, equal to "non-indigenous" knowledge in a particular area or field. Thus, the traditional healer's knowledge would be as significant, epistemologically, as that of a general medical practitioner, and the knowledge of a naturopath or homoeopath. The insights into climate change, animal behavior and plant life cycles of the San, Inuit or Native Americans would be no less important than those of occidental analysts, climatologists and biologists. In fact, they could arguably learn from each other. It is important to bear in mind that there is no question here of different truths (different beliefs perhaps, different methods of justification almost certainly), no question of (radically) different knowledges. Truth and reality are essentially not in the eye of the beholder.

5. Educational Implications

What are the implications for education? Which aspects of so-called "indigenous", "local", "alternative", "non-formal" or "traditional" knowledge should be taught or included in the curriculum? Which should be left out? On what grounds? The question as to what should be left out is fairly easily answered. Not included in the curriculum, at least not under the guise of "knowledge", should be mere beliefs or opinions unanchored by reason(s), bald assertions, superstitions, prejudice, bias; in fact, anything that involves myth, fabrication and constitutes an infringement on the rights of learners. However, it may be pedagogically and epistemically useful to teach these *qua* beliefs, opinions, assertions, superstitions, prejudice and bias.

The question as to which aspects of indigenous knowledge should be included probably requires a more comprehensive response than I am able to provide here. Briefly, skills and practical knowledge are worthy of inclusion, as are traditional music, art, dance and folklore (*qua* folklore). Moreover, it follows from the account provided above that anything that meets the essential requirements for *knowledge-that* could in principle be included, e.g., traditional African knowledge of agriculture and

environment, insights into conflict-resolution and the like. Naturally, the context and environment of learners should be taken into account here. That is to say, learners should be taught only what is appropriate for their age or, more correctly, for their cognitive and affective capabilities. Similarly, they should be taught primarily what is relevant or what is likely to be relevant to their lives.

A traditional healer's insight that one should only use a limited amount of bark from a given tree or that one should harvest no more than one-tenth of a given natural resource (*i.e.*, harvest a plant only if it is one of ten such plants growing in the vicinity) constitutes an insight that may not be shared by many, but it has universal value and application; and there is no reason why these insights should not be included in a comprehensive educational curriculum. There is a surprising amount of common ground between cultures, not only in terms of factual knowledge, but also in terms of values (the moral premium placed on truth-telling and preservation of life, other things being equal, comes to mind here). A reconciliation of so-called "indigenous" and "non-indigenous" insights is not only possible, but desirable; on educational, ethical, as well as political grounds [2] (p. 43).

6. The Rejoinder: "Way-Centered" as Opposed to "Truth-Centered" Epistemologies

Against this understanding of knowledge, and its educational implications, it has been contended that indigenous knowledge places no special emphasis on "belief", "evidence" or "truth", but that, according to indigenous practitioners, it is rather "the way" that constitutes knowledge, harmonious interaction and appropriate models of conduct [17,22,23]. It has been argued, further, that cognitive states are (to be) seen as "maps", as useful and practical action-guides [24–26]. This is why (so the argument for "polycentric epistemologies" or "polycentric global epistemology" goes) divination, rain-making, rain-discarding, shamanism, sorcery, ceremony, ritual, mysticism, *etc.*, must be acknowledged as ways of knowing alongside animal husbandry, botany, medicine, mathematics, tool-making, and the like [17] (p. 60).

David Hall and Roger Ames argue that those epistemologies that might be called "way-seeking", as opposed to "truth-seeking", are concerned neither with truth, true belief nor truthful representation. Rather, they are concerned with identifying the *proper path* or *appropriate model* of conduct that will enable humans to live the kind of life suitable for human beings [17] (p. 57; emphasis added); [22,23].

For many (if not most) indigenous Africans, Asians and Oceanians, for example,

> this consists of living harmoniously with one's social surroundings. Correspondence truth plays no role in this endeavour. One aims for a life of authenticity, genuineness, rectitude and wholeness—not knowledge defined as justified true belief. [This kind of] epistemology seeks to identify the kind of practical know-how needed for following this path [17] (p. 57).

This basic orientation is echoed in a recent symposium anchored by Henry Rosemont, Jr. (James Maffie, John Maraldo and Sonam Thakchoe are the other participants). The argument is that traditions outside the Anglo-European mainstream:

> seem to draw on an integrated view of thinking, feeling, and living a human life. For their practitioners, truth is less of a correspondence with a given external reality. In fact, it enables human beings to strike the right path in living good, social lives [27] (p. 150).

These responses seem to contain two kinds of confusion. The first is the failure to distinguish between epistemology, on the one hand, and ethics (in this case virtue ethics), on the other. While there are important connections between the two (as a quick survey of the field of social epistemology will show), there appears to be no awareness on the part of the authors that they may be committing a category mistake here. The second confusion is the conflation of propositional and practical knowledge (I will return to this point below). Furthermore, identification of the "proper (or right) path", *etc.*, will almost certainly involve some beliefs about the appropriateness and correctness of this identification. Surely, there must be beliefs about which paths are "improper", "wrong" or which models are "inappropriate" and what counts as "correct" identification of proper paths and appropriate models.

One can quite coherently aim both for "a life of authenticity, genuineness, rectitude and wholeness" and "knowledge defined as justified true belief". The two are not mutually exclusive; quite the contrary. A similar response might be given to Maffie's claim that:

> [c]onquest-era indigenous Nahuatl-speaking philosophers in Central Mexico conceived knowing in terms of balance, well-groundedness, moral uprightness, authenticity and disclosingness ... Correspondence truth played no role in their notions of wisdom, knowledge, or right belief [17] (p. 57).

It has been contended further (by Deloria Jr., Deloria *et al*, and Hester and Cheney) that

> indigenous North American philosophies treat *cognitive states as maps rather than as beliefs*. Native Americans adopt an agnostic attitude towards the correspondence truth of their maps seeing as they are concerned only with the utility of maps as practical action-guides. Native American philosophy does not focus upon belief and thus worries not about correspondence truth of belief. Native Americans focus upon practices and adopt an attitude of non-belief (*i.e.*, neither belief nor disbelief) towards their practices. Knowing is likewise practical. It is not a species of belief or theoretical attitude towards some abstract proposition, justified or otherwise [17] (p. 57; emphasis added).

In response, one might point out that there is nothing incoherent about treating beliefs as maps. John White famously does this in his chapter "Beliefs: Maps by which we steer" [28]. Moreover, while propositional and practical knowledge are clearly distinct, and one does not collapse into the other, they are considerably more intimately connected than the above-named authors are willing to acknowledge. Surely, Native Americans will almost certainly entertain certain beliefs about, for example, the utility and sustainability of their practices. Similarly, if "[i]ndigenous Amazonia philosophy ... conceives knowledge in terms of the trustworthy, responsible, and careful ordering and arranging of things" and "eschews broad, overarching, abstract conceptions of truth such as correspondence between propositions and the world" [17] (p. 57), it is difficult to see how one is to make sense of trustworthiness, ordering, arranging, *etc.*, in the absence of truth-based knowledge, especially given their justificatory role.

Maffie is arguably correct in pointing out that "Western truth-seeking epistemologies (beginning with Plato and Aristotle) ... standardly define knowledge in terms of theoretical contemplation rather than practical application" [17] (pp. 57–58). After all, this is what *makes* them "epistemologies". However, if one accepts, *merely for the sake of argument*, that there is an undesirable bias involved here, one could direct a similar complaint towards Maffie, who focuses on one (practical knowledge) at the expense of another (propositional knowledge). He keeps returning to this dichotomy:

> ... it is common for [proponents of indigenous knowledge] to reject what they see as Western philosophy's ... obsession with truth (as correspondence), belief, and worldview. What matters most to indigenous North Americans, for example, is how one lives—*not what one believes*. Indigenous North American philosophy is practice-centred ... [17] (pp. 58–59; emphasis added).

To repeat: it is difficult to see how views about how one lives or ought to live, what one practices or ought to practice, *etc.*, can be held in the absence of belief (*i.e.*, beliefs about the utility, appropriateness and sustainability of one's practices, life, *etc.*) and of the corresponding desire for one's beliefs to be not only justified, but also true.

7. Postscript

There appears to be one last avenue open to advocates of "way-seeking" philosophies and defenders of "polycentric global epistemology". From an indigenous or aboriginal perspective, according to Maffie,

[k]nowledge concerns how one conducts oneself in the world. It is not about producing rational arguments or deductive-nomological explanations, and the inability to produce these is not considered an epistemological shortcoming. Indeed, it is precisely the insistence upon rational proofs that is typically considered a shortcoming. Hence the very idea of discursively refuting [Western critics] is misplaced since it appeals to notions of propositional truth and falsity that these philosophies reject [17] (p. 59).

How can one provide a response here that will not exhibit the much-maligned rationality and discursiveness? Maffie's intended knock-down argument will lead to exactly the kind of impasse illustrated in the following pertinent excerpt from a play by Bertolt Brecht.

The teacher: Si Fu, name the central questions of philosophy!

Si Fu: Are things outside of us, for themselves, also without us, or are the things within us, for ourselves, not without us?

The teacher: Which opinion is the correct one?

Si Fu: No verdict has been reached yet.

The teacher: What was the latest tendency among the majority of our philosophers?

Si Fu: The things are outside of us, for themselves, also without us.

The teacher: Why did the question remain unsolved?

Si Fu: The conference that was supposed to yield the final verdict took place, as it has done for the past two hundred years, in the monastery Mi Sang, on the banks of the Yellow River. The question was: Is the Yellow River real, or does it exist only in people's heads? During the conference, however, there was a melting of snow in the mountains, and the Yellow River rose above its banks and swept away the monastery Mi Sang and all conference participants. The proof that the things are outside of us, for themselves, also without us, therefore, has not been furnished [29] (p. 36; my translation).

8. Conclusions

Although this parable is ostensibly about reality, and our perception of it, it also serves as a fitting epitaph to the discussion of the problem of knowledge with which I began this paper. In other words, the parable can also be taken to pose questions around the nature of knowledge, realism *vs.* constructivism, and objectivity *versus* subjectivity of truth and truth-claims. The very reason why an answer has not been furnished actually constitutes the answer; and directs us away from subjectivism, relativism and constructivism [30] (p. 73; note 17).

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