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The Prospects of the Method of Wide Reflective Equilibrium in Contemporary African Epistemology

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Abstract

This paper makes a case for wide reflective equilibrium in doing African epistemology. It argues that on the issue of formulating a viable theory of knowledge, such an approach is more promising than the extant dominant approaches, namely, the method of ethno-epistemology and the method of particularistic studies. More specifically, wide reflective equilibrium articulates a proper balance between philosophy and culture and endows a theory of knowledge with multiple sources of normativity.

Keywords: Ethno-epistemology, particularistic studies, reflective equilibrium, philosophical methodology, African philosophy, Barry Hallen, Olubi Sodipo, Kwasi Wiredu.

1. Introduction

The method of reflective equilibrium has played an influential role in Western philosophy. Historically, the idea goes back to Goodman (1956), and was later adopted and emended by Rawls in his theory of justice (Rawls 1971, 1974; Daniels 1979, 1980). Roughly speaking, Goodman thought that in philosophical practice, what we should do is put forward a theory to account for a set of (intuitional) data. Recalcitrant data force emendation to a theory or else explained away as noise or artefacts. Methodologically, however, reflective equilibrium is a new name for a familiar form of scientific practice, and the explanation of how scientific results often get justified. In this practice, a scientific theory is put forward to account for a set of

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observational data. Recalcitrant observational data force emendation to a theory or else explained away as noise or artefacts of the observational instrument.

Is there a prospect for such an approach in African Philosophy? In this paper, I argue for an affirmative answer to this question within the context of contemporary African epistemology. I show that such an approach has some advantages over two extant dominant methods in African Epistemology, namely, the method of ethno-epistemology and the method of particularistic studies. Specifically, I argue that it not only can accommodate their positive insights, it can overcome some of their weaknesses.

The paper proceeds as follows. In the second section, I outline few considerations in favour of a theory of knowledge and the place of such a theory in our evaluative practices. In the third section, I discuss the two extant dominant approaches to doing African epistemology and show some of their limits. In the fourth section, I advocate for the place of wide reflective equilibrium in the project of African epistemology. The paper closes with some concluding remarks.²

I. The Central Thrust of Epistemology

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. In being so, it is interested in the set of conditions that are conducive to acquiring knowledge such as evidence, justification, good belief-forming processes sanctioned by one's community, and so on (Goldman 1979, Pritchard 2018, Goldberg 2018). If knowledge is a normative standing, namely, the complement we pay to a mental state that attains certain success conditions, then for all kinds of reasons, we need a theory of such a standing. And there are many reasons why that theory might be useful. For one, it can help us detect the presence or absence of knowledge in people around us. Someone like Craig (1990)

²Throughout this paper, I presume that there is a great deal Western philosophy can learn from African philosophy, and conversely, that there is a great deal that African philosophy can learn from Western philosophy. This mutual borrowing and learning process is most reasonable given our common goal of knowledge and understanding. Indeed, I take it that for any tradition of philosophy, African or Western, the best that has been said, written or spoken, and that is of relevance ought to be taken seriously, and as always refined to meet some fundamental desiderata important to a given tradition.

has argued that because of the role we want knowledge to play in our community, we need to be able to track people who attain such success conditions, namely, true belief, because they can be good informants on matters that are of interest to us. Another reason for such a theory is that it can help us project into unknown and indeterminate situations where we are not sure whether a state constitutes knowledge or does not constitute knowledge. This, in a nutshell, would be an inductive value such a theory would have. Finally, we can use such a theory of knowledge to understand what other standings other than knowledge would be like to play the kind of roles they play in our community. Someone like Williamson (2000) has pursued this agenda in contemporary epistemology. Rather than try to understand knowledge in terms of other standings like belief, justification, and so forth, we take knowledge as theoretically primitive and then seek to explain other phenomena like belief, justification, assertion, reference,³ and evidence in terms of knowledge. For all these reasons, and more, epistemology deals with the nature of knowledge and epistemologists try to give a theory of it. In the next section, I examine two dominant approaches a contemporary African epistemologist might explore in giving such a theory.

II. Two Dominant Approaches in Contemporary African Epistemology

a. Ethno-Epistemology

To the question what method should the African philosopher deploy in giving a theory of knowledge; ethno-epistemology is the approach that says our account of those theories should consist in canvassing, documenting, and presenting the beliefs, practices, everyday intuitions, folktales, proverbs, and the linguistic and cultural heritage of our people. Notable examples include Tempels (1959), Mbiti (1988), Kagame (1966), Senghor (1964), Kaphagawani (1998), Hamminga (2015), and Hallen & Sodipo (1997).⁴

³ See Williamson (2007).

⁴ This is a representative list, not an exhaustive one. My interest here is African epistemology, not African philosophy in general.

These accounts involve either the distinctive practices of individual communities in Africa (e.g., Tempels 1959) or those of Africa as a whole (see e.g., Mbiti 1988, Hamminga 2015). For example, here is Hamminga presenting the African theory of knowledge as opposed to the Western conception of it:

Westerners can be surprised to see us all getting excited (or sad) at the same moment. That is because we are one body, a tree. *We sing, we dance, we weep, we know.* We are “together”, in such a far-reaching meaning of that word that westerners will have a hard time understanding and believing this togetherness. Ironically, the West sent Christians to teach us about togetherness. But we, here in Africa, are the experts. *Knowledge is one form of togetherness* (Hamminga 2015, p. 58).

Given the inherent problem of factual errors and overgeneralisation present in such accounts, however, others follow a more cautious approach. Here African account of knowledge is presented by examining African cultural heritage particular to an African community. One way to do this is to advert to one’s linguistic competence in a given community. For example, Kaphagawani presents Chewan epistemology by examining the language of the Chewa people:

Chichewa, the language spoken by the Chewa people, is littered with proverbs, the messages of which are indicative of the Chewa conception of knowledge. The first and foremost is Akuluakulu...which means, literally, “The elders are rivers where fire is extinguished.” ...Now the concept of knowledge starts to come to light. It is something along the lines of “maximum cumulative experience,” not for its own sake, but rather for practical purposes (Kaphagawani 1998, p. 241).

One of the remarkable features of ethno-epistemology is that it asks us to begin philosophy with our culture. Indeed, why should a theory be called an African theory of knowledge if it has no input from African cultural insights and data?

The general problem, however, is that it seeks to go no further with those data and insights. This is what has exposed it to some of the severest criticisms in the literature on the self-definition of African philosophy (see Bodunrin 1981, Hountondji 1976, and Wiredu 1991). In what follows, I will not rehearse those criticisms. I would rather question some assumptions about the proper relation between philosophy and culture it depends on.

How is that relationship ought to be understood, given the wider imperatives of African philosophy in the face of the problem of development in Africa? It helps here to illustrate with some examples drawn from the western tradition. The great contributions of Frege, Russell, Strawson, and Grice were not merely that their reflections were about issues in the use of natural language (i.e. everyday spoken languages) to denote things in the world and the various ways the Western mind does this; their philosophical reflections have become something like a patrimony indispensable to the significance of the culture itself. For example, the Western mind owes it to Frege that language is used not merely to refer to things in the world, but that our relation to that world is by means of our language only, through our concepts or what he calls the “sense ” as opposed to the “reference” of our words. “Morning star” and “evening star” are different senses of one and the same reference (i.e., one and the same celestial object; Frege 1948). In the same vein, the Western mind owes it to Russell that sentences or more accurately propositions in English language (and perhaps in any language) having uniquely denoting phrases like “the present king of France,” “the author of Things Fall Apart,” etc., are not concerned with denoting or referring to anything in the world because if they do all kinds of puzzles and problems arise. On the contrary, when they occur in our language, we can always reformulate them in a way that the denoting phrases disappear so that, for example, “the author

of Things Fall Apart is Chinua Achebe” becomes “one and only one entity wrote Things Fall Apart, and Chinua Achebe is identical with that one” (Russell 1905). Further, the Western mind owes it to Strawson and Grice that to understand the significance of our language we have to pay attention not merely to the relation between words and objects but also their pragmatics and implicatures, and ask what contexts and significant human situations are they being used (Strawson 1971; Grice 1975). The list goes on. In all these cases, philosophy begins with culture and provides understanding of issues that arise in that culture in a way that imparts on that culture itself. It significantly contributes to the growth, and sometimes the renewal of culture.

Ethno-epistemology lacks these dynamics. And when viewed from the perspective of the social and political predicaments in which the African culture exists today, this makes it doubly problematic. Of course, in citing these examples, there is no suggestion that this is the only way of doing philosophy, or even the best way of doing philosophy. There is also no suggestion that those achievements were final in the sense that they resolved all riddles and all problems the authors were grappling with. No philosophy does. But given the possibility implied in these projects, why should we take the ethno-epistemological approach as a serious alternative?

One suggestion an ethno-epistemologist might appeal to is the claim that culture is philosophy or a kind of philosophy, that our belief systems, to use Horton’s formulation are really theoretical systems that give members of our culture models of explanation, prediction, and control of their world by linking events in everyday life with causal forces that transcend or underlie that world (Horton 1993). However, If this claim is true, it means we are to count these beliefs as being on par with Western science and Western philosophy. And this would mean that we count for the sake of consistency folk physics, folk biology, and folk psychology the ideal endeavours in the Western tradition. For like the belief systems in the African

tradition, folk physics, folk psychology, and folk biology are theoretical systems that give the everyday person in Western culture the explanatory, predictive, and controlling powers of the physical, social, and mental worlds in which they live (see Geary 2012). But folk physics, folk psychology, and folk biology, however, resourceful they are were taken in the Western tradition as the starting points for theoretical physics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, epistemology, and modern biology.

Perhaps, the ethno-epistemologist might bite the bullet and say well, why think there is one standard for governing our epistemic life? Why think that if folk epistemology is not epistemology in that tradition, it should not be epistemology in other traditions? It seems to me this form of epistemic relativism is untenable especially when seen within the African continent itself. In a country like Nigeria, for example, there are well over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups. The same can be said for a country like the Democratic Republic of Congo. The epistemological relativists would allow, by their own lights, that epistemic norms and standards should be a function of one's ethnic group. In the African context, the relativists would allow well over two hundred and fifty norms and standards to govern our epistemic life. That seems clearly untenable, if only because it would enact an epistemic "tower of babel." What is more troubling is that there is no principled reason why by the relativists' light, we should stop at the level of ethnic groups. Epistemic norms and standards might then be a function of individuals' idiosyncratic preferences too and that would enact a worst form of confusion.

Let us grant for the sake of the argument that the relativists' position is possible. However, on pragmatic grounds, that is, given the imperative of development in Africa, is such anything-goes-way of thinking of philosophical practice in Africa even desirable? I think not.⁵

⁵ A reviewer for this journal expresses the worry that this is not a fair assessment: We should understand African epistemology from an African point of view. My response: First, like every discipline, a working assumption of this paper is that one way of understanding philosophy better in any tradition is by looking outward. Looking inward is good. But looking outward can help bring to light certain features that are little understood. This is hardly a new or an implausible claim. In the fields of sociology and political science, researchers often say that a person who knows only one country knows no country. I believe this is a good methodological lesson as well as

b. Particularistic Studies

Unlike ethno-epistemology, the method of particularistic studies championed by Wiredu (1980, 1998, 2002), and practiced by Hallen & Sodipo (1997) and Sogolo (1998) in epistemology, seeks to be both critical and comparative. It consists in canvassing the intuitions, beliefs, and attitudes of Africans from linguistic contexts and cultural heritage and showing how the authentic African concept contrasts and compares with Western counterparts. The aim is to demonstrate African linguistic and cultural heritage in its true lineament against the disruptive cultural impact and conceptual impositions of colonialism:

Think, then, of the possible enormity of the avoidable philosophical deadwood we might be carrying through our historically enforced acquisition of philosophical training in the medium of foreign languages. Of course, a similar pessimistic soul-searching is altogether in place even among the natives of any given philosophical tradition vis-a-vis their historical inheritance. This is, in fact, much in evidence in contemporary Western philosophy, for example. But the position is graver in our situation of cultural otherness, for even ordinary common sense would deprecate needlessly carrying other people's garbage (Wiredu 1997, p. 12).

the basis of comparative philosophy itself, an ever-burgeoning discipline in philosophy. Second, this paper is not alone in seeing no value in the exceptionalism that is usually indulged in resisting outward looking point of view in African philosophy. Hountondji argues against ethno-philosophy on precisely the same ground when he says: "Let us now ask the crucial question: is this the usual meaning of the word 'philosophy'? Is it the way it is understood, for instance, in the phrases 'European philosophy', 'nineteenthcentury philosophy', etc.? Clearly not. It seems as though the word automatically changes its meaning as soon as it ceases to be applied to Europe or to America and is applied to Africa" (Hountondji 1983, p. 60; see also Oruka 1972). Third, what is at stake here is disciplinary matrix as opposed to particular doctrines or beliefs, say about religion or ethics. And one might think that the latter as opposed to the former is an area where we can advance the discipline by engaging in inter-disciplinary analysis and discussion. Fourth, in trying to motivate the alternative view on philosophical method in African epistemology, I do not want to rehearse the views of others on this matter, say that of Oruka or Hountondji or Bodunrin, which have received elaborate comments and discussions in the literature. To do so strikes me as very unproductive or uninspiring.

Let us see how this works in concrete terms. Hallen and Sodipo (1997) examined the Yoruba⁶ concept of knowledge and belief to show, among other things, its similarity and difference with their Western counterparts.⁷ To achieve this, they consulted a professional elite group in Yorubaland, the Oniṣẹ̀gún, who have no knowledge of English and therefore are innocent of foreign linguistic influence. Using specific examples of usages in Yoruba language, the Oniṣẹ̀gún explain what it means to say that someone knows and what it means to say that someone merely believes. In analysing knowledge, which in Yoruba language is “mò”, they say:

1. The one you use your own eyes to see and which your ọ̀kò̀n witnesses you that it is Ọ̀Ótò—this is the best.
2. It is clear in my eyes. This means I have witnessed it myself. It is Ọ̀Ótò that he does this thing...It is clear in your eyes (Hallen & Sodipo 1997, p. 60).

The authors take these comments as the Oniṣẹ̀gún stating two necessary conditions that must be satisfied for something to have the complement of knowledge in Yoruba. The first condition is that it must be the result of first-hand experience, typically visual experience. The second condition is that it must be the outcome of witnessing with one’s ọ̀kò̀n, which translates roughly to one’s apprehension of something with one’s mind.

Next, consider the state of belief, or its rough equivalent in Yoruba, hearing and accepting what one hears, *gbàgbó*. They say:

- (21) What you use your eyes to see—this is not what you are told. What you are told may not be true (Ọ̀Ótò). But if you use your own eyes to touch it, like this [gesture],

⁶ A socio-cultural group in South-West, Nigeria.

⁷ I would not discuss the mid-wifery method implied in sage philosophy (Oruka 1990). For one, some of the challenges with particularistic studies pointed out here are present there too.

you will understand (yé) it. You've used your own eyes to see it. (22) If you have been noticing the behaviour (iwà) of a person, we can say, 'He can do a certain kind of thing.' But if he has not done such a thing in [before] your eyes, you will say, 'I gbàgbó'. But if he has done such a thing in your eyes, you will say, 'I mó. This means it is clear in your eyes. (23) It means that your ọkòṅ does not witness the thing—whether it is or is not (Hallen & Sodipo 1997, pp. 64-65).

The objects of gbàgbó include the whole gamut of oral tradition and testimony (textbook information, information passed on from teachers, and information from others we have little knowledge about). So, on this analysis, oral tradition belongs to the category of hearing and accepting what one hears, not to the category of knowledge. This is very curious, because ideally, not only is testimony standardly regarded as knowledge, oral tradition is knowledge if anything is in most traditional African cultures. However, Hallen and Sodipo (1997) see things differently. They think that the Oniṣẹ̀gún is offering a distinctively African epistemological account, one that is not only different from the Western counterpart in which testimony is a source of knowledge, but one that is also different from the rest part of Africa in which oral tradition or testimony is a source of knowledge as well.

This is unconvincing. I think that a close reading of the authors' discussions with the Oniṣẹ̀gún does show a more irenic interpretation of the usages. On this view, the Oniṣẹ̀gún may not be offering an account of necessary and sufficient conditions of states, which have the complement of knowledge and those that do not have such complement such as hearing and accepting what one hears. On the contrary, the Oniṣẹ̀gún is pointing to *exemplars* of states, which can have the complement of knowledge and those that merely approximate it. States of mere hearing and accepting would thus count as an instance of the latter, and visual perception would count as an instance of the former. If so, the comments of the Oniṣẹ̀gún would not exclude testimony as a source of knowledge; they only amount to saying that testimony is not

a perfect state of knowledge like one would get in visual perception, a reasonable position to hold.

Imagine also a situation, say in 1380 in Yoruba culture where a child learns a number of things from her mother whom she has come to trust. Imagine further that the child is the only son of her mother and the only son of her father, who died few months before the birth of the child. The mother tells the child that she was born on a market day. The child accepts the mother's word for it. There are no reasons that tell against this belief. And the mother is sane and normal. Moreover, it is 1380, and therefore no calendar or documents to verify this testimony. By the account of the authors, the Yorubas would say the child merely believes or agrees with her mother but does not know and more importantly would never know that she was born on a market day. This seems clearly implausible. A child should be able to know facts about her life on the basis of a reliable and trustworthy testimony of a mother.

Indeed, apart from the few instances and usages recounted by the *Oniṣẹ̀gún*, we have no way of knowing whether this is in fact a contextual feature of some linguistic usages being turned into a classificatory rule of the Yoruba language or indeed a deep feature of the language itself. Further, there is no indication among the Yorubas in print that this is a peculiar feature of their cultural life apart from what the authors say about this cultural feature.

In general, it is a persistent concern with particularistic studies that they lose sight of the fact that the rule of any language or usages is a much more technical matter than normally assumed. The truth is that any speaker of any language, however competent, needs more than the ability to apply a concept to a number of situations to be able to formulate the rule guiding the usage of that concept. Consider for example, someone who is interested in formulating a rule guiding the usage of "fish." If he approaches the fishermen on the basis of their competence to apply the word on a daily basis, at best he would arrive at a number of paradigm instances of classifying certain things as fish and others as not fish. The fishermen might be able to come

up with some criteria that form a rule of thumb for their ordinary purposes, but one cannot take their words for it. If one is interested in giving a coherent and systematic account of the rule already implied by their conceptions, one has to do better than just present those criteria. Thus, it is in the formulation of this rule more than the mastery of particular usages that shows the incompleteness of this kind of method in African epistemology. This is even more important when the task is not about some mundane concepts like “fish” but deep concepts like “knows”, “true”, and “justified belief.” Although, I have used words or concepts in English language, the lesson is quite general.

The problem with particularistic studies is deeper. While it may be a distinctive cultural achievement to recover the authentic African conceptual scheme, it is highly doubtful that it should be a precondition for doing contemporary African philosophy in general and African epistemology in particular. This is due both to the nature of language as a carrier of meaning, and the historical transformation of African cultures before colonialism itself. The truth is that the authentic African concept so beloved by champions of this approach is illusory from a historical standpoint: African cultures have never been stable even before colonialism and never been free from foreign incursions due to commerce, war, migration, and dominance. As Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, a great historian of Africa pointed out:

In fact, these reputedly stable societies rarely enjoyed the lovely equilibrium presumed to have been disrupted by the impact of colonialism. West Africa, for example, had been seething with activity even [sic] since the eighteenth-century waves of Fulani conquest and well before the creation of units of resistance to European influence....The Congolese basin was the site of still more profound upheavals linked to commercial penetration. In such cases the revolution in production rocked the very foundations of the political structure. As for South Africa, the rise of the Zulus and their expansion had repercussions up into central Africa. How far back do we have to

go to find the stability alleged to be “characteristic” of the precolonial period: before the Portuguese conquest, before the Islamic invasion, before the Bantu expansion? Each of these great turning points marked the reversal of long-term trends, within which a whole series of shorter cycles might in turn be identified, as, for example, the succession of Sudanic empires, or even such shorter cycles as the periods of recession (1724-1740, 1767-1782, 1795-1811, and so on) and the upswing of the slave-trade economy of Dahomey. In short, the static concept of “traditional” society cannot withstand the historian’s analysis (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1976, p. 263).⁸

Relatedly, the approach relies on a conception of language as a system of meaning, which being complete in the past can provide answers to the question of a people’s identity in the present and the future. Being free from the foreigner’s gift, good or ill, the past is judged as superior to the present and the future in terms of who the people are. These are controversial assumptions that require solid defence by champions of this approach. What is worth bearing in mind here is that the language of a people is a system that continues to evolve with their interaction with the world, all along embodying the identity, values, beliefs, and attitudes of the people in changing historical contexts. As Kaphagawani & Malherbe noted: “If we can say that Africa is now in a post-colonial period of history, it is because indigenous culture has come back into its own. European culture, so far as it is still in evidence, has lost its continental hegemony and is developing here, not Eurocentrically but Afrocentrically, that is, in response to African rather than European influences” (Kaphagawani & Malherbe 1998, p. 270). I think this is true to a great extent. Even the English language bemoaned by proponents of this group is not spoken in any African country as British or American or European English. The British or the American or the European person often fails to understand what is being spoken as

⁸ This explains also why in modern African society like Nigeria, people inherit names from their ancestors that come from far away ethnic groups. For example, it is common to see Benin people bearing Yoruba names, whose root goes back to their ancestors.

English in most parts of Africa. This is even more evident with the “pidgin English” in some parts of Southern Nigeria.

Finally, it should not be of any surprise to us if the language of any group or community does not yet accommodate all the distinctions and sophistications needed to think about a particular philosophical problem. It is not yet a strike against the universality of a philosophical problem; and not yet a strike against the imperative of those problems if we find that those problems do not reflect in the way traditional people speak. It only reveals what we already know, namely, that the language has not been made to respond to this new context or problem. Think about the development of the syntax and semantics of various systems of logic in Western philosophy. This development was not only a response to some particular challenges in philosophy and the inadequacy of natural language, but also has enabled people in this tradition to imagine new problems and novel solutions to those problems even in a natural language (English in this case).

All in all, what is needed here is a proper relationship between philosophy and culture. It seems plausible that the limit of our culture should not be the limit of our philosophical engagements. To think so is to misunderstand the dynamic nature of culture, and to downplay the intellectual responsibility in doing philosophy.

In what follows, I will defend the method of reflective equilibrium as a more viable method for the development of theories of philosophically interesting concepts in African epistemology.

III. African Cultures in Wide Equilibrium

There is something definitely right about ethno-epistemology and particularistic studies, namely, that in doing African epistemology, there is nowhere else to start from than from our own cultural heritage. However, what they get wrong is how to conceive the relationship that should exist between the cultural heritage, especially the linguistic insights about concepts of

epistemological interests and the theory or hypothesis that adequately accounts for those insights. I believe there is a more promising way to engage our culture in philosophy. The main idea whose originality and fruitfulness for justifying our inductive and deductive practices was enunciated by Goodman is as follows:

I have said that deductive inferences are justified by their conformity to valid general rules, and that general rules are justified by their conformity to valid inferences. But this circle is a virtuous one. The point is that rules and particular inferences alike are justified by being brought into agreement with each other. *A rule is amended if it yields an inference we are unwilling to accept; an inference is rejected if it violates a rule we are unwilling to amend.* The process of justification is the delicate one of making mutual adjustments between rules and accepted inferences; and in the agreement achieved lies the only justification needed for either (Goodman 1956, p. 64).

This is narrow reflective equilibrium, in a nutshell. Rawls' idea is that in putting into coherence rules and accepted inferences, we should also allow background facts, both theoretical and empirical to play a role in determining the outcome of the process (Rawls 1971, 1974, Daniels 1979, 1980). This would be wide reflective equilibrium.

Let us explain this notion of wide reflective equilibrium with the earlier toy example of defining a "fish" and then apply it to African epistemology with particular reference to defining "knowledge." As a scientist within the African context, one might be interested in what a fish is, that would then guide the scientific community in classifying something as "fish" and something as not "fish." Within that African context, native speakers of a given community already apply the word "fish" to some things, and do not apply the word to other things. We then propose a rule or formula that endeavours to pick out things, which these native speakers would count as "fish" and does not pick out things that native speakers would not count as "fish." A formula that violates any of these conditions is rejected. The process continues until

we find a formula that is adequate enough to capture the application conditions implied by the native speakers. However, the goal is not merely to arrive at a formula that systematises all the application conditions, for in that case we might end up with a formula that is gruesome, unnatural, and unwieldy: It fits all the available linguistic data about our usage but it is deficient as an explanatory principle. In a sense, this was the problem with Hallen and Sodipo's systematisation of the utterances of the Oniṣẹ̀gún.

To see these, suppose in a given community, native speakers use "fish" to refer to things having the property of fins, scales, tail, breathing water, oviparous, not suckling one's young, and cold blooded. If one is interested in formulating a rule on the basis of these properties, and which will then guide usage about future unknown cases of instances of fish, it cannot just be that a "fish" is anything that has the property of fins, scales, tail, breathing water, oviparous, not suckling one's young, and cold blooded. For given this rule, and given that whales have a number of the properties stipulated by the rule, one might easily conclude that from the standpoint of one's community, whales do really count as "fish." Therefore, the standard view that whales are not fish ought to be revised.

But that would be pseudo-science because meaning is not mere usage. From the standpoint of knowledge and understanding, we are interested not in a set of necessary and sufficient conditions, but in a set of *salient* conditions, a finite set of properties that would be illuminating, explanatory, and natural. And this might be that fish is something that is "completely aquatic, water-breathing, cold-blooded craniate vertebrate" (Slote 1966, p. 211). Since whales do not have the salient properties stipulated by this rule, such as being water-breathing and cold-blooded, whales would not count as fish. In fact, from our scientist's standpoint, nothing counts as fish without being cold-blooded and water-breathing.

Notice two things. The first is that most of what the local scientist has to rely on by way of developing the general rule depends on the application practices and cultural usages of his

community. The investigator has nowhere else to start from. The second is that this rule might in the end not incorporate everything the community of the investigator would normally count as fish. In our case, whales would not count as fish even though whales would strike the community as having most properties of things they would count as fish such as living in water, having the look of a fish, and having a tail. The error-theory of the investigator for the community might be that they have been overly impressed by superficial features of fish, and that from the standpoint of learning more about fish and deciding future cases, it pays more to pay attention to *salient* features (Slote 1966).

I believe this applies to African epistemology. Here we are interested in formulating a rule for the application of a concept like knowledge. We begin, and rightly so with the insight of our community. Hallen & Sodipo say that according to the Oniṣẹ̀gún: “1. The one you use your own eyes to see and which your ọ̀kò̀n witnesses you that it is Ọ̀Ó̀tò—*this is the best* (emphasis, mine). 2. It is clear in my eyes. This means I have witnessed it myself. It is Ọ̀Ó̀tò that he does this thing...It is clear in your eyes (Hallen & Sodipo 1997: 60). If as it seems plausible, what the Oniṣẹ̀gún is saying is that perception is a paradigm case of knowledge, then the rule which the African epistemologist would formulate cannot violate the practice of taking perception as a case of paradigm knowledge. But there are other useful data and ways of eliciting them other than what the Oniṣẹ̀gún think or say. One way is through a short story that attempts to put into sharp relief the relationship between traditional conditions of knowledge such as belief, truth, and justification or evidence. If used on the Oniṣẹ̀gún or any native speaker in any African community, it would also make clear what they actually think about knowledge. Such stories are often known as intuition pumps because they elicit people’s judgements in

clear and easy way. Consider the following story adapted from Lehrer (1965), which one might present to the Oniṣẹ̀gún or subjects in any African community:⁹

You are a school teacher. One of your students tells you that he has won a lottery. He gives you proofs that this claim is true by presenting to you a cheque of the handsome prize. You therefore formed the belief that someone in your class is a lottery winner. Your belief is true and justified because you have good reasons for so believing. However, this student was merely shamming you. He has not won a lottery, and not even attempted one. But your belief that someone in your class is a lottery winner is still true because another student of yours in the class has just won one.

In reaction to this story, if the subjects say the school teacher does not know even though the teacher has the conditions of belief, truth, and justification, this would *at least* show *that* not every case of justified true belief is a case of knowledge.

A third source of data for the African epistemologist in coming up with a theory of knowledge would be the entrenched beliefs we have about knowledge itself. For example, in most if not all African cultures, oral tradition and the testimony of elders and ancestors are *bona fide* knowledge. It would be a strike against a rule or formula about knowledge that fails to capture this.

A fourth and final source of data would be various contextual meanings of knowledge among native speakers. In the case of the Yoruba culture, this would be the multiple contexts the word “mò is used and the underlying meaning (s) in those various contexts.

Given all these data, the task of the African epistemologist is to formulate a rule that accounts for all of them. Again, like the scientist or the investigator about fish in the local context, the goal is not merely to arrive at a formula that systematises all the conditions of

⁹ I am suggesting here an experimental African philosophy, one in which surveys and vignettes are used to elicit the judgement of ordinary subjects to be used in further philosophical discussions.

knowledge, for in that case we might end up with a formula that is gruesome, unnatural, and unwieldy: It fits all the available linguistic data about our usages but it is deficient as an explanatory principle. Rather, the goal is to formulate a rule that highlights a set of *salient* conditions, a finite set of properties that would be illuminating, explanatory, and natural.

African theory of knowledge so conceived has a number of advantages. First, it avoids the pitfall of taking one's performance-error, which are always possible given our fallible epistemic conditions as the target theory we are trying to formulate. The method of wide reflective equilibrium does so because it requires the epistemologist to discount certain data as mere noise or artefacts of the instruments one is using to gather the data. Reflective equilibrium does so precisely because it requires one to weigh whatever linguistic or cultural data one has gathered against the broader horizon of one's knowledge of the issue under investigation. For example, when Hallen and Sodipo gathered from the Oniṣẹ̀gún that testimony is not a *bona fide* source of knowledge, the method of reflective equilibrium would require that given how this datum is wildly at odd with the broader horizon of their knowledge of African culture (perhaps some other aspects of the Yoruba culture as well), they should seek a more charitable interpretation of the datum or seek further data on the matter that might corroborate the linguistic datum. Indeed, experimental philosophers have used this approach to discount some moral views. For example, in their excellent paper, Kneer & Machery (2019) argued that there is no such phenomenon as moral luck because when the intuitions of subjects are probed deeply and repeatedly on the relevant scenarios we normally attribute moral luck, the judgements of these subjects reveal that there is no distinctive moral attitude such as blame they show to scenarios involving luck they never show to scenarios involving no luck. As a result, Kneer & Machery hypothesize that the phenomenon of moral luck in moral philosophy arises from the performance error of subjects, in particular from a form of cognitive limitation known as hindsight bias. This is a form of bias that arises "from a retroactive overestimation of the

probability that an outcome would occur if it does indeed occur, which leads people to view the morally unlucky agent as more negligent than the lucky one” (Kneer & Machery 2019, p. 18).

Second, the normative status of such a theory can depend on various sources. For example, it can be based in part on one’s competence as a good inquirer with a set of intellectual virtues such as one’s sensitivity to details, open-mindedness in evaluating evidence, fairness in dealing with facts, intellectual humility, intellectual perseverance and care in inquiry, and so on (Zagzebski 1996). It can also be based in part on the practices of one’s community. Finally, it can in part be based on the explanatory power of the theory such as its simplicity or elegance or theoretical fruitfulness or fertility. It seems to me a theory with such multiple sources of normativity has more credibility than a theory with only one.

Conclusion

A great deal of work is going on in African philosophy today. In this paper, I have limited myself to African epistemology, more precisely, to contemporary African epistemology and argued for a space for the method of wide reflective equilibrium. Note that there is no claim that if one searches through the length and breadth of the extensive literature in African philosophy, from past to present nothing resembling the method I have advocated for here would not be found. The claim however is modest: insofar as the method *might* be implicitly recognised, there is need for a more self-conscious application of it in the business of doing African epistemology.

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