

UNDERSTANDING IN PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY

This paper is concerned with how we can understand other philosophies. My method is first to offer an analysis of an aspect of African thought. Then I shall use that analysis as a vehicle for discussing some theoretical and methodological problems in the study of other thought systems, especially problems raised by Peter Winch.

I

A puzzling feature of African thought is that general propositions seem seldom to be evaluated in the light of contrary empirical evidence. If events do not proceed according to expectations stemming from general beliefs, Africans do not on this basis question the validity of those beliefs. Instead, they produce "secondary elaborations" (Horton 1967: 167-69): rationalizations accounting for the divergence between events and expectations in particular circumstances while leaving the general belief or assumption which produced the expectation intact.

Horton (1967) treats this phenomenon as a general characteristic of African traditional thought. To list a few examples, Dinka do not ponder the efficacy of sacrifice in general because particular sacrifices are not followed by the desired events. One explanation for failure is that Divinity refused to respond to that particular sacrifice. Another is that the specific Power responsible for the difficulty which the sacrifice aimed to remove was wrongly identified, rendering the sacrifice ineffective because misdirected (Lienhardt 1961: 291). This characteristic of African thought is copiously documented for the Azande. That a man admits he may be a witch although he does not act with malicious intent nor in concert with other witches does not shake his belief that witches do act in these ways. It only leads him to conclude that he is not an ordinary witch (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 119-20). If a witchdoctor fails in his cure the explanation may be that this particular witchdoctor is a fraud, but never that witchdoctors in general have no power (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 193). Failure of oracles may be attributed to causes like corruption of the poison by witchcraft or mere hunger of the termites rather than attendance to the questions put to them; the possibility that oracles in general are futile is never raised (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 337-41).

Our question, then, is: Why do Africans refrain from questioning their general beliefs in the light of contrary evidence? Speaking specifically of the Azande, Evans-Pritchard argues that they do not do so because their thought is a closed system which accounts for its own failures.

Azande see as well as we that the failure of their oracle to prophesy truly calls for explanation, but so entangled are they in mystical notions that they must make use of them to account for the failure. The contradiction between experience and one mystical notion is explained by reference to another mystical notion (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 339).

Again,

The failure of any rite is accounted for in advance by a variety of mystical notions - e.g. witchcraft, sorcery, and taboo. Hence the perception of error in one mystical notion in a particular situation merely proves the correctness of another and equally mystical notion (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 476).

In his book on the Azande Evans-Pritchard takes the position that Zande notions about witchcraft, magic and oracles are "mystical", that they are not in accord with objective reality as this is apprehended by the observations and logic of scientific thought (1937: 12, 476-78, 494). Winch criticizes this approach, maintaining that concepts of reality are themselves given in language and culture, and therefore that no culture-free concept of objective reality can exist. We thus have the options of viewing another system of thought in terms of our concepts of reality or in terms of its own concepts of reality. Winch insists on the latter course, and for that reason finds Evans-Pritchard's later analysis of Nuer religion (1956) preferable to his treatment of Zande thought (Winch 1964: 307-15).

Much of the next section will be devoted to a critique of Winch's ideas. Here, however, I wish to point out what strikes me as an advantage in the approach he advocates. If we do evaluate another philosophy, it is likely that we will find a great deal of error in the alien philosophy. We may then be led to wonder how that philosophy can persist when much of it is wrong, and our analysis may be an attempt to answer this question.¹ Consider Robin Horton's answer to the question raised in this paper. He argues that traditional African thought systems admit no alternatives to their basic theories and postulates. The African either believes that the world is ordered as his received philosophy says it is, or he must believe that the world is not ordered at all. Therefore, the African does not question his basic assumptions in the light of contrary evidence because of his anxiety that, were those assumptions found false, he would be driven to the psychologically unsettling conclusion that the world is chaotic (Horton 1967: 167-69).

One may read Horton's analysis as taking it for granted that to assess general beliefs according to empirical experience is a natural or proper epistemological procedure for all men, and that Africans would employ it if only their lack of alternative theories did not prevent them from doing so with psychological security. Adopting Winch's prescription of viewing a philosophy in its own terms, one's attention would be directed to precisely those things which Horton appears to take for granted. Instead of wondering how the failure to assess general beliefs in the light of contrary evidence can persist in African thought, one would ask what it is about African ontology and epistemology which renders it unnecessary or irrational within that system of thought to evaluate beliefs in this way. The analysis I offer attempts to answer this question.

I think we will be in the best position to understand why Africans do not evaluate their general beliefs in the light of empirical evidence if we first consider why we of the West often do evaluate our beliefs in this way. My point can be made most clearly on the basis of that part of Western thought in which this mode of evaluation is most rigorously developed, so this brief discussion of the West will be limited to natural science. In science, the procedure of evaluating beliefs (or assumptions or theories) according to empirical evidence is the experimental method. This method rests, I think, on two basic postulates of Western metaphysics - postulates seen perhaps most clearly in Comptean Positive philosophy. The first is that empirical events are subject to unseen principles or laws; the second is that these principles or laws operate with mechanical regularity. In our epistemology, the first postulate leads us to think that empirical events are relevant to our knowledge of the unseen principles or laws.

The second postulate assures us that empirical events are a reliable means of evaluating our assumptions or theories about those principles or laws. The postulate that the laws of nature operate with mechanical regularity is essential to the experimental method. It assures us that variables can be controlled in an experiment: that some laws will not operate, or at least will not operate in an unpredictable fashion, in the experiment. And this assurance in turn is necessary if we are to think that the result of an experiment is due to the particular law

whose operation that experiment was designed to reveal. Unless these criteria are met, it is irrational to think that the experimental method could be utilized to evaluate our theories about any law of nature.

With certain modifications, our first Western postulate - that empirical events are subject to unseen principles or laws - would appear to be valid also for African metaphysics. The word "law" is especially inappropriate for African thought. Let us adopt Father Tempels' wording and rephrase the postulate to read "empirical events are subject to unseen forces or powers". Among these forces or powers are what have been termed Spirit and refractions of Spirit for the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard 1956), Divinity and divinities for the Dinka (Lienhardt 1961), ghosts and witchcraft for the Anuak (Lienhardt 1962), witchcraft, oracles, and magic for the Azande (Evans-Pritchard 1937), the Supreme Being, and ancestors, men, and literally all being for the Baluba (Tempels 1945). Certainly there are many differences between these concepts, but they are not important for the very general point I wish to make: that all of these things, in the African view, are forces which may influence events in the world.

But comparing African thought with our second Western postulate we find a sharp difference. Africans do not think that these forces act with mechanical regularity. Many of them are thought to have volition, as is seen in the Dinka idea that Divinity may or may not respond to a particular sacrifice (Lienhardt 1961: 291). In Baluba philosophy the forces are intimately interconnected so that the operation of one force depends on a great many others. On a particular occasion a given force may remain inactive or may act in any of a number of ways and with any of a number of results, depending on the disposition of a multitude of variables (other forces) on that occasion (Tempels 1945: 40-1, 57, 87-89).

Zande oracles (Evans-Pritchard 1937) reveal clearly the idea of the irregular action of forces, and show how Africans use this concept in a positive way. The Azande administer poison to a fowl, asking the poison to kill the fowl if a certain statement (e.g. a prediction of the future or the cause of an illness or death) is true. Then they ask the oracle to confirm its answer by sparing a second fowl if the first one died, or by killing the second if the first survived. Essentially this is an experiment, run twice, with the aim of confirming a "hypothesis" - that hypothesis being the prediction or other statement put to the oracle. The interesting thing is that the Azande accept the hypothesis as proven or disproven only if the experiment has different results each time it is run - if one fowl dies and the other survives. This procedure is completely unintelligible in Western scientific thought, where an experiment is valid for confirming or disproving a hypothesis only if the result is the same each time the experiment is run.

The Azande think that the poison lacks potency in itself, that the potency emerges only when a question is put to the oracle (Evans-Pritchard 1937: 315). It thus appears that the Azande conceive of the poison oracle much as the Baluba conceive of medicinal plants. Their curing power does not operate automatically; it may or may not act depending on the state of a number of forces external to the plants themselves (Tempels 1945: 62-3). For the Zande poison oracle, the main external force which stimulates the poison to kill or to spare is the truth or falsity of the "hypothesis" put to it. Here is a case where Africans utilize their conception of the irregularity of the forces of nature to regulate their lives. They construct an experimental situation where a force is asked to act irregularly (killing one fowl, sparing another) and they endow the particular form of irregularity (which fowl was killed, and which spared?) with meaning. And, of course, given their assumption that the forces of nature do act irregularly and under the influence of many other forces, if an apparently valid oracular prediction fails to materialize, it is logical to suppose that some other force, such as witchcraft, influenced the oracle.

It may appear that the thought I have attributed to Africans is not

fundamentally different from Western science. I have suggested that, for Africans, the forces of nature are not thought to act regularly because the action of any force is influenced by many other forces. But this could be taken to mean simply that Africans consider a great many variables to impinge upon events, and that what I have called their conception of the irregular action of the forces of nature is nothing more than their recognition that they do not fully understand all the variables affecting any particular event. From this point of view one might attribute to them the ideas that the forces of nature do act with mechanical regularity and that they could predict the events resulting from their operation if only they could control all the variables. In this view the Africans emerge as possessing a scientific mentality but without enough knowledge to take it very far.

The problem with this position is that, given our idea that the laws of nature operate with mechanical regularity, when we talk about "controlling variables" we mean the ability to predict if and how variables will act in particular circumstances. Such prediction is, I think, impossible in African thought. The variables we are discussing are the forces of nature, and most of them (the Supreme Being, nature sprites, witches, ghosts, etc.) have volition. Therefore, the African has no way of predicting if they will act in a particular situation. Neither are they conceived with the functional specificity that characterizes variables in the Western view. There are many ways, for example, in which a witch or malevolent ghost can do mischief. Therefore, even if the African conception of variables (forces) would allow them to predict that certain variables will act in a particular situation, that conception renders it impossible to predict how they will act. Therefore, I maintain that the postulate that the forces of nature do not operate with mechanical regularity is validly attributable to African thought.² Their ontological character (especially volition and functional diffuseness) is incompatible with any idea of predictable, mechanical regularity of action.

My answer to the question of why Africans do not question their general beliefs on the basis of contrary evidence should now be clear. General beliefs or assumptions can be evaluated in terms of empirical experience only if one is certain that the experience is relevant to the assumption, that no other factors contributed to the course of the experience beyond those embodied in the belief or assumption. The variables affecting the experience must be controlled. But the African postulate that the forces of nature do not operate in a mechanically regular way means that in their view the variables affecting experience cannot be controlled. They cannot rationally attribute a given event to a given force because they cannot be certain if that force in fact operated on that occasion. Nor can they be certain if (and if so, how) the outcome was affected by the action of other forces. Therefore, I suggest that Africans do not question their general beliefs in the light of contrary evidence because, within their system of thought, this is not rational. From their metaphysical point of view such evaluation cannot be a reliable epistemological procedure.

II

Having offered the preceding analysis of an aspect of African thought, I should now like to view that analysis as data against which we may consider some problems in the study of other philosophies.

Peter Winch would have us understand another culture or historical period in its own terms. As I understand his reasoning in its relevance to anthropology, a people's thought and behaviour are intelligible only in terms of the concepts of reality held by that people. These concepts of reality are given in language and in the "form of life" in general. Since languages and "forms of life" vary, concepts of reality and the resulting modes of apprehending meaning in ideas and behaviour also vary. Further, since there can be no concepts apart from a language and a "form of life", there is no common denominator in terms of which different concepts of reality and modes of intelligibility can be understood.

Each "form of life", with its language, philosophy, and system of social relations is a self-contained entity which can be understood only in its own terms (Winch 1958, see especially pp. 11-15, 22-23, 40-44, 121-133).

I must confess uncertainty as to exactly how far Winch wishes to press the point that a culture must be understood in its own terms. The train of logic summarized above and many of his remarks (e.g. 1958: 129-32) imply that we must strive to approach, as closely as possible, the goal of understanding as the native understands. But MacIntyre (1967) interprets Winch as arguing that understanding from within is just a starting point for analysis, and Winch's statement (1964: 319) that "the sort of understanding we seek requires that we see the Zande category in relation to our own already understood categories" lends credence to this point. Whichever Winch espouses, he has not to my knowledge given close consideration to the problems involved in understanding another culture in its own terms. These are the problems which I propose to discuss here.

My analysis of why Africans do not question their general beliefs on the basis of contrary evidence may appear to qualify as an example of understanding another culture in its own terms. There was no evaluation of the validity of African concepts from a Western point of view. Nor was African thought referred to as a "closed system" or as "lacking alternatives", and both of these characterizations imply an external perspective. Instead, the analysis considered the problem in terms of concepts of reality attributed to the Africans, and concluded that within these concepts such a mode of evaluating beliefs would not be rational. Yet I do not claim that this analysis provides understanding of African thought in its own terms; still less do I claim that in thinking through the conclusions of this analysis we are thinking like Africans think. I doubt that either of these claims is true, for a number of reasons.

First, since concepts of reality and intelligibility are imbedded in language and a "form of life", understanding a philosophy in its own terms presupposes intimate knowledge of the language and culture. Hence the analysis offered above is disqualified at the outset, for I know no African language, have never studied first-hand an African society, am in no sense an Africanist and have never even been to Africa. Doubtless an anthropologist with all these qualifications could devise an analysis of our problem superior to the one I have offered. But one wonders if even his analysis would represent understanding of African philosophy in its own terms. Would not the fact that he of necessity learned that philosophy in terms of his own culture's philosophy while the natives learned it from infancy mean that he must understand it differently than they do? And are there any criteria, beyond intuition, by which he could know that he understands it as the natives do? Even if he could gain such understanding, and could know he has it, surely it is incommunicable to anyone who lacks the language and first-hand contact, since when he tries to explain it in another language and according to different concepts of reality it is clearly not being treated in its own terms.

Secondly, if we are to understand another philosophy entirely in its own terms, we should be limited to thinking only about those problems which arise within that philosophy. This would bar us from asking, among many others, the question raised in this paper. If it does not occur to the African to question his general beliefs on the basis of contrary evidence, it is difficult to imagine him wrestling with the problem of why he does not. Clearly the question emerges when African thought is viewed from the perspective of Western thought. We of the West often do question our general beliefs in this manner, and it is precisely the difference we perceive between ourselves and Africans which leads us to ask this question and to be interested in its answer.³ Moreover, our analysis concerns not all of African thought but a class of it: the class manifested in cases where general beliefs are not questioned on the basis of contrary evidence. But I have just argued that the observation that general beliefs are not questioned in this way stems from Western thought rather than African thought.

Were we viewing African thought in its own terms, we would not be justified in thinking that those cases form a class at all. There would probably be no common characteristic which relates them and sets them off from other aspects of thought; certainly not the characteristic we have recognized. Thus even before it gets started, at the point of framing the problem, the analysis offered here cannot be a study of African thought in its own terms.

Furthermore, a comparative perspective has characterized my entire analysis. I found it easiest to think about why Africans do not evaluate their assumptions on the basis of empirical evidence by thinking first about why Western scientists do. My analysis proceeded from a pair of postulates which I think are attributable to African philosophy, but these postulates were introduced and discussed in contrast with their opposite numbers from the West. The same method of contrasts was followed in the discussion of how experiments could be run and variables controlled in terms of the Western and African postulates. The very concepts "experiment" and "variable", crucial to my analysis, were of course derived from Western rather than African thought. Considering all this, the analysis I have offered must be very remote from understanding African philosophy in its own terms.

The most important reason I have for why my analysis does not reveal African philosophy in its own terms is that the epistemological structure of that analysis itself is Western rather than African. My aim was to explain why Africans do not evaluate their general beliefs according to contrary evidence, and my method of explanation was to posit two postulates of African philosophy and, by reasoning from those postulates, to argue that it is not rational within African philosophy to evaluate general beliefs in this way. This method itself stems from Western philosophy. It is based on the first Western postulate I offered: that empirical events are subject to unseen principles or laws. In this case the "empirical events" are observations that Africans do not evaluate their general beliefs according to contrary evidence. The "unseen principles or laws" are the two postulates I posited for African philosophy. In Western thought the epistemological correlate to the postulate that empirical events are subject to unseen principles or laws is that empirical events are intelligible in terms of those principles or laws. By explaining African thought in terms of my two postulates of African philosophy, my analysis has followed this directive of Western epistemology; it is Western rather than African in structure.⁴

Moreover, the notion of intelligibility which underlies my analysis is Western and not African. When I conceived of analyzing our problem in terms of the two postulates I have posited for African philosophy, I evaluated those postulates by asking "Do they work?" In carrying out this evaluation I juxtaposed the postulates against various particular cases where Africans do not question their general beliefs in terms of contrary evidence, and determined whether each of those cases could be understood in terms of the postulates. In such an evaluation, each case which can be so understood constitutes "proof" or supporting evidence for the postulates, while cases which could not be understood in terms of the postulates would disprove them and therefore would necessitate revision or dismissal of the postulates. Furthermore, I think a critic would evaluate my analysis and its postulates of African philosophy in precisely the same way. Although not attaining the rigor found in natural science, this mode of evaluation is essentially the experimental method. It stems from the second Western postulate mentioned earlier: that unseen principles or laws act with mechanical regularity. In my analysis the postulates of African philosophy represent "unseen principles or laws" of African thought. It is rational for us to insist that they render every relevant case intelligible only if we first assume that those principles or laws operate with mechanical regularity. Therefore, the way in which both I and a critic judge whether or not my analysis makes the African thought in question intelligible is a Western way. And especially insofar as this way incorporates experimental thinking, it

is not an African way. For it will be recalled that the very problem we set out to explain is why Africans do not evaluate general beliefs on the basis of contrary evidence, i.e., why do Africans not think experimentally? Since both I and a critic understand my analysis and the African thought it treats according to notions of intelligibility quite alien to African thought, it clearly cannot be said that this analysis provides understanding of African thought in its own terms. And I think that this point holds with equal force for any analysis we make of another philosophy.

To sum up, when we seek to understand another system of thought, not one but two philosophies are in play. There is of course native philosophy, since it is the natives who do the thinking we wish to understand. But our own philosophy is intrinsically involved as well, since it is we who do the understanding. Understanding itself varies among cultures. Northrop has devoted a great deal of hard thought to this point (1946, 1960, 1964), and a few differences between Western and African epistemologies (such as the role of experimental thinking in understanding) have been discussed in this paper. (See also Tempels 1945 for a discussion of African epistemology.) When we understand another philosophy, then, we understand it according to what properly constitutes understanding for us. Very likely this would not qualify as understanding from the native point of view, nor would the native's understanding of his own philosophy count as proper understanding for us.⁵ Therefore, I think it is extremely unlikely - if not impossible - that we could ever understand another philosophy in its own terms. This would require operating entirely within the metaphysical and epistemological concepts and procedures of that philosophy, while I maintain that another philosophy, like everything else in the universe, can be intelligible to us only in terms of our own metaphysics and epistemology.

[(Curiously, my reasoning here is very close to that of Winch, and yet we end up at opposite poles. I agree with his point that a people's ideas and behavior are intelligible only in terms of their concepts of reality. But I think that the logic requires another step: since we are people too, another culture's concepts of reality are intelligible to us only in terms of our own concepts of reality.)]

From this point of view, any analysis we make must have an "as if" quality about it. I do not mean to suggest in this paper, for example, that Africans subscribe either consciously, unconsciously, implicitly or in any other way to the postulates that empirical events are subject to unseen forces, and that these forces do not act with mechanical regularity. I do suggest, however, that certain puzzling aspects of African thought become intelligible to us if we regard the Africans as if they subscribed to these postulates. This is similar to the procedures of natural science. Horton has pointed out that scientific theories are often constructed on the model of familiar phenomena, as for example the planetary theory of the atom (Horton 1964:98, 1967:67-8). Now the thoughtful scientist would not say that atoms really are constructed like the solar system, but only that a number of things about atoms become intelligible to us when we view them as if they were (see Northrop 1946: 194).

This leads to my final point. Winch argues that understanding in social science is different from understanding in natural science, and that therefore social scientists should not attempt to operate like natural scientists (1958:1-2, 127-28, 132-33). His main points seem to be that intelligibility in natural science depends on theory, that natural phenomena can meaningfully be said to be related only in terms of the theory which posits that relationship. One cannot understand the relationship without first understanding the theory. In contrast, social phenomena are intelligible only in terms of the language and culture in which they exist. Their relationships must be understood from within. Therefore one cannot understand social theories or laws without a prior understanding of the social situations to which they apply (Winch 1958: 133-36).

The burden of this paper has been that we cannot understand social situations (other than those in which we participate as thoughtful natives) from within. In my view, we understand them very much as Winch describes understanding in natural science. Winch argues that in natural science understanding of a theory precedes understanding of the phenomena explained by that theory, while social phenomena must be understood in themselves before we can understand theories purporting to explain them. But consider once again the analysis of African thought offered in this paper. We began with a characteristic of African thought which was unintelligible to us. We explained it in terms of a theory: two postulates and certain deductions from them. Contra Winch, I do not think that one need understand the elements of African thought this theory purports to explain before one can understand the theory. (Indeed, I do not think he can understand those elements of thought apart from the theory, or some other theory). To be sure, I devised the theory while puzzling over those aspects of African thought, just as a natural scientist builds theory not in a vacuum but with reference to problems. But I see no reason why someone else of the West could not grasp the postulates I advanced for African thought and my reasoning from them, even if he had never heard of Dinka sacrifice or Zande oracles or the rest of it.

Another facet of Winch's point is that in natural science connections between phenomena are intelligible only in terms of theory, while connections between social phenomena are given in the social situation in which those phenomena exist. But our analysis advanced a connection between the African practice of not questioning general beliefs on the basis of contrary evidence and Zande thought with reference to the normal and proper operation of oracles (see pp. 5-6 above). Again contra Winch, I submit that this connection is not "given" in the social situation. Rather, as Winch says with reference to intelligibility in natural science, "It is only in terms of the theory that one can speak of the events being thus 'connected' ...; the only way to grasp the connection is to learn the theory" (1958: 134, Winch's emphasis).

Finally, I have argued that we do not understand other cultures in their own terms, but according to what for us constitutes proper understanding. This mode of understanding itself is a theory - a theory of knowledge or an epistemology. I do not think our analyses of social phenomena are likely to be intelligible to anyone who does not have a prior familiarity with that epistemology. Within our epistemology, which Northrop (1964) has termed "logical realism", puzzling observable phenomena are made intelligible by viewing them as if they conform to invariable principles or laws which we devise and label "theories". We then judge a theory experimentally: by determining whether other observable phenomena which fall within the domain of the theory also behave as if they conform to the principles or laws it postulates. Although there are clearly differences in rigor of experimentation, I submit that this means of understanding characterizes the social sciences as much as the natural sciences.

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References

1. MacIntyre (1962:61-65) explicitly advocates this procedure.
2. It is probably quite awkward to attribute to African philosophy the negative postulate that the forces of nature do not act with mechanical regularity. The more elegant way would be to say that the postulate that the forces of nature act with mechanical

regularity cannot be attributed to African philosophy. However I beg leave to continue with the former formulation, as this seems to give me something more tangible to work with as I construct my analysis and (in Section II) as I analyse that analysis.

3. It may be protested that I have phrased the question ethnocentrically, and that it could properly be asked within the context of African philosophy in the neutral form "What is the relation between general propositions and particular events?" I agree that the question is better stated in this form, as the analysis above demonstrates. But I maintain the point that we are led to ask even this question because the relation seems different for Africans than it does for us. When a Zande tells us that his foot is cut because he struck it on a rock we do not spin theories of Zande causation. It is only when he begins to speculate over what witchcraft caused his foot to strike the rock that we become interested. I submit that no matter how carefully and neutrally we frame our questions and pursue our investigations, we always conceive of those questions and investigations from the perspective of our own thought. It is difficult to imagine how we could do otherwise.
4. One might argue that since my first African postulate (that empirical events are subject to unseen powers or forces) is similar to the first Western postulate, the method of explanation adopted in my analysis may not be totally alien to African thought. On the basis of what has been said thus far I agree with this, although quite striking divergences will appear in a moment. At any rate, I would maintain that the method of analysis derives from Western rather than African philosophy, and that any similarity to a possible African method of analysis is due to coincidental resemblances between the two philosophies, not to the possibility that I have been able to analyze African thought in its own terms.
5. This is not to say that we cannot understand what for the native constitutes proper understanding. We can and should study native epistemology. But our understanding of native epistemology will not be the same as the native's understanding of it. To be intelligible to us it must be cast in the concepts of Western epistemology, not native epistemology.

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