



Philosophy of Culture

The Path to Knowledge

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ABSTRACT: Recent ethnographies suggest that tribal cosmologies address topics of philosophical relevance and offer valuable insights into the nature of perennial philosophical problems. For example, while postmodern and feminist thought has argued that the verification of knowledge is directly related to political interests, I argue that there are other vantage points not related to such interests that serve as valuable measures for the acceptance of knowledge. Direct empirical verification of the ontological presuppositions that govern the assessment of *anthropos* in the context *sub species aeternitatis* empowers an individual to understand his or her role within culture as well. The methodological bounty described in ethnography signals for philosophers to question the categorization of transcendence merely as 'religious experience.' This paper argues that humans may have the capacity both to recognize the divine and to give objective descriptions through symbols and language which allow for the development of methodologies in order to access that knowledge at will.

Many postmodern and feminist thinkers place knowledge into the domain of politics and power. Such insights allow for the deconstruction of social realities and for postulating democratic principles in accepting multicultural philosophies. The recognition of form, however, cannot substitute for content. The educative function of politics reveals important insights into the human condition and allows one, for example, to see postmodernity in the context of historical events, such as the resourceful relationship between reason and capitalism, the transition from living law to positive law (cf. Northrop 1960), and the shaping of thought through liberalism and nihilism. An important feature of postmodern thought is its acceptance of multiplicities of viewpoints. By entertaining disparate claims for truth that originate in diverse methodological and historical origins, postmodernists learn to employ creative strategies to solve conceptual disjunctions much like anthropologists must learn to cope with the collapse of their worldviews when 'going native.' Such experiences, however, can be fertile ground wherein new scientific methodologies might have a chance to blossom.

A recent study on tribal epistemologies (Wautischer 1998) demonstrates a type of understanding that stands outside the methodological scope of naturalistic observation. The exploration of human consciousness beyond linguistic thought will caution any philosopher to claim that behavior and intelligence can be understood by referring to deterministic principles. In this context, philosophical discourse continues to fulfill a vital role in educating humanity. It is misleading to assume that philosophical inquiry is primarily a political enterprise. Rather, a philosophical sense of wonder gives value and respect to

diversity, gives empathy for other human beings, and concern for other life forms. Consider the following example that signals a direction toward a different path to knowledge: an older, ever recurring perspective, *philosophia perennis*, has its origin in the belief that certain philosophical topics remain relevant for all societies, during all periods of history. The practice of perennial philosophy dates back to ancient Egypt, continued by Platonism, the Corpus Hermeticum, Scholasticism, contemporary Western philosophy, and Eastern thought as well, (1) while the concept of perennial philosophy can first be found in the sixteenth century, when the Papal

librarian Agostino Steuco wrote a work devoted to it. (2) Principal themes of this perennial philosophy include reflections on pursuing truth, universal wisdom, and mystical unity.

There is certainly no value in labeling the entire history of philosophy as an example of perennial philosophy; however, the practice of philosophy is the common thread that unites the craft guild, such as the celebration of philosophical discourse, the development of one's faculties of awareness through reason and transcendent insight, and the teaching of values to overcome the absurdity of existence. This philosophical leitmotif must not be confused with the political demands of an era. It is rooted in an ontology that views life *sub specie aeternitatis* and contradicts utilitarian claims for viewing life *sub specie temporis*.

A person's ability to reflect upon one's death, gradually to distance himself or herself from land, animals, divinity, the other, and eventually oneself, challenges both reductionist methodologies as well as transcendental practice. The former becomes challenged in the solitude of ideational space where the noetic dimension of transcendence combined with a religious experience of *unio mystica* leads one to the realm of conscious participation in the co-creating universe. The latter is meaningless if we assume no purpose to the existence of organic and inorganic matter, where one is bereft of any hope to escape darkness.

In ancient Greece, philosophical anthropology is not spoken of as a distinct school of thought. It exists, however, in the context of *paideia* (as a system of education) and *politeia* (defining a system of social polity). Stoic and Roman philosophers addressed it in the context of humanity. Not until Immanuel Kant introduced philosophical anthropology as a legitimate field of study did it gain a clear status of its own. Placing his faith in the transcendental ego of rational human beings who prescribe the laws of reason to nature, Kant treated it primarily as philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) without offering any relevant cultural analysis related to ethnography. Upholding the Kantian tradition of placing anthropology into the realm of the phenomenal world, a shift in emphasis took place during the nineteenth century toward history (e.g., Dilthey's phenomenological historicism), and in the early twentieth century toward existential and biological philosophy, social criticism, and philosophy of culture. For a while, philosophical anthropology had become primarily a German affair, using knowledge from the natural sciences and advancing mathematical reasoning while at the same time striving to overcome the limitations of natural science by implementing the dialectic methods of existentialism, phenomenology, and hermeneutics. Leading scholars such as Ernst Cassirer, Max Scheler, Nicolai Hartmann, Helmut Plessner, and Arnold Gehlen each developed a distinctly different approach to find an answer to the question about the nature of *ánthropos*.

This unique blend of combining empirical research from a detached observer perspective together with a person's direct experience and awareness of the human condition - *viz.*, desire for authenticity, uniqueness, transcendence, and for a meaningful existence - allows for merging a traditionally ideational space with solid data. Most writings in philosophical anthropology during the early twentieth century did not utilize much of the ample ethnographic literature about other cultures and their relation to knowledge. Often these references are given as examples for earlier stages of mental development or in the context

of ethnocentrism. As more ethnographic information became available, philosophy itself underwent an identity crisis. Consequently, the new ethnographic data were primarily utilized not only by anthropologists themselves, but also by psychologists, folklorists, sociologists, botanists, and so on; rarely, though, do we find a philosopher ready for unbiased assessment of ethnographies. The value of ethnographic data in contemporary philosophy is predominantly seen as providing evidence to attack the philosophical tradition in general, and Western thought in particular. It is generally overlooked that many themes relating to *philosophia perennis* can be found in tribal cosmologies as well, and awareness of the methodological bounty described in ethnography is generally met with opposition.

Philosophers tend to contrast these examples of prelogical mentality with a presumably later state of cultural evolution, such as scientific mentality and rationality. For them, knowledge belongs to the realm of language and symbols, it requires objectivity, and it must be incorporated into a larger body of thought. Goethe gives a beautiful description of this situation:

Truth, in its identity with the Divine can never be grasped directly; we perceive it only as reflection, in an example, a symbol, in single and related manifestations; we recognize it as incomprehensible life and yet we cannot disown the desire to comprehend it at last (1896, p. 74). (3)

The overwhelming evidence of ethnographic research suggests that humans may have the capacity to intuit the divine while at the same time giving descriptions through symbols and language that allow for developing methodologies to access this knowledge upon will. Since religious experience is rooted in symbols, the philosophical analysis of the epistemic potency of symbols remains a meaningful discipline. The schism between transcendentality and appearances is recognized in all cultures. Take, for example, concepts such as 'spirit realm' and 'a priori.' The phenomenal manifestations of these concepts and their noumenal descriptions are generally considered two separate ontological spheres - often viewed as being mutually exclusive.

After years of social-linguistic analysis, an ancient knowledge was rediscovered, namely, that language is utilized in different dimensions of communication. By linking language to breath, and breathing to sound, the vibrational intonation of sound patterns is practiced in all cultures as part of the ritual towards transcendence. While linguistic analysis ignores the knowledge related to vibrational sound, it does emphasize the social implications of structuring semantics. At the onset of this analysis we find feminist theories and their radical call for emotionality and body as a means for enhancement of communication; but soon it becomes clear that - without firm traits of character that reflect one's desire for wisdom - both body and emotion will be applied equally manipulatively, as we can see in sophistic rhetoric.

As more people have become the protagonists of their own lives and have learned how to stage sadness, anger, or happiness, they have also learned how to direct their affect and use poses, mime, and emotions to get their way. In ethnographic literature we find this role often attributed, for example, to the Coyote, the Trickster, the Raven, and we find historical records about the function of masks, troupes, or jesters. Traditionally, these roles signal a state of reflection upon the meaning of life, in general, and society, in particular. Their function is recognized as mediator between the worlds - they are skillful reminders of one's mortality and are communicators of fearless death.

Any manipulative application of verbal and nonverbal linguistic devices affects both social realities as well as human interaction with nature and the physical world. The social adaptation of nature is supported by the methodologies derived from epistemological

truths. Today we can celebrate technology as providing us with the key to manipulate a meaningless universe. Surrender into this meaningless universe is made possible by accepting the paratelic goal of infinite games where rules keep changing during the play (cf. Carse 1986, p. 11). There is no exit from a strategic solipsistic universe; the *bellum omnium contra omnes* has taken on dimensions to accommodate one's social and economic survival inconceivable even for Hobbes. In this context, the acquisition of knowledge is no longer a path toward eternity, instead it has become an existentialist theatre act, viz., playing the roles of one's life for the mere joy of playing - and without vision to escape the finitude of *thánatos*.

Where the finite player plays for immortality, the infinite player plays as a mortal. In infinite play one chooses to be mortal inasmuch as one always plays dramatically, that is, toward the open, toward the horizon, toward surprise, where nothing can be scripted. It is a kind of play that requires complete vulnerability. To the degree that one is protected against the future, one has established a boundary and no longer plays with but against others (Carse op. cit., p. 31).

This notion of competitive play is a typical feature of ideologies that fail to recognize relational forms of coexistence. Only if an individual has accepted his or her solitude in the universe will a desire to overpower others temporarily compensate that individual for one's ultimate defeat of anticipating the cessation of consciousness.

It is the pragmatic use of knowledge that makes ethnography a highly political enterprise. For example, many tribal informants (or consultants, to use the politically correct term) have grown weary of seeing their sacred beliefs dissected, distorted, and dishonored, and as a consequence some have taken to selling deviant versions of their sacred knowledge, finding that the possibilities of the market place are many. In our modern times of 'global village' we have come to understand that allegiance for shared values is across cultures, across gender, across nations, and across corporate identities; it is a feature of authentic persons who assemble to manifest their shared visions.

In most cultures, knowledge is seen as belonging to a group of people rather than being the result of individual effort. Thus, claims for private ownership of knowledge leave out a culture's achievements over the course of history. Such genealogy of knowledge is most foreign to information age societies, where legal concerns about copyrights and corporate ownership constitute a revenue source of equal magnitude compared with the revenues obtained from the marketing of knowledge. Also, philosophical reflection owes a debt to the historical process in the formation of theories about the function and role of humans in the overall enigma of existence.

In all cultures, including the Western traditions, the importance of merging transcendental insights with subtle perceptions of reality is recognized as an undisputed fact. This knowledge stands in direct opposition to the use of reductionist methodologies for empirical testing of scientific hypotheses. I seriously doubt whether there is even one practicing philosopher who is not aware of the political consequences humankind will face once an unrestricted application of reductionist methodologies has provided the mechanisms for manipulating organic matter even to the extent of ideational surveillance. The mere fact that such applications may be possible does not guarantee the correctness of corresponding hypotheses purporting to explain the occurrence of consciousness. A strict application of the Duhem-Quine thesis (cf. Duhem 1954, Quine 1953) should alert the scientifically minded philosopher that the nature of the currently dominant methodological approach in consciousness studies may need revision. (4) There are just too many so-called 'anomalous' phenomena surfacing through the channels of modern information highways. Suppressing the research about these phenomena by means of ridicule, patronizing methodologies, and denial for funding does, indeed, create an environment of censorship that is inhospitable to science proper.

The path to knowledge eventually leads one to explore the question of consciousness. There is no guarantee that by merely looking at this path one will come to understand consciousness. Perhaps it will help to walk this path and to experience one's own observations of it. Intercultural philosophy cannot take place within the confines of one dominant methodology. To consider subjective experience as an acceptable form of primary data in the acquisition of knowledge is certainly radically empirical in the sense of William James, and is also compatible with Bergson's vision that the union of science and metaphysics will lead the positive sciences to a level far higher than one can imagine.

In conclusion, the path to knowledge ideally will provide the philosophical traveler with a sense of sentience that allows one to participate in an authentic dialectical process spanning the chasm between transcendent void and volitional place.

Notes

(1) For a list of representative works see Schmitt (1966, pp. 505-6).

(2) A ready available reprint is Steuco (1972).

(3) 'Das Wahre, mit dem Göttlichen identisch, läßt sich niemals von uns direct erkennen; wir schauen es nur im Abglanz, im Beispiel, Symbol, in einzelnen und verwandten Erscheinungen; wir werden es gewahr als unbegreifliches Leben und können dem Wunsch nicht entsagen, es dennoch zu begreifen' (trans. H. W.).

(4) The scientific enterprise is based on a holistic web of beliefs to confirm or falsify hypotheses at different stages of scientific development. Every theory can be refuted in principle by the weight of newly gained evidence; consequently, one can argue that homogenous methodologies tend to create a false consensus about acceptable descriptions of reality. For a detailed analysis of the Duhem-Quine thesis see Harding (1976).

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