

From Ontological Duality to Duality of Epistemological Justification in Yoruba Philosophy

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Abstract

Plato argues that it is only reason through the mind that can discern the truth or reality. Descartes, Leibniz and other idealists followed in the same tradition. However, British empiricists like Locke and Hume argued to the contrary, that facts through perception are the evidence necessary for justification of knowledge. Edmund Gettier, in his analysis of Western traditional notion of knowledge as justified true belief, argues that it is possible to produce justification in both instances without attaining knowledge. This is so because while empiricists emphasize on the external state, the rationalists hap on the internal state of human cognition. After Gettier, virtue epistemologists have argued that what Gettier refuted is externalism rather than internalism of justification. This paper proceeds to argue that traditional Yoruba epistemology will not suffer Gettier's criticism because it considers both external and internal dimensions of justification. This 1 shall show by advancing the argument that the Yoruba notion of justification, unlike the Western notion, takes as its basis the whole of human personality (body and mind), alongside with the disposition and evidence of the epistemic agent in epistemic discourse. The significance of this work is to show that the Yoruba notion of justification is more robust and consequently unique in comparison to the traditional Western notion.

Keywords: conscience, Yoruba epistemology, justification, knowledge, Gettier

Introduction

From Plato's epistemology to the modern period of Western philosophy, the role of human personalities has enjoyed prominence in the theory of knowledge. In Plato's 'Allegory of the Cave' and *Theaetetus*, the human mind was shown through reflection on ideas to arrive at knowledge. The human mind, according to Locke, is a receptacle of ideas. Knowledge is achieved only when the mind stores external or internal ideas *a posteriori*. For Locke, the mind is innate and blank and its contents are products of experience. Knowledge or truth is imprinted on the mind through the physical senses. In other words, the mind is just a store-house of knowledge or truth derived from sensation. George Berkeley's position is not different from this. He asserts that what the mind stores is sense data which is an abstraction but not

the real object of knowledge. This led him to his controversial position that we cannot know physical objects but sense data.

In the same empiricist tradition, Hume denies the independent existence of the mind by saying that it is nothing but 'a bundle of perceptions' (Sahakian, 1968:161). Hume, like Locke relegates reason and elevates experience, then gives importance to psychology as the basis of our empirical knowledge in his denial of causality. It was Hume that actually constructed a fork model of analysis to explain that ideas are only acquired *a priori* or through *a posteriori* means. He posits that any book that does not contain either of the two should be thrown into flame. He, however, adds that those ideas cannot be justified by reason except experience though such endeavour will be circular. Kant was inspired by Hume's skepticism, and in his analysis, he attempts to save scientific knowledge from Hume's attack. Kant (1983) accepts Hume's Fork and adds that some knowledge like those of the sciences are *synthetic-apriori*. In other words, they arise from experience but are justified *apriori*. This view was the first attempt to bring a synergy between reason and experience. However, he submits that the ultimate reality (*noumenon*) which the mind seeks after is unknowable (Sahakian, 1968:173). So, knowledge about intangible or spiritual entities is impossible.

Gettier (1963) brought the problem of previous epistemology to the fore when he argues that justification through perception or logic (reason) is insufficient to provide knowledge under certain circumstances.

Case I:

Jones and Smith applied for the same job. After the interview, Smith approached the president of the organisation to know who is going to get the job. To which the president responded "Jones is the man who will get the job". Smith is also aware that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket. So, he concluded that 'the man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket'. However, it was Smith who eventually got the job and when his pocket was searched, 10 coins was found there. This made his audience acknowledge that Smith knows who will get the job. But unknown to Smith himself, is the fact that he has 10 coins in his pocket at the time of announcing that "the man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket (1963:121).

From the above situation, Gettier shows the error involved in relying on the inference from perception about Jones having 10 coins in his pocket. Here, Smith observes that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket and that the president of the company who is the head of the recruiting panel testifies that Jones will get the job. Smith therefore infers that the man who will get the job has 10

coins in his pocket. The inference though true is not knowledge. The same outcome happened in his Case II counterexample.

In both Gettier's cases, we have situations where true claims are valid inferences from Smith's observations, yet, we cannot claim that Smith knows. The claim that Jones has 10 coins in his pocket is a product of experience and the valid deductions are products of reason. Smith is justified having depended on both reason and experience if the Western traditional notion of knowledge is anything to go by. Yet, Gettier admits that the inferences are far from being called knowledge. The problem here therefore is how cases of justified true belief (JTB) are not cases of knowledge as propounded by the Western traditional epistemologists. The question one can ask here is: are Gettier's cases, actual cases of justified true belief? In other words, is Gettier's epistemological agent (Smith) actually justified in his submissions?

Yoruba Metaphysics and Epistemology

Armed with a different metaphysical belief about human personality, I interpret Yoruba epistemological position as denying that Smith is justified in his submission because Yoruba epistemology takes into consideration the virtue or moral disposition of an agent in determining whether he/she is justified or not. Knowledge in this regard is justified by the evidence and conscience of the agent through his/her virtue or moral disposition. Yoruba ontology holds the belief that human beings have both the objective and the subjective parts, and as such, both are important in epistemic theorizing. Gettier's counterexamples might not be a problem as such, if epistemic agents involved are not said to be justified. What is inferable in Gettier's counterexamples is that Smith pretends he knows the truth of his inference and thereby hides his doubts. As such, his audience gave him undeserved accolades or rewards of knowledge. The question here is should the judgment of one's conscience or the intention of epistemic agents be ignored in epistemic justification? This shall be attended to after an exposition of Yoruba ontological principle.

The Yoruba people are from the Western part of Nigeria, which is the most populous country in Africa. Nigeria comprises about three major ethnic nationalities (Yoruba, Igbo and Hausa) with sub-ethnic groups numbering about two hundred and fifty. Outside Nigeria, the Yoruba people are found in Brazil, Cuba, America and some West African countries like Republic of Benin and Togo (Oduwobi & Iwuagwu, 1997:14-18). A recent study estimates the population of the Yoruba people to be over 25 million (Jemiriye, 2015).

The Yoruba people ontologically affirm that the human person is a combination of both *ara* (body) and *èmí* (mind). Though, *ara* and *emi* are

distinguishable, they are nevertheless inseparable. Given this binary, it is no surprise that every part of the physical body has a corresponding immaterial part usually thought to be in the body. The outer head has a corresponding inner-head (*ori-inú*), the outer eyes have corresponding inner-eyes (*ojú inú*), the heart has *okàn* (heart), and there are physical legs and spiritual legs (*esè*). Yoruba Ontology therefore, propagates symbiotic duality. In this duality, both the inner and outer properties of human agents have epistemological significance in terms of apprehending reality, and as such, both have justificatory roles.

Bewaji (2007) reiterates this when he writes that, knowledge has two constituent parts; namely, the objective and the subjective. The objective part is the phenomenon and the subjective part has to do with the human agent who is the subject of knowledge. He goes further to say that we cannot have a careful account of knowledge unless we accept the multi-dimensional nature of knowledge (Bewaji, 2007:31). Those who focus on the phenomenon are called externalists while those who focus on the subject are the internalists.

Some African epistemologists such as Sodipo and Hallen (1986) have analyzed the African knowledge system from the externalist perspective. They argued that visual perception is a necessary condition for knowledge, therefore factual experience can serve as a justifier in African epistemology. Senghor, an internalist, summarizes the African knowledge system with his popular dictum: “emotion is African and reason is Hellenic” (Senghor, 1964:72).

In spite of the above opposing views, this work re-interprets past literatures on African epistemology and argues that African epistemological system of knowledge has a blend of both externalism and internalism. In African traditional society, because oral medium is the source of information, it is expected that “credible information (p) should proceed from a reliable source (s)” (Udefi, 2014 emphasis mine). In other words, a speaker of a true proposition has the duty to convey it truthfully. Truthfulness in this regard requires certain intellectual virtues that will show one is unbiased or not being economical with the truth. This projects an integrative system of epistemic justification as argued by Chiedozi Okoro. For him, all areas of knowledge are interwoven in such a way that it is impossible to separate epistemology from ethics, likewise metaphysics and logic (2011:06). For instance, logic is a technique of epistemic justification but the substance of justification is in ethics and metaphysics. The question, what can we know is connected with the question, what exists? To say I know that ‘there is a cat on the roof’ is to say I have discovered that ‘a cat exists in the world or a cat is before my perception’. This suggests a close affinity between metaphysics and

epistemology. Also, what is known epistemologically cannot be discussed outside how it is known. That is the essence of the concept of justification in the traditional standard of knowledge. Justification means the provision of evidence or reason for how one arrived at a claim. How one arrived at evidence cannot be discussed outside an agent's disposition or virtue at that particular time. One's personality in this wise has epistemic importance.

In Hallen and Sodipo's analysis of Yoruba notion of knowledge, Knowledge means "what you use your own eyes to see and which your *okàn* (heart) witness that it is *òótó*. Knowledge is something that is clear in one's eyes. This means what one has witnessed (observed) personally to be *òótó*" (1986:60). Certainty in Yoruba epistemology, therefore, requires both the objective (perception) and the subjective part because seeing clearly requires a state of mind or disposition that will ensure a good interpretation of reality. In Yoruba language, the word for knowledge is *imò* which is closely associated with *oye* which means understanding. A third concept is "*ogbón*" which stands for wisdom. All these epistemic concepts are closely related to another concept *igbagbo*, which means belief.

To the Yoruba, *imò* (knowledge) is stronger than *igbagbo* (belief). *Imo* means knowing with certainty because one has personal experience. *Igbagbo* is usually related to information without personal experience. *Igbagbo* is a combination of two words; *gbà* and *gbó*. *Gba* means agree or accept while *gbo* means hear. So, *ìgbàgbó* means "acceptance of what one was told or has heard". True belief from testimony in Yoruba epistemology cannot be held with certainty because it is second-hand information, whereas it is categorized as knowledge in Western epistemology. The strength of Yoruba epistemic system is that it is oblivious of the difference between justified true belief with self-effort and justified true belief emanating from another person's effort. Yoruba epistemology, therefore, recognizes the difference between a knower from a learner in its theory of justification, even when both the learner and knower possess justified true belief. The fact that one is in possession of a true proposition does not mean one is necessarily a knower.

African epistemology departs from its Western counterpart by combining internal and external factors of justification; thereby exposing the belief that all human senses are required for justification of knowledge, because reality is not purely empirical, neither is it purely mental (spiritual). The point here is that African metaphysics shapes its worldview in such a way that there is an affinity between what is internal (mental) and what is external (physical) to the human agent. Justification is therefore not purely about gathering evidence or reason that corresponds with reality but also about the conformity or coherence of such evidence or reason with the virtue

or disposition of the human agent. The quest for justification in African epistemology is to answer the question “are you sure this evidence or reason is a product of your effort(s)?” in addition to asking “is your claim true?”

Wande Abimbola (1976:393) also reiterates the importance of virtue when he writes: “In Yoruba philosophy, *iwa* (virtue/character/behaviour) has a significant impact.” *Ìwà* originally means “the fact of being, living or existing”. Little wonder, it features prominently in Yoruba metaphysics or the problem of human destiny. *Iwa* is also the background concept in Yoruba ethics and epistemology. According to Abimbola, human character or virtue (*iwa*) can help achieve a whole lot of things in life. It follows that *iwa* of an agent can be cited as the reason for believing or accepting a claim; it is essentially a justificatory factor. If one is known to be always right or saying the truth most of the time, the tendency is to accept such a person’s claim without personal investigation. The thinking behind this attitude is that such a person has always displayed necessary virtue in achieving knowledge and that is the reason for his/her success. If this character is still maintained, then, this current claim will also be true like the pasts’. Virtue is a causal factor to truth in this wise.

Socrates also linked knowledge with virtue by positing that if one acquires knowledge, it will show in one’s character but there is a point of difference which is exhibited in Abimbola’s work that virtue is the foundation of knowledge. In other words, virtue is not just a consequence of knowledge but a causal factor for knowledge. Abimbola’s assertion is slightly different from the Socratic belief that no one does wrong knowingly. By which he means if one has knowledge, one will be virtuous. In Yoruba philosophy, a virtuous mind is a knowing mind since virtues like open-mindedness, carefulness, calmness are prerequisites to understanding of reality and dissemination of knowledge, so, when any is deployed to observation and interpretation of reality in accordance with the situation, then, objective knowledge can be achieved. Yoruba epistemology recognizes speaking the truth and speaking it truthfully as indication of knowledge. It recognizes the synergy between the truth of P, the intention and virtue of epistemic agents (S) towards P. After all it is not debatable to say S says P, P is true but S does not mean P. An epistemic agent could infer P from a set of Proposition, the inference could be true but the agent is contemplating not-P as true.

The above situation is demonstrated in Western epistemology as represented in Gettier’s counterexamples where Smith has evidence or reason in support of a claim, yet, lacks the direct awareness of the inferred true beliefs but pretends to the public that he is aware. Such situation is controlled in Yoruba notion of Justification by making human conscience a

criterion of justification. Once your conscience convicts you of not doing the proper thing or casts doubts on your efforts, then you cannot claim to know. If you know P, then, you should believe P or accept it. In this situation, the truth of P will not be a matter of accident. Jennifer Lackey (2009) for instance, says accidental knowledge is due mainly to two factors (1) The inability of the subject; (2) what the subject does not intend. Whereas, knowledge is due to one's ability and intention. It is necessary to say here that in Yoruba ontology; it is the inability of an agent to deploy necessary virtue that always leads to failure. This is captured in the saying, "*ori-inu mi ma ba t'ode je*", meaning, my inner-head should not obstruct or destroy my outer-head.

A Comparative Analysis of Western and Yoruba Epistemologies

In Western epistemology, empiricists emphasize human perception as a way of knowing, while rationalists emphasize the mind. While perception involves senses of smell, taste, touch, sight and hearing, the mind involves that of will, reflection, doubt, imagination, memory and intuition. What is interesting in Western epistemology is the attempt to reduce either the mind to the body or vice versa. To empiricists, the mind is nothing but bodily processes while rationalists claim that all physical things are ideas in the mind. The rivalry among the two schools resulted in traditional Western epistemologists favouring either externalisation of justification or internalisation of justification. Immanuel Kant (1983) seems to be different with his attempt to marry both rationalism and empiricism in his theory of synthetic-apriori as a category of knowing. For Kant though, analytic propositions can be known *apriori* and synthetic propositions can be known *aposteriori*; he, however, submits that there are some synthetic propositions that are known *apriori* (Kant, 1977:28). Kant in this submission, therefore, introduced a third category of knowing. In spite of introducing a third category, Kant avows that every object of knowledge can be separated into *noumenon* and phenomenon. He goes further to argue that while the phenomenon can be apprehended, the *noumenon* is elusive. It follows from this that knowledge can only be about the external nature of things (appearance).

However, an African epistemology did not see the need for such reduction or separation, it projects a connection between the *noumenon* and the phenomenon. In African cosmology, the material and the immaterial worlds are interrelated such that there is no separation between the two worlds. The physical senses therefore can apprehend the physical things while the mind has the capacity to penetrate beyond the physical to apprehend the immaterial things, apart from its role of reflection. This is why Okoro says the

African world is not a world of pure abstraction or that of appearances but a world of harmony of the two (2017:322). The human person for example, is a combination of both *Ara* (body) and *Èmí* (mind). Though, *ara* (body) and *emi* (soul) are distinguishable, they are nevertheless inseparable. It is no surprise then that every part of the physical body has a corresponding immaterial part, usually thought metaphorically to be in the body. The outer head has a corresponding inner-head (*ori-inu*), the outer eyes have corresponding inner-eyes (*oju-inu*), the heart has *okan* there are physical and spiritual legs (*esè*). Yoruba ontology is therefore, a dual system. In this duality, both the inner and outer properties have epistemological significance in terms of apprehending reality.

If a Yoruba man asserts that “*e je k’a fi oju inu wo*” (let us look at it with our inner eyes), he is saying that in spite of what we have perceived, there is a need to use our power of insight, and go beyond the accumulated facts. Another saying of significant note is “*inú ríran ju ójú lo*” (literal meaning: the inner eyes see more than the outer eyes). This proverb emphasizes the potency of internalism of justification. It is an attestation to the power of intuition in going beyond what is perceived. The African ontology therefore provides the background for a pure epistemological discourse that is complimentary. It is within this tradition of epistemological duality that one can understand the Yoruba idea of two levels of justification in African epistemology: the outer level represented by perception and the inner level, represented by conscience or the inner mental properties. Maduabuchi Dukor reiterates that the “faculty responsible for reason can be divided into two ... a faculty of intuition by which one sees truths or abstract things (essences or universals, etc.) and a faculty of reasoning that is passing from premises to a conclusion” (2010:129).

Zagzebski (1996), while supporting the role of virtue in epistemology, thinks epistemology should aim to promote “practical usefulness”. It ought to help us recognize when we do or do not know something or help us to overcome anxieties due to defective presuppositions about knowledge. McDowell (1994) concludes that epistemology should help us to appreciate forms of “epistemic injustice” or it should help to promote cultural reformation and intellectual flourishing (Roberts and Wood 2007). It will amount to injustice for one to asserts P to an audience but be doubting P or contemplating not-P in one’s conscience, yet, be receiving accolades for the truth of P.

The concept of *èrí-okàn* (conscience, mind-witness) in Yoruba epistemology is instructive here. One can ask some questions relating to the intention or the purpose Gettier’s epistemic agent is trying to achieve when

he infers the belief that “the man who will get the job has 10 coins in his pocket” from the premises that “Jones has 10 coins in his pocket and Jones is the man who will get the job”. Is the failure to mention Jones’ name in the conclusion an attempt to play safe? Is he playing smart? Or is his inference purely a matter of logic? These questions are important to determine if he actually obeyed what the facts or premises demanded or he has ulterior motive. If he has ulterior motive his *èrí-okàn* (conscience) will convict him and therefore render any outcome of his inference null and void. And if it is purely a product of logic, his *èrí-okàn* will convict him immediately it was discovered that Smith rather than Jones got the job because of the falsity of the president’s statement. Possible interrogation of the *èrí-okàn* will be, “do you know the president of the company before now?” “Why did you not take a second person opinion check on the president’s statement?” “Do you know whether the president has the final say about the outcome of this job interview?” The failure in Gettier’s cases will be exposed by the above questions. This work believes Smith’s failure to meet sufficient condition of knowledge will be meaningful if it is explained as a consequence of certain vice or lack of proper virtue in the course of investigation rather than explanation in terms of chance or luck as some analysts have done in Western epistemology.

Conclusion

From the postulations of different African scholars, perceptual knowledge and intuition are ranked as important in Yoruba epistemology but they have supported either externalism or internalism of justification. They argue that authentic knowledge is based on *ìrírí* (first-hand experience). Notwithstanding this, it is clear from Wande Abimbola, Sodipo and Hallen’s works that *èrí-okàn* (conscience), through virtue, is the second-order level of justification while perception is the first. This is why this work has argued that there are two aspects of justification in Yoruba epistemology: public and private. Though conscience is a function of the mind, it can be assessed either through behaviourist’s or inductive approach. When a claim is verbal, the behaviourist approach will apply but when it is written, then, inductive evidence of past claims will suffice. It is possible to detect virtue of an agent from the firmness or otherwise of the background information or evidence.

It would not be incorrect following the above analysis, to label Western system of knowledge as epistemological monism in terms of justification while that of the Yoruba as epistemological dualism. The reason for this difference is a product of the different ontological principles in two cultures. Factors like conscience as a functional aspect of the human mind is absent in

most western epistemologist theories. The best mention of conscience is in the area of ethics but for the Yoruba philosophy, ethics cannot be severed from epistemology because to justify also involves epistemic justice and justice is an ethical concept. Consequently, the truth of P is justified when there is supportive evidence or reason and when one's conscience is clear that one's virtue is responsible for the outcome of the success. Justification, therefore, requires that epistemic injustice is eliminated in any knowledge system.

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