Knowledge, Belief, and Witchcraft

Analytic Experiments in African Philosophy

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With a New Foreword by W.V.O. Quine
and a New Afterword by Barry Hallen

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2. An African Epistemology: The Knowledge-Belief Distinction and Yoruba Discourse

1. Introduction

In this chapter we propose to attempt at least three things. The first is to demonstrate the dangers of assuming that such philosophically significant terms as 'know' and 'believe' in the English language have precise meaning equivalents in other, particularly African, languages. This may be another variant of Quine's myth of universal propositions but in fact, as recounted in the Introduction, we noticed that the supposed Yoruba equivalents of these terms were occurring in contexts foreign to their English-language counterparts even before we came to develop an interest in Quine.

A second is to engage in the concrete experiment referred to in the last chapter in the cross-cultural translation of select abstract meanings in an effort to determine what practical consequences, if any, follow from the indeterminacy thesis for such exercises. The third is to demonstrate and promote our own analytic approach to African philosophy by selecting for this experiment concepts that are philosophically significant in their own right – the English-language 'know' and 'believe' and their supposed equivalents in the Yoruba language. (When we say 'supposed equivalents' we are referring to those stipulated by the two existent Yoruba-English dictionaries (Abraham 1958; Oxford 1950). In the succeeding text, whenever we make reference to a translation equivalence drawn from them, following Quine we shall refer to it as from the *etm* (established translation manual).)

In what follows, making reference to several standard Western philosophical works and a bit of common-sense, we endeavour to identify to what it is that words like 'know' and 'believe' are meant to refer. We then proceed to identify their varieties, if any, their objects (what kinds of things one may 'know'), the criteria that must be satisfied before one can have a particular kind of knowledge or belief, and that are invoked when that knowledge or belief is challenged or disputed. Making use of the explanations and analyses of the *oníṣègùn*, we then endeavour to do the same for their

supposed Yoruba equivalents, *'mọ̀'* and *'gbàgbọ́'*. After comparing meanings between the two language systems with reference to these four terms we shall reintroduce Quine and, in the end, disagree with him over the degree to which indeterminacy may be a problem. We shall also argue that our analyses suggest that propositional attitudes are *not* universal.

2. Quine on the Indeterminacy of Universal Propositional Attitudes

> Now of all examples of propositional attitudes, the first and foremost is *belief*.
> (Quine 1955: 186)

In English-language philosophy verbs like 'believe', 'know', 'doubt', 'hope' and 'want' are described as *psychological attitudes*, words meant to express a person's attitude towards a subordinate proposition. It is this latter relationship – of attitude towards statement – that has led to these same terms also being described as *propositional attitudes*. In other words, they are statements that are of the standard form, 'I believe that X' or 'I wish that X', where X is itself a proposition like, for example, 'he would register for the course'.

Psychologists, philosophers and anthropologists often presume that these propositional or psychological attitudes are so fundamentally human that they are transcultural. 'Belief, in fact, is one of the most commonplace and familiar things in the world.' (Price 1967: 24) In the English language the word may be 'believe', while in French it is *'croire'* and in Yoruba it is *'gbàgbọ́'*. But the underlying meaning, the state-of-mind each seeks to express, is the same, and further meaning equivalents can presumably be found in other language cultures.

One of the most powerful arguments against the universality of propositional attitudes arises from Quine's indeterminacy thesis of radical translation. In section ten of this chapter we shall make a more careful evaluation of the evidence for indeterminacy and also of the criteria Quine proposes for the composition of inter-linguistic translations. The primary aim of the present section is to summarize briefly his position with respect to propositional attitudes and then examine some of its consequences for cross-cultural comparisons.

With reference to indeterminacy generally, we have seen that the principal conclusions Quine wants to establish are: that it is impossible to prove there are culturally universal propositions (meanings); that verbal and non-verbal meanings, relative to any language, are learned and defined behaviourally; that the evidential gap between statements of empirical observation and statements of theoretical interpretation is more distinct and

attitudes as they themselves would in an analogous situation. He repeatedly refers to the drama, to the idea of 'casting our real selves thus in unreal roles'. (1960: 219) But he does so with approval, for he can see no alternative. Nevertheless, indeterminacy always provides that another translator may improvise an alternative natural, and therefore again cautions us against *really* claiming to know that propositional attitudes are universal.

The fourth criterion requires that we do the equivalent with the unnatural. If it would be unnatural for the translator (as a member of his language culture) to express a certain propositional attitude in a certain situation, it is safer if he presumes the same holds for the aliens.

> The linguistic ideal in any event would be a humdrum sort of discourse on the native's[4] part and anything startling or surprising should be *prima facie* evidence of error.
> ('First General Discussion Session' Davidson, et al., 1974: 495)

Quine is aware that alien propositional attitudes may be different from our own. But he feels that an embarrassing number of translations that have given precedence to this possibility have resulted in representations of alien attitudes that are both silly and offensive. Too much emphasis has been placed upon the bizarre and too little on the commonplace.

If there can never be sufficient evidence to support objectively true translations of alien psychological attitudes, would it not be safer to dispense with them as terms of reference altogether – at least for translation? Quine's responses to this would likely be the following. Since indeterminacy affects translation generally, agreeing to dispense with psychological attitudes would set a dangerous precedent for dispensing with the translating of all behaviour that goes beyond the simplest material object level.

Propositional attitudes, even as indeterminate, have a genuine utility as mediums of translation. Even the pretence of 'entering into' the alien's mood makes the interpretation of his behaviour seem that much more real and natural to us. Therefore let translators continue to utilize propositional attitudes as elements of language, but let them avoid defining them in 'mental' terms. An individual's mind or state thereof is by definition private. Psychological or propositional attitudes are best identified, understood and defined on the basis of patterns of overt behaviour.

> It is here [the behavioural level], if anywhere, that we must give our account of

[4]Quine's use of the term 'native' is ironic, for the point of indeterminacy is that anyone can be an alien and thereby a 'native'.

> the understanding of an expression, and our account of the equivalence that holds between an expression and its translation or paraphrase.
> (Quine 1975b: 87)

3. *To 'Know' in English-Language Discourse and Philosophy*

> Perhaps the greatest agreement among Philosophers has concerned the relation of knowledge and truth . . . I cannot possibly know that any sentence is true unless that sentence is true. Hence truth is a condition of knowledge.
> (Lehrer 1974:24)

'Knowing' and 'believing' are complex and sometimes technical terms, both in ordinary usage and that specialized area of English-language philosophy known as epistemology or the theory of knowledge. The aim of this and the two following sections is not to present a comprehensive or even consistent theory of either term, or an exhaustive account of usage. Rather we shall select judiciously, hoping to touch upon enough materials to give fair representation of the complexity of each concept and of their interrelations on the level of ordinary language, and at the same time laying the foundations for interesting comparisons with what are said to be their Yoruba counterparts.

If knowing is by definition true, then our first concern will be to determine whether all knowing is of the same basic kind and, if not, what the varieties are. We shall then go on to ask *why* or *how* something is or comes to be knowledge. Or, another way of phrasing the same question, what sort(s) of evidence must be produced, justification given, or conditions satisfied – if the need should arise – in order to prove that what one claims to know *is* true. This latter point will require paying some attention to the so-called theories of truth that form one of the cornerstones of philosophical epistemology.

> Now in ordinary everyday English the verb 'to know' is generally used in a dispositional sense; not quite invariably perhaps, but certainly the dispositional use of it is by far the most common.
> (Price 1969: 42)

There are philosophers who disagree with this and claim that 'knowing' has a distinctive tone as a private mental state that intuitively distinguishes it from other psychological attitudes. Therefore, when I say 'I know that p', I am referring to that distinctive state-of-mind, or consciousness, at the time.

Ordinary English usage, however, indicates that the word is used far more commonly in a dispositional or behavioural sense. 'Disposition' is here being used in the sense of latent tendency or trait. If I say that someone

knows his way around London, what I mean is that if and when he finds himself there, he will act in a manner that demonstrates he is throroughly familiar with that city.

Whether characteristically defined as a private and distinctive mental state, or as a latent disposition to behave in a certain manner, philosophers and ordinary usage have gone on to distinguish three different varieties of knowing: (1) knowing that (or information); (2) knowing how (or competence); and (3) knowledge by acquaintance.

'Knowing that' is certainly the most common usage, and may be implied by the other two. Bertrand Russell has sought to clarify ordinary usage by stipulating more precise criteria and renaming 'knowledge that' knowledge by description. But as we prefer ordinary usage as a base for our eventual cross-cultural comparisons, there is no need to consider Russell's theory in detail. 'Knowledge that':

> does not have the character of 'first hand encounter' which knowledge by acquaintance has. There is something indirect or second hand about it. Most frequently we get it from testimony, from reading what others have written, or hearing what they tell us. (Price: 65)

'Description' is appropriate, since this type of knowledge does involve understanding a description ('Tokyo is the capital of Japan.') that is existential in character. Nevertheless, 'when a piece of knowledge by description is analysed, it turns out to be reducible to knowledge *that*, knowledge of facts or truths' (Price: 65).

As we shall see, it is also possible to have knowledge by acquaintance of something of which one has 'knowledge that' ('I know that Tokyo is the capital of Japan. I visited the city in 1979.'). But the more interesting cases for comparative purposes, and for purposes of understanding the uniqueness of this English-language epistemological category, will be those in which something is known to us *only* by description. This includes any information we obtain from printed or oral sources, and to which we could refer in the context of the statement, 'I know X', where X is a proposition ('that Tokyo is the capital of Japan'). Hence 'knowledge that' is a clear example of a propositional attitude.

'Knowing how' to do something is used to characterize a practical skill or proficiency (such as playing a musical instrument or repairing automobiles), even when the possessor may not be said to have significant conceptual or cognitive knowledge relevant to understanding or explaining the skill. Such knowledge can also be intellectual, as in the case of the clerk who can mentally calculate the postal rates for parcels being sent through the mail.

Nevertheless, as with the majority of situations in which knowing means 'knowing how', the significance of the term attaches to a practical activity rather than, as in the case of knowing that, to a cognitive or propositional attitude directed towards something by definition true.

'Knowledge by acquaintance' is another variety of knowing which Bertrand Russell has sought to clarify theoretically. In ordinary usage, however, it has at least two characteristics: (1) I must know the object, event or person first-hand. 'Knowledge by acquaintance is contrasted with the second-hand or "hearsay" knowledge which we get from testimony, spoken or written' (Price: 54); (2) I must be sufficiently familiar with the thing or person so that under ordinary circumstances I will be able to recognize it again.

Because what is known is neither a fact nor a truth, acquaintance is not a propositional attitude. It is possible to have knowledge by acquaintance of a philosophical argument and still not be convinced that it is true. As for the earlier claim that 'knowing that' is entailed by the other two forms of knowing, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which one would obtain 'knowledge by acquaintance' and derive no 'knowing that'. Perhaps an encounter whose consequences were *total* confusion would be the exception. However, as one of the conditions of knowledge by acquaintance is that one would be able to recognize the thing if a further encounter should occur, total confusion would, appropriately, indicate a situation in which there is no variety of knowledge. Similarly, if I know how to do something, then I must have at least *some* information about it.

It is now time to proceed to the relationship between 'knowledge' and 'truth', the so-called *theories* of truth that have been proposed in the effort to explain *how* and *why* it is that a person has knowledge. For purposes of the representative model we are trying to construct, 'knowing that' will be taken as the primary meaning of 'knowledge', and the others as subsidiaries available for situations or comparisons wherein 'knowing that' does not seem to make sense or seems to be otherwise inappropriate. In any case, the theories of truth are mostly concerned with outlining the conditions for explaining the basis of 'knowing that'.

In the exposition and analysis of these theories of truth we shall rely upon Keith Lehrer (1974) as our basic reference. This is not because we have rated his analysis as the best of its kind, either from the standpoint of reporting ordinary usage or of developing an original theory. (His primary interest is in the latter.) But it so happens that, in the course of working out his theory of knowledge, Lehrer takes special interest in a number of issues that will prove relevant to the concerns and viewpoints of the Yoruba.

> ... the most customary use of the word 'know'. Commonly, when men say they know they mean they know for certain, and they assume there is no chance of being in error. (Lehrer: 239)

It is because of this assumption that theories of truth are employed primarily as theories of justification or verification, steps people resort to when their 'truth' is challenged, with the eventual aim of making us agree that their truth should be our truth. The two theories we shall survey are commonly termed the Correspondence theory of truth and the Coherence theory of truth.

In the traditions of Western philosophy, the best known argument over what truths are to be taken as more reliable is that between the so-called rationalists and empiricists. The former, often typified by Descartes, argue that there are some truths that may be certified indubitable by the powers of the mind or reason alone, and then serve as a basis for all other knowledge. The latter, typified by Locke and Hume, argue that sensory experience, or sensation, serves as a basis for all the basic truths that are known, or not known, about the world. The literature reflecting the wrangling that has gone on between and within these two 'schools' of academic philosophy is vast and, for the most part, too technical to be of use in this chapter. The important point to bear in mind is that the word 'correspondence' is used for the overall theory because these basic truths, and the others derived from them, are said to correspond to and therefore accurately reflect reality.

What is of special interest in Lehrer's treatment of the correspondence theory is his account of the philosopher Thomas Reid's analysis of what the *average* man, apparently in any culture, treats as his basic truths. The average man is not so rigorously systematic in ordering them as the philosopher. Nevertheless his behaviour shows his commitment to a polyglot mixture of 'truths' that serve as the basis of an everyday and culturally distinct life.

> Some [truths], for example perceptual [truths] concerning what we see immediately before us, are in no need of justification. Though they can be erroneous ... they nevertheless stand justified in themselves without need of independent corroboration. (Lehrer: 101)

Much of the traditional knowledge a man imbibes simply by virtue of being a member of his society shares this same character. Reid describes the justification underlying these basic truths as that of *'birth and ancient possession'*, and argues that the man who relies upon them 'in forming his plans and shaping his convictions' will be described as eminently reasonable.

> We may, in the customary affairs of life, rely upon the intrinsic guarantee of truth and the attendant justification that attaches as a birthright to various of our beliefs. They are completely justified in themselves without need of any independent information or justification. (Lehrer: 102)

It is when an argument or evidence is produced that challenges our perception or our traditions, or when an enterprise of enormous practical significance is likely to depend upon them, that the 'intrinsic guarantee of truth' is withdrawn or suspended. We have then to face the problem of what constitutes a satisfactory justification or verification of something as knowledge.

Coherence theory argues that there are no basic truths that may be directly, individually and indubitably verified. Truths do not occur in isolation from one another, but in the form of interrelated systems wherein one truth either explains or is explained by (or perhaps both) others. Any single truth that is a component of a coherent system must be consistent with the others. But as any number of alternatives might also be consistent with the overall system, the single component truth selected must 'either explain or be explained in relation to the system *better* than anything which contradicts it' (Lehrer: 164; our italics). The problems involved in defining 'better' are eloquently expressed by Lehrer:

> Little has been written on the question of what it means to say that E1 is a better explanation than E2 of F. Moreover, we shall not attempt to explicate that concept here. The hopelessness of obtaining any useful analysis militates against the attempt. (Lehrer: 165)

However, the major problem with the coherence theory is that it is in practice possible to develop *a plurality of systems*, all purportedly true, 'that are equally satisfactory from the standpoint of explanation' (Lehrer: 181). The dilemma, then, as Lehrer puts it, is that:

> We are left with the problem of *inconsistent* systems of [truths] having a maximum of explanatory coherence. (Lehrer: 181–82; our italics).

There have been any number of attempts by philosophers to formulate a supplementary criterion that would provide for choosing one from amongst this plurality of coherent systems. One of the more popular has been *simplicity*, but it has been found difficult to define it clearly, and to decide precisely what elements (postulates, basic concepts, ontology, etc.) of a system it is most important *be* simple. In consequence Lehrer concludes that neither simplicity nor any other criterion has yet to be produced that is an adequate or reliable guide.

We have chosen 'knowing that' as our paradigm of ordinary usage in the

English language. Does ordinary usage express any preference with reference to a theory of truth? What we should like to do at this point is to review the position of Thomas Reid, that of the so-called 'average' man and his truth(s) of birth and ancient possession.

Reid does presume that the average man operates on the basis of a form of correspondence theory. Perceptions correspond to what actually exists or is taking place in the world, and traditions (shall we call them 'social truths'?) are worth learning and applying because they are based upon factual knowledge.

Unlike the philosopher, the average man is not concerned to rigorously systematize nor to prove in advance everything that he is prepared to assert as true. It is only when his truths are challenged by others that he will concern himself with justification. And as he operates on the basis of correspondence, his initial justification should consist of proving that his *account of* his perceptions or that his *knowledge of* his traditions is accurate. If either of these is not accepted by the challengers, and the justification must proceed to a deeper level – that of proving the truth *of* the perception itself or the truth *of* the tradition itself – then obviously further proofs of correspondence will come into play.

Coherence theory – that there are no basic truths – seems less likely to be taken up by the average man and more the domain of the academic philosopher. Correspondence theory can identify and correct inconsistencies in a set of truths as effectively as coherence theory, and such notions as 'explanatory coherence' and 'simplicity' are of so technical a nature that it is difficult to translate them into average or ordinary terms. Therefore, from this point onwards, we shall incorporate correspondence theory into our model of 'knowledge' in the English language.

4. *To 'Believe' in English-Language Discourse and Philosophy*

> Belief, in fact, is one of the most commonplace and familiar things in the world. (Price: 24)

The above quotation may give the impression that the definition and analysis of 'believing' will be easier than that of 'knowing'. In fact the opposite will prove to be the case. Arriving at a non-controversial definition of 'believe', either from the standpoint of ordinary usage or epistemological theory, is a difficult task.

Price (1969) and Needham (1972) will serve as our primary sources. They themselves disagree in their conclusions about the meaning of 'belief' in the English language. This is interesting because the two published their

conclusions contemporaneously yet independently of one another. Price's analysis antedates Needham's, but the latter admits to being unaware of it until his own was virtually complete.

As with 'knowing', we will divide up our analysis between the varieties of belief and the criteria (in respect of justification or verification) of belief. This will first be done from Price's point of view and then, again, following Needham.

With reference to the varieties of 'believing', the first problem that must be dealt with, as in the case of 'knowing', is what is the best method for analysing the meaning of 'belief' generally. English-language culture has to date devised two major, alternative methods that claim to be able to do this.

The oldest is that belief is a unique kind of mental occurrence or act that can be introspected by the person who experiences it. Price describes this theory as traditional Occurrence Analysis. Its primary aim is to provide a careful, introspective analysis of the mental 'tone', characteristics or qualities of this distinctive state of mind.

The second, Dispositional Analysis, rejects the idea that belief is a distinctive state of mind. We may find ourselves affirming that we believe something, but it is wrong to regard this as a state of *mind* that can be uniquely characterized. Believing is behaving, and if we attribute it to ourselves or to another person, what we mean is a conditional statement (If p, then q.) to the effect that the person referred to would say, do or feel a certain something if a certain kind of situation were to arise.

Over and above the question of whether belief in general is best understood as a mental act or disposition, English-language philosophers have catalogued at least three different senses in which the term is used in ordinary discourse: (1) 'believing that'; (2) 'believing a person'; and (3) 'believing in'.

Believing 'that' is by far the most common usage. It occurs when the verb 'believe' is followed by the relative pronoun 'that' and it, in turn, by a proposition (as in 'I believe that it will rain tomorrow.') The object of belief, the proposition, may be either true or false – it may or may not rain. Obviously, this sense of 'believe' expresses a propositional attitude.

Less frequently we speak of believing a person, as in the proverbial case of the man who complains; 'She told me we would get married and *I believed her*.' Price argues that there is a logical connection between believing a person and believing 'that'. For we come to believe (or not to believe) a person on the basis of our experience of his previous true (or false) assertions.

The English language allows one to believe 'that' (a proposition is true or false) or to believe a person to varying degrees:

> You may believe . . . very firmly, or fairly firmly, or mildly. A rough scale of degrees of belief may be constructed, ranging from conviction at the top end to suspecting at the bottom end, with varying degrees of opinion somewhere in the middle. (Price: 39)

However, those who choose to use the word 'believe' in the third sense, believing 'in', reject the idea of varying degrees, and usage allows them to do so. They insist that one must be *absolutely* convinced of what one believes (as in the context of religious commitment). Anything less may be designated 'opinion', 'being almost certain', etc. but not 'belief'.

> . . . in the special case of believing, the two questions 'what is your evidence for . . .' and 'what are your reasons for . . .' amount to pretty much the same thing. (Price: 93)

When it comes to the *justification* (reasons) or *verification* (evidence) of beliefs, and the consequent appeal to something more than other beliefs to provide this, English-language epistemologists have identified four basic sources of evidence: perception, self-consciousness, memory and testimony. The arguments and literature relating to the first three of these are again vast and it would be a hopeless task to try and summarize them here. We shall therefore wait until the Yoruba material has been introduced, and then work backwards – *from* it *to* relevant English-language comparisons and contrasts.

The fourth source of evidence, testimony, does deserve immediate attention. This is because it is comparatively underrated by English-language philosophers, and because it would seem especially relevant to evidence for beliefs in a culture like that of the Yoruba, which is often said to be based upon oral tradition. 'Testimony' refers to information which I receive from someone else and of which, consequently, I do not have first-hand experience.

> The whole point of testimony is that it is a substitute for first-hand experience, or an extension of first-hand experience, whereby each of us can make use of the experiences which other persons have had. (Price: 117)

Price cannot envisage a society that would function or survive if it rejected testimony as a source of belief. The percentage of our beliefs that are derived from direct, first-hand experience is tiny by comparison with the percentage derived from testimony. If we insisted upon attempting to verify everything for ourselves, all forms of social cooperation would cease. Price therefore posits a *Principle of Charity* as an attitude that he feels does

underlie our behaviour and therefore serves to illumine it: 'Accept what you are told unless or until you have specific reasons for doubting it' (127). He also argues that there is a moral dimension to the principle (and belief itself) in that part of its meaning is 'every person, just because he is a person, has at least a *prima facie* claim to be believed' (114).

Several ancillary consequences follow from this analysis of testimony that may prove important to us later on:
(1) 'Belief' is an area where the theory of knowledge and moral philosophy overlap.
(2) If a belief held on the basis of second-hand tesitmony is subsequently verified by first-hand experience, the testimony becomes redundant.

Finally, Price finds himself grown weary of the endless appeals to *public verifiability* as the ultimate test of the rationality of testimony or belief. There is no corporate 'public'. Nor is there a corporate 'Science' to perform these tests. Both are composed of individuals, and in the end – even as scientists – people will still be accepting or rejecting one another's testimony as a basis for their beliefs. It is more representative to focus attention on the problems common to accepting testimony in any forum. There *is* always a risk involved. But the (English-language) Principle of Charity admonishes that:

> it is reasonable to take this risk, and unreasonable not to take it. If we refuse to take it, we have no prospect of getting answers, not even the most tentative ones, for many of the questions which interest us. (Price: 128)

In *Belief, Language, and Experience* Rodney Needham complains that many Western ethnographers treat the philosophy of mind they inherit from their own language systems as a kind of received truth whose categories are honoured universally.[5] Their concern, therefore, is to locate the equivalents in non-Western languages for terms such as 'knowing', 'believing', 'doubting', 'willing', 'hoping', 'desiring', 'intending', rather than in considering whether the propositional attitudes of an alien language express an entirely different philosophy of mind. Consequently, with special reference to belief, English-language anthropological monographs make constant reference to 'beliefs', 'belief systems', 'ritual beliefs', 'religious beliefs', 'primitive beliefs', and so forth.

Needham proposes that a necessary step towards determining whether 'belief' can be of value to cross-cultural studies is to be clear about its meaning in the English language. That the language has produced and

[5] A thesis with which Quine would obviously agree. Needham, however, makes no reference to him in this book.