

## ISSUES AND POTENTIAL IN AFRICAN EPISTEMOLOGY

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12616.55046

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DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.12616.55046

### **Abstract**

*This Paper focuses on African epistemology. It articulates the traditional response of Africans to the problem of knowledge in philosophy. It unveils how the Africans come to know reality, what constitutes knowledge, sources, scope, purpose and justification of knowledge in the traditional African community. It brings to the fore the rich epistemological heritage residing in the all-encompassing African epistemological outlook, which implicates the natural and the supernatural in knowledge production in a manner that can clearly remedy certain historical problems in western epistemology. The paper concludes with the optimism in the capacity of African epistemology's additive enrichments to epistemology in general.*

**Keywords:** Epistemology, Philosophy, African, Knowledge, Justification

### **Introduction**

The quest for knowledge about reality is a universal human need. In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle declares: "All men by nature desire to know" (1.1). Knowledge is a universal imperative for the gratification of man's curious nature and satisfaction of his existential needs through effective interaction with the world. However, since human *knowing* follows closely from human *being*, our culture, necessarily influences and "gives an orientation to our knowledge of reality" (Uduma, 63). In other words, culture is an epistemological determinant through which framework within we live as well as interpret reality. There is, therefore, no *aseptic* knowledge without its undergirding cultural influences. In philosophy, problems associated with knowledge are epistemological problems.

Given the geographical and historical differences in cultures, there are, expectedly, different worldviews and corresponding systems of knowing

about reality peculiar to each culture. Hence, any creative work on the philosophies and epistemologies of any region such as the West, East and Africa, requires a good understanding of their underlying worldviews as rooted in their cultures, which govern their epistemic conceptual schemes. Georg Hegel says that, "Every philosophy... belongs to its time and is biased by its limitations" (qtd. in Kaufmann, 286). Lack of consciousness of this hermeneutic principle is responsible for the absolutization of Western philosophy and the denial of the existence of African philosophy by some Western irredentists and jingoists and their African sympathizers. However, today, African philosophy has gone far beyond this stage of skepticism. It is fast establishing a tradition in current global scholarship such that no scholar should be taken serious who denies its reality.

Epistemological problems are perennial human and philosophical problems, cutting across all philosophical traditions. Hence, much of such problems raised in the era of Plato and Aristotle in the West about the meaning, nature, scope and justification of knowledge, which have remained largely unresolved, are still relevant today and relates to the African philosophical tradition too. The objective of this paper is to articulate the African traditional responds to these problems in philosophy. We intend thereby to philosophically expose the traditional African epistemic categories as it relates to how the African knows reality, what constitutes knowledge for the traditional African, the scope and purpose of knowledge in Africa. Beneath this intention, is the ultimate desire to unveil the rich heritage in African epistemology and its additive enrichment capacity to epistemology in general.

### **African Ontology**

There is a consensus among scholars that a people's ontology has a concomitant effect on their epistemology or theory of knowledge (Ojong, 201). In other word, a people's worldview is closely related to the way they know or interpret reality. Hence, every ontological instance has it representative in epistemological theories. In fact, as Taylor says, every philosophical discussion (including that of epistemology), when long stretched, resolves itself into basic problems of ontology (1). That being the case, a good understanding of the African ontology is crucial for our understanding of the African epistemology. For as Egbeke Aja argues, "African theory of knowledge...derives from traditional African metaphysics" (76). Generally, ontology is one of the major branches of philosophy known as metaphysics, which deals with the questions about the nature of being, becoming, existence or reality. It is the study of what constitutes "the basic reality on which every

other reality stands according to the perception or conception of a people” (Ijiomah, 54 - 55).

By implication, ontology is the basic worldview (*weltanschauung*) of a given people, which serves as a major determinant of how they perceive and interpret reality. James Christian explains that different cultures have different ontological conceptions of reality, hence, no culture is a custodian of an absolute conception of the nature of reality (542). In the light of this fact, F. Njoku rightly submits that, “the West and Africa, part company in the way each of the cultures perceive or conceive reality” (78-79). A truly critical scholar, according to Henry Maurier, must therefore, be conscious of the difference between the Western and the African thought forms from which derives the different philosophies, cultures and value systems (87). The Western ontology is basically characterized by dualism – a view of reality that presumes the existence of two fundamentally and mutually opposed principles.

The Western dualistic ontology either promotes one of the two against the other or presumes the independence and superiority of each position in such a way that an attempt to bring them together is believed to produce a contradiction. This ontology is embodied in Plato’s dualism of the ideal world and the phenomenal world and in Aristotle’s bifurcation of reality into substance and accidents, matter and form, etc. The distinctively dualistic orientation of Western epistemology, is an inevitable bequest of this dualistic ontology of the West. For example, knowledge in the West is largely limited to two major disjunctive sources of either sense experience or reason. This dualistic polarization of sources of knowledge has resulted in the long-drawn historical battle between the Empiricists and Rationalists’ schools, representing these sources. Attempts to reconcile the two (as in case of the Kantian Mediation) under the influence of this same ontology has been unsuccessful.

Underneath the controversies surrounding knowledge justification in the West also, is this dualistic ontology, which has thrown up the two major opposing camps of Foundationalism and Coherentism. Again, attempts to reconcile them based on the same ontology, especially with Susan Haack’s Foundherentism, has also emerged unsuccessful. The submissions of other emerging schools and post-Gettier theories of justification: Reliabilism, Causal theory, Defeasibility theory, etc., are far from being satisfactory either, as they

are also rooted in the Western dualistic ontology with manifest templates of ideological polarization.

What then constitutes African ontology? The reality of subcultures as represented by various ethnic groups in the African continent notwithstanding, there are some basic assumptions across borderline which constitutes the African ontology or worldview, by which they live their lives and interpret reality. These include the beliefs that: (1) Beings are hierarchical in existence, starting from God, spirits, man, animals and inanimate entities. (2) These beings do not exist in opposition to one another, rather, they are contraries and hence complement each other. (3) Reality is composed of material and spiritual existences. (4) At the centre of beings is man, reaching out to the highest being and to the lowest being. (5) Goodness or badness of any reality depends on its humanizing or dehumanizing effects on man (Ijiomah, 96).

What can be deduced from the foregoing basic assumptions is that the African ontology or worldview, unlike the dualism of the West, presents a totality of beings, comprising of the Creator and the creatures in a harmonious and communal relationship. Thus, rather than the dualistic worldview, Africans possess a *unitary* worldview, where there is no significant distinction between the spiritual and the material existents. Within this worldview, there are three intimately related cosmological modalities which encompass a continuum of realities, namely, the sky, where God and major spiritual being reside; the earth, where human beings and other physically observable beings reside and the underworld, where ancestors and bad spirits live (Elemi, 54). They all form parts of the seamless whole. And as T. Mbuy affirms, it is only through this three-fold dimensions of realities that African existence and worldview can be captured intellectually and meaningfully through philosophy (9).

Moreover, irrespective of its categorization in the modality, each reality is characterized by “vital force” (Tempels, 5); and they relate to each other through this vital force, making them yearn for each other (Meurier, 65). Reflecting on this, J.S. Mbiti says:

The spiritual world of African people is very densely populated with spiritual beings, spirits and the living-dead (those ancestors who have died and still live in our memory)...The spiritual universe is in unity with the physical, and that those two intermingle and dovetail into each other so much that it is not easy, or even necessary at times to draw the destination or separate them (72).

Okeke further emphasizes the unitary ontology of Africans as manifest in the fact that, for the Africans, the visible and the invisible are perceived as one, interrelated, interacting systems where agency and causality form a gigantic network or reciprocity, which translates into several acts of what we call religion, worship, respect, sacrifice, divination, communism which mark the relations between spirits and ancestors on the one hand and men on the other hand (3).

From the foregoing, it is clear that the Africans generally possess a unitary ontology, characterized by the interconnectedness of realities. This clearly brings out the idea of *duality* (not dualism), in the African worldview, whereby all realities are believed to exist in a *dual* and interrelated manner. This point is succinctly captured by Njoku that, "...In African thought, things, the cosmos, the realities of the world, supernatural beings are so much mingled with the human realities to be looked upon from an objective and substantive view point" (78). Like other group of people, Africans do not leave behind their ontology in their attempt to study and understand reality. In other words, what constitutes knowledge for Africans what can be known and how they know what they claim to know, are necessarily influenced by their unitary ontology or worldview. Hence, African ontology has its representation in the African epistemology.

### **What is African Epistemology?**

In its general consideration, epistemology, also known to as theory of knowledge, is that brands of philosophy which seeks to answer the questions about how human beings perceive the world and gain knowledge about it. Its basic mission is to clarify and resolve questions about the possibility, the nature, the sources, the scope and the justification or validity of human knowledge (Blocker and William, 85). In this connection, African epistemology, in particular, is "Africa's own way of carrying out its inquiries into the nature, scope and limit of human knowledge" (Ozumba, 158). It is the African theory of knowledge, which includes the conception of the nature of knowledge, the means used to gain knowledge, the criteria for the assessment of knowledge, the purpose of the pursuit of knowledge, and the role that knowledge plays in human existence.

For Anyanwu and Ruch, the African epistemological is investigates the following: How do Africans know what they claim to know? What method does the mind follow in order to arrive at a trustworthy knowledge of reality?

How do Africans grasp reality in the universe of human discourse? (80). Ozumba and Jonathan say that African epistemology seeks to clarify the following in addition:

What does it mean to know or to have knowledge in African philosophy? Is knowledge a purely cognitive exercise in African philosophy? Or is it a moral exercise? Or both? Has it any human face? How can we justify a non-cognitive knowledge process? Is knowledge tied to the individual or to the community thought? Can we be certain of anything in African epistemology? Is there even a need for epistemic certainty in African thought? How do Africans justify their knowledge claims? (34).

African epistemology is thus, Africans' systematic response to these and other such epistemological questions that arise when they reflect on reality so that questions of knowledge in Africa could be clearly answered. However, that the issue of *reality* and how the African comes to *know* this reality is in focus here, once again reiterates the intrinsic connection between African ontology and epistemology.

### **Concept of Knowledge in African**

What is the Africans conception of knowledge? It must be said at the outset that based on the influence of their holistic ontological worldview, Africans maintain a holistic conception of knowledge. Africans' conception of knowledge embraces that the cognitive, moral and social dimensions, rather than the overly cognitive western point of view. The popular conception of knowledge in epistemology as "Justified true belief" (Dancy, 23), is given an excessively cognitive orientation in the western epistemology. Initially suggested in Plato's *Theaetetus* (291c - 210d), this definition generally requires that, for the attribution of knowledge, a claim it must be believed, it must be true, and it must be justified. The emphasis here is that, knowledge is not simply a matter of having a belief that is said to be true, but, it must be *justifiedly* held.

How *justified* a person is in believing something depends not just on what he believes, but on *why* he believes it. However, in western epistemology, this *why* can only be adequately supplied with sufficient internalist or externalist *cognitive* evidence. Nothing else would do. Although Edmund Gettier's objection to the adequacy of the above tripartite conditions for knowledge with his counter-examples in his 1963 Paper, triggered a flurry of post-Gettier theories of justification in western epistemology - Defeasibility, Causal and

Reliability theories – these theories, typical of the western orientation, ultimately limit the relevance of knowledge justification to the internalist or externalist cognitive justificatory schemes.

On the other hand, in Africa, “knowledge is co-extensive with material and spiritual realms, seen and unseen, empirical and rationalistic, psychological and religious to wit, it is all encompassing” (Ozumba, *A Concise Introduction...*, 158). In line with this understanding, knowledge in Africa can be viewed as “a well-rehearsed and rationalized set of ideas, which are seen as having met the optimal standards of rationality, acceptance, with evidential corroboration within the traditional community” (Ozumba, 158). This does not imply that Africans do not see knowledge as “justified true belief”. In fact, this is exactly the African notion of knowledge too; for obtained elsewhere, any claims to knowledge in African must meet the essential conditions of belief, truth and justification. The difference with the West, however, lies in the context of justification, which is holistic and integral in Africa, with a peculiar communal orientation. Hence, what passes for knowledge in Africa, is a belief that has been subjected to the rigorous analysis of reason and experience, together with the stamp of the community, which gives it a social and normative dimension, as well as an all-encompassing epistemological outlook.

### **Communal Nature of Knowledge in Africa**

In Africa, knowledge is essentially a community thing rather than an individual thing. Ozumba and Jonathan state that, “The norms and other basic beliefs that constitute the African thought system are sanctioned in the mind of the community” (35). Hence, what constitutes an individual’s belief or opinion remains so until there is a stamp of the community on it, that is, until it coheres with the “community thought” system before it is knowledge. In other words, what is knowledge is generally sanctioned by the “community-thought” through its per-determined cogno-normative norms. This “community thought” system are elements from the Africa’s past that are imperative for the construction of any new episteme in a given circumstance. Jewsiewicki Bogumil refers to them as “usable past” (76); and Janheinz John calls them “valuable past” (, 16).

Moreover, in Africa, knowledge follows a certain interrelated hierarchy that reflects the African unitary ontology. Besides the individual and community levels, knowledge resides ultimately in God, the Supreme Being, who through some agentive beings, communicate it the individual through the community.

There is thus, an internal link of epistemic interaction that runs from God to the individual through the community. Temples implied this when he defined the African concept of knowledge as, “how deeply he understands the nature of forces and their interaction” (68). Pantaleon Iroegbu refers to this interaction as being guided by the “internal relational law of dynamics” (qtd. in Titus, 181). Besides, the epistemic primacy of each being is determined by its ontological status in the hierarchy. Ifeanyi Menkiti, explains that in Africa, the primacy of beings is meant to apply not only ontologically, but also in regard to epistemic accessibility (171). Hence, whereas the community serves as the immediate reference point for the individual’s knowledge, God becomes the ultimate reference point for both. In order words, the ultimate knowledge which forms the basis of community and individual pool of knowledge resides at the transcendental level in God.

It is obvious from the foregoing that within the African culture, an individual may possess a belief deemed to be true, but it is the community that gives it the force of knowledge. This is the basis for such assertions among the Efik/Ibibio tribe in Nigeria as: “Owo kiet isidiongoke mkpo ikan obio” (a person cannot be wiser than the village); and “etihi isiyonke ikan ansito enye” (The okro plant does not grow taller than the owner). What all these conduce to is that, besides the experiential and rational justificatory frameworks, the acceptability of a belief as knowledge in Africa proceeds by way of its capacity to cohere with the belief system and norms of the community. Otherwise, it cannot be called knowledge.

### **Purpose of Knowledge in Africa**

Another feature of knowledge in Africa, worthy of note is that, Africans do not seek knowledge for knowledge sake. Knowledge for the Africans has an instrumental and a teleological purpose; for it is seen as a map meant to guide man as he navigates his way through life to enable him attain harmony with the entire universe of beings and so attain his destiny. Rooted in the African unitary ontology and relational understanding of reality, Africans’ instrumental and teleological view of knowledge is thus based on the crucial opportunity knowledge is believed to offer man to be able to stay in harmony with reality, maintain wholeness of existence and resolve his existential problems. This is why Africans generally disdain ignorance and highly esteem wisdom. The Efik/Ibibio capture this in their saying: “etok ayin ama eyet ubok asana, ase adia mkpo ye mbong” (a young man who proves himself wise can dine with elders).



### **The Possibility of Knowledge in Africa**

A philosophical position that doubts the possibility of knowledge claims on grounds of want of evidential certainty is generally referred to as scepticism (Rescher, 38). The sceptics basically question the very possibility of knowledge of anything by referring to the unreliable nature of our perception and several other ways in which our knowledge can go wrong (Etuk, 27). In sum, for the sceptics, we are always vulnerable to error as we labour under cognitive imperfection that make the definitive condition of certainty that is required for knowledge impossible in the factual domain.

In the history of Western philosophy, scepticism is mostly identified with Protagoras who said that “man is the measure of all things” (it is man who decides for himself what is knowledge and what is not); Gorgias, who argues that, “nothing exists, if anything exists, it cannot be known, and even if it is known, it cannot be communicated; and Pyrrho, who, believing that equal arguments (for or against) can be offered on both sides of any claim, and that the human mind is limited and cannot penetrate into the inner nature of things to know things with certainty, dismissed the search for knowledge as a vain endeavour and calls for the suspension of judgement in everything (Stough, 19). Epistemology in the West has grown largely in response to the sceptics’ challenge about the possibility of knowledge; for, where the sceptics assert the contrary, western epistemologists try to show how man can acquire certain knowledge.

However, African, on the other hand, do not generally doubt the possibility of human knowledge, either of the present or future occasions. If anything, “the African is an epistemological optimist” (Ozumba, 164). Africans are of the belief that existence is a continuum and through the vital force ensuring there exist a relation of beings in the various cosmological domains, they believe that the learning process continues even after death. Hence, whatever cannot be known today, is not unknowable; for it can be known tomorrow, what cannot be known through the limited natural means, can be known through the supernatural means in this life or in the after-life. Hence, the Efik/Ibibio say, “Idoho akpa usen etipeke ube ke mfod asiduk” (A frog does not go into the well on the first day it is dug). This means that for the Africans knowledge is not only possible, but the depth of it comes with time.

### **Sources of Knowledge in Africa**

Contrary to what obtains in the West, where the sources of knowledge are largely limited to source experience and reason (an orientation that follows the Western dualistic ontology), Africans believe that knowledge can be gained through the integrated media of the senses, reason and revelation or extra-sensory perception). This corresponds with the three kinds of knowledge possible in Africa, namely, experiential knowledge, rational/reflective knowledge and revelational knowledge. And this is because, for the Africans, knowledge cannot be sub-ordinated to reason or senses alone; rather, knowledge is a holistic thing embracing the physical, mental and spiritual, which reflects the African inter-related worldview and cosmological modalities of beings.

Africans do not ignore sense experience as a source of knowledge. The sensual or experiential knowledge is gained through the five sense organs. But then, sense-data or the images and sensation of things received through the senses (which constitute the lowest level of knowledge based on the degree of certainty), are sent to the mind, which interprets and understands the perceived images and sensation and produces ideas therefrom, which constitute the rational or reflective knowledge. Africans believe that rational knowledge, which occurs at the theoretical level of creative thinking, has a higher degree of certainty than sensual or experiential knowledge. This is because besides being the seat of intellection, mind can serve as a channel of communication between a subject and higher beings, with ontological and epistemological primacy.

Hence, the older one gets, the more disposed his mind is believed to be capable of producing more knowledge not only through the benefit of hindsight and experience, but also through his relationship with higher beings. Hence, the elderly members of the African societies are respected as people who are closer to ancestors and to God and as people with some epistemic privilege, "who receive knowledge which other human beings cannot get" (Mbuy, 15). Egbeka Aja clarifies that in Africa, "one approaches divine wisdom the older one gets, the ancestors have more wisdom, followed by the elders, both death and living" (78). This is why the Igbos say that, "the words of elders are words of the gods" (*Oku ndi okenye we oku ndi muo*). However, for the rational knowledge, originating from the senses, there is the need for its authentication by the "community thought", otherwise, it goes no further than a mere opinion of the subject.

However, the third and highest source of knowledge is revelation or spiritual insights from God, and other deities or ancestors. It is a “revealed” kind of knowledge from the divine and supernatural forces. For this reason, it is called “revelational knowledge”; and it can be revealed through the oracles of native priests, divinations of traditional diviners, insights or inspirations of the mystics or through elders and people in special occupational skills who are so inspired in service for the benefit of the community. This role of *divine forces* in African epistemology, thus, introduces a non-empirical and a non-inferential element into the scope of human knowledge and shows clearly the limits of empiricism and rationalism that characterize western epistemology.

Since God is the embodiment of knowledge and since African ontology recognizes interrelated hierarchy of beings, it is believed that the more man relates with God, the more God can reveal to him deeper knowledge of reality. Ikenga Metuh says that “God is no stranger in an African community” (52). Hence, through his mysterious encounter with God or other agentic deities, Africans believe that they received revealed and supernatural knowledge or insights that can enable them understand reality beyond the limitations of sense experience and reason. And revealed knowledge is considered to be the most certain type because its origin is God, the ultimate source of all wisdom and knowledge. It is of tremendous benefits for man, for, besides addressing limitations of the empirical and rational knowledge, it settles all epistemic uncertainties of individual or community and established the normative foundation of African epistemology. It is for this reason that a typical African usually looks up to inspiration from God besides his reliance on his experimental/technical and rational skills.

This explains the African’s epistemic confidence especially in their native diviners and sorcerers, regarded as the “eyes of the gods”, for their capacity to receiving special, revealed knowledge from God and other agentic deities, for the good of the individual or community. The traditional African scientists, medicine men and craftsmen rely a lot also on revealed knowledge for effective delivery of their services to the community. They do not necessarily limit the results of their finding to what their experimental and rational tools can yield. Hence, they often resume their activities with some words of prayer, invocation or incantation requesting the assistance and the knowledge they can receive from divine forces.

An important noteworthy fact emerging from the foregoing is that, in his epistemological endeavours, the traditional African combines the natural (sense experience and reason) and the supernatural (revelation) ways of knowing. This has its basis in the African unitary and complementary ontology (duality), where things exist in dual and interrelated fashion, and where the physical and the spiritual realities dovetail into each other to maintain equilibrium in the universe of things. Thus, knowledge for the traditional African is an integrated whole in which all human and non-human powers, physical and spiritual forces interact in a mutually reinforcing manner to enable man acquire the knowledge he needs to resolve his natural and supernatural needs and to relate successfully with nature. There is no one way of looking at reality as knowledge is a product of empiricism (senses), rationalism (reason) and supernaturalism (revelation). This epistemological outlook is opposed to the western absolutism and completely diffuses the problem associated with historical polemic struggles and disquisition between empiricism and rationalism of the West by offering a complementary approach to knowledge.

This is certainly one feature of the traditional African thought system and epistemology that remains very puzzling to many non-Africans seeking an understanding of the African conceptual scheme. But as Paul Claudel admonishes, "to know a man, one must be born into his thought pattern" (qtd. in Ijiomah, 121). As long as one is distanced or is ignorant of the African ontological pattern, one's conclusion about any dimension of life in Africa is bound to be logically distorted, metaphysically befuddled and epistemologically jaundiced. This African way of knowing is emblematic of the African belief that "there is more to life than the eyes can behold" (Etim, 296). Knowledge goes beyond the physical and mental. Hence, revelational knowledge makes up for the missing link and the shortfall created by empirical (perceptive) and rational (reflective) knowledge. This Africa potential creates room for a more holistic epistemological view of reality, making room for the possibility of extending our epistemological engagements beyond the limitations of human sensory experience and reason.

### **Justification of Knowledge in Africa**

The main issue about justification in epistemology is to state and assess the grounds on which claims to a belief is made. Accordingly, this grounds or rationale must or must be flawless and sufficient to guarantee the belief's truth (Rescher, 5). D. Hamlyn captures this idea of justification this way: "knowing is being in the appropriate position to certify or give one's authority

or warrant to the truth of what is said to be known” (101). For Alvin Plating, a belief is justified if any only if the subject holding it is “right to believe it or the subject has justified her intellectual duties” (30). But the question is: what exactly constitutes these evidential reasons or sufficient grounds of justification of knowledge?

Epistemologists are divided on this issue as many theories have been proposed to demonstrate different ideas of justification in western epistemology. These include, Foundationalism, Coherentism, Foundherentism, Defeasibility Theory, Defeasibility Theory, Causal Theory, and Reliability Theory. However, influence by the western dualistic ontology and the limitations thereof, these theories generally limit their framework of epistemic activities to either reason or sense experience, or both; but goes no further than these faculties. There are in them all manifest signs of segmentation of ideas along merely along rational or empirical lines. For reasons of the obvious limitations of such epistemic orientation, these theories are seared with deficiencies, and despite their eliminative competitions with each other, none enjoys the general acceptance. The debate continues. But the truth is that, there can be no end to this debates so long as there is lack of awareness of the fact that justification of human knowledge, in line with human nature, requires commitment to both the physical and the metaphysical, the natural and the supernatural, a unique potential that African epistemology exhibits.

Justification of knowledge in African epistemology reflects a commitment not only to the natural and supernatural epistemic sources, but also to foundational epistemic hierarchies, in line with the African ontology. As earlier indicated, African ontology recognizes the existence of hierarchy of beings in the physical and spiritual universe which are seen as two dimensions of one and the same universe in constant interaction through the *vital force*. Since there are spiritual as well as physical hierarchy of beings, the extent of human knowledge reflects this hierarchy. In the spiritual realm, God is Supreme above all other spiritual beings and is the *Ultimate* Source of knowledge and ground of justification. In the physical realm, the community, where an individual belongs, is the *immediate* ground of knowledge justification. The community is higher than the individual, who lives, acts and knows as a member of his community.

The structure of epistemic justification this orientation suggests is that of Foundationalism. However, this is not to be reckoned with the western interpretation of Foundationalism, for in this, the African Foundationalism is qualitatively different from the West's. Generally, Foundationalism is a philosophical theory of knowledge justification which holds that "knowledge has foundations in certain basic beliefs" (Pollock and Joseph, 32). The emphasis here is that a belief can be justified based on certain other foundational, basic and self-justifying belief, which serve as "cognitive ultimate" or "epistemic unmoved movers" to other non-basic and inferential beliefs. Such beliefs which are generally believed to be products of rational intuition or sense experience in Western epistemology, are considered to be capable of providing knowledge with "secure foundations of certainty" (Blackburn, 139).

In order to refute the sceptics' challenge, Foundationalism essentially seeks to halt the infinite regress of reasons for justification of beliefs by asserting that our minds or senses can furnish us with certain basic, and non-inferential beliefs that can serve as foundations for other inferential beliefs. Such beliefs constitute the foundational structure on which the whole supreme-structure of justified beliefs rests. As indicated in the foregoing, mental states (reason) or immediate experience/senses) are often taken as the basis for such beliefs. Rene Descartes, the father of modern Foundationalism, in seeking for such firm foundation for knowledge, resolved to doubt everything he had previously known and to accept only those truths that appeared to be "clear and distinct" in his mind. The result was his "cogito ergo sum" (I think, I therefore I am), whereby, he secured the foundational knowledge about his existence through his "thinking", which he believed was indubitable and from which other knowledge could be inferred.

Another western philosopher, Roderick Chisholm, rested the basis of his Foundationalism on immediate experience (sensation). For him, the indubitable certainties in knowledge are "first person propositions about one's experiences" (187). As one undergoes an experience through the senses, and reflects upon it in his mind, the proposition that one is experiencing in a specific way is certain and indubitable enough to oneself. For instance, as he illustrates, "if S believes that he perceives something to have a certain property F, then the proposition that he does perceive something to be F, as well as the proposition that there is F, is one that is meaningful for S" (45). Thus, the immediate perceptual experience becomes the foundation for justification of one's knowledge.

This western conception of Foundationalism is often fraught with defects, making it an unsatisfactory theory for critics. At the base of these deficiencies is the theory's intrinsically limiting epistemic platform, which is either reason or sense experience. First, since man normally labours under the predicament of cognitive defects, it is difficult to imagine the reality of any belief produced by the human mind that is so basic and does not require the support from other beliefs. Arbitrary assumption of the reality of rational or perceptual basic or foundational beliefs by the Western Foundationalists, can therefore not be said to be able to resolve the problem of infinite regress. Besides, one's subjective perception experience, which is subject illusions, cannot constitute the basis for objective justification of knowledge. Hence, reason and experience are neither individually nor collectively sufficient enough to carry the edifice of justification in foundationalism. These two natural epistemic pillars need the complementation of a third and supernatural pillar that African Foundationalism offers.

African Foundationalism is a *Transcendental* one as it lends epistemic priority to the invisible, the transcendental or the supernatural epistemic foundation. In the epistemic hierarchy (which follows the hierarchy of beings), God is the Ultimate Source and Foundation of all knowledge. By virtue of the perfection of his being, God is infallible and possess Ultimate grounds or reasons for the justification of all human knowledge. He is the Foundation of all basic beliefs of the community, and by virtue of His divine nature these beliefs indubitable and are self-justified in Him. Hence, for the Africans, the regress ends in God, the Ultimate Reason.

However, next in the epistemic hierarchy of knowledge justification below God, is the community, where the individual being lives and where the mind of God is reflected in varying degrees in the community belief system. This divine mind finds representations in the community cultures and traditions. This explains why the God-consciousness of Africans can be seen in every instrument of their culture and tradition: art, beliefs, proverbs, songs, etc. However, given its ontological limitations an association of human beings and an intermediate agent between God and the individual, the community does not enjoy the same level of epistemic primacy as God in knowledge justification. Despite this limitation, the community as a "norm-giver" is very vital for knowledge justification, for it serves as the immediate foundation for justification, by providing the customs and traditions upon which bases the individual's beliefs are justified. The individual lives and acts a member of his

community and is so influenced and guided by the customs and tradition of his community that his knowledge is not his creation but the product of his community.

In Africa, person is not just an individual of human parentage, but also one evincing in his activities an adequate sense of his community life. This is the basis of the cultural and social perspectives of African knowledge, which in a way, diverts attention from the conventional abstract rational quest for certainty to quest for cultural and social relevance. This is also the basis for the *contextual* nature of knowledge in African epistemology, for every piece of knowledge is certain and justified within the context of a given community. From the foregoing, it is clear that the African epistemic category of justification is “Transcendental Foundationalism”: Where God is the Ultimate ground and Source of all knowledge and justification; the community’s beliefs find justification in the revealed knowledge that comes from God as manifested in its customs and traditions; and the individual’s belief find justification in the community’s thought. The problem of infinite regress that dogs the steps of western Foundationalism is thus addressed, since the regress unquestionably stops in the All-knowing God.

### **Conclusion**

The focus of this work has been on African epistemology. Efforts have been made in the work to discuss how the traditional Africans know reality as well reveal the unique potential inherent in African epistemic categories that can help in resolving difficult challenges in epistemology in general. Since a people’s epistemology is rooted in their ontology, in line with the African unitary ontology, which captures the harmonious interrelatedness of beings – both physical and spiritual – we have exposed the concept and nature of knowledge, sources, scope and justification of knowledge in Africa as it is within the context of this unitary ontological orientation. African epistemology as this exposition shows, presents an all-encompassing epistemological outlook and has a lot going for it: It makes room for the contribution of divine forces (non-cognitive and non-empirical elements) in knowledge accretion through revelation, which addresses the limitations of the western emphasis on reason and experience in this regard; it emphasizes the cultural and social dimensions of knowledge through the cogno-normative activities and epistemic primacy of the community over the individual and his beliefs; it presents a holistic system of foundationalist justification through an inferential process of reasoning, which ends in God.



African epistemology, thus, presents the unique potential of being able to extend the scope of human knowledge beyond the limitations of human reasoning and sense experience through relevant connection and dependence on the supernatural elements. This fortifies it against several pitfalls of western epistemology, rooted in ontological dualism, and which limits the western epistemological endeavours to the faculties of reason or sense experience. African epistemology, thus, allows for a more holistic and comprehensive epistemological outlook whereby the physical and the metaphysical can combine to extend the frontiers of human knowledge. It is time to harvest more of “this African epistemological leaven” for the benefit of epistemology in general so that Africa can take its place alongside Europe in a fair exchange of epistemological cultural gifts.

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