

A JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN DEFENSE OF EPISTEMIC PLURALISM¹

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Abstract:

Epistemic pluralism emphasizes different interpretations and understanding of the human experience of reality. From the stories of the “Fall” of Adam and Eve and the multiplication of human languages at the Tower of Babel in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, one can deduce two forms of epistemic pluralism. The first form of epistemic pluralism which can be inferred from the “Fall” of Adam and Eve is the derivation of two or more interpretations and understanding of a state-of-affair from the same worldview or paradigm (the eating of the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden): God said if you eat of it you will die, and the serpent said if you eat of It, you will not die but that you will be like God knowing good and evil. The second form of epistemic pluralism which can be deduced from the multiplication of the human language at the Tower of Babel is two or more radically different interpretations and understanding of a state-of-affair from radically different worldviews or paradigms. This gave birth to the different worldviews or paradigms of different cultures. The former (from the “Fall”) can be synthesized towards arriving at an epistemic objectivity, while the later (from the multiplication of the human languages at the Tower of Babel) may be difficult if not impossible to synthesize, thus leading to epistemic

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relativity. Using the critical and expository methods, this paper argues in defense of epistemic pluralism and the need to understand reality from the diverse interpretations and understanding of reality of different worldviews and paradigms.

Key Words: Judaeo-Christian, Epistemic Pluralism, Epistemic Objectivity, Epistemic Relativity, Paradigm, worldview

Introduction:

Judaism and Christianity are two religions that sprang from the Jewish culture. Both religions have Abraham as their father in faith. While Judaism believes Christianity is an adulterated form of it, Christianity believes that it is the climax of Judaism for it is the fulfillment of the prophesies of Judaism. However, they both share a fundamental belief in the Supreme Being who exists of Himself (which is a form of monism), and the sacredness of the Old Testament.

The Old Testament is a part of the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity. Some of the stories of the Old Testament can be interpreted in support of epistemic pluralism. The story of the “Fall” of Adam and Eve reveals two epistemic paradigms. The first epistemic paradigm can be deduced from the instruction of God that they should 'not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil' so as not to experience death. The second epistemic paradigm can be deduced from the instruction of the 'serpent' that if they eat from the forbidden fruit they will not die, but they will be like the Supreme Being with the knowledge of good and evil. These two epistemic paradigms reveal the two possible experiences Adam and Eve will have if they eat of the tree at the middle of the garden.

Also, the story of the Tower of Babel also exposes two epistemic paradigms. The first epistemic paradigm is the situation of speaking one language with one perception and interpretation of reality that led to an agreement by humanity to build a tower up to heaven. Then the Supreme Being steps into the narrative and introduces another epistemic paradigm that produces multiple languages with different perceptions and

interpretations of reality such that humanity may not be able to see or perceive the same event from only one paradigm, worldview or perspective; thus the discontinuation of the building of the Tower of Babel up to heaven.

Using the critical and analytic methods, this paper argues that the stories of the “Fall” of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and that of the multiplication of human language at the Tower of Babel support epistemic pluralism.

Clarification of Terms:

The following terms: (a) Judaeo-Christian (b) Epistemic and (c) Pluralism are clarified below.

(a) Judaeo-Christian:

The Christian Bible comprises of the Old Testament which is the spiritual book of the Jewish religion (Judaism), and the New Testament which contains the fulfillment of prophecies of the Old Testament in the person of Jesus Christ, and the early life of the followers of Jesus Christ (Christians). Thus the term “Judaeo-Christian” refers to the shared beliefs of Judaism and Christianity as stated in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible.

(b) Epistemic:

The term “epistemic” refers to knowledge claims as it relates to the totality of human experiences which include, but not limited to sense perception, reason, consciousness, intuition, revelation, feeling and telepathy, dreams, etc. It incorporates propositional knowledge which has been the major preoccupation of Western philosophy, and the knowledge systems of the philosophies of the East (Asia) and South (Africa). Thus, to adequately capture the scope of the “epistemic” one should add to propositional knowledge other forms of knowledge derived from “mirages, hallucinations, dreams, astral travels, and the

most fantastic imaginable things”² for they are all part of the human experience of reality.

(c) Pluralism:

Pluralism in metaphysics is the “philosophical position that there are many nonreducible substances.”³ In epistemology it is the position that these nonreducible substances will produce unique and nonreducible conceptual schemes with which reality is explained or made meaningful. Epistemic pluralism, therefore, can be construed as the different, unique and cognitively valid ways of justifying knowledge claims. It is an acceptance of various ways different races and cultures conceptualize and make meaning of their experiences of reality. Here, worldviews, paradigms, and different forms of logic are accepted and tolerated.

The Nature of Epistemic Pluralism

One can argue for two forms of epistemic pluralism. One form is the different and unique ways persons within a nation or continent who share the same essential (and sometimes accidental differences in) worldview conceptualize reality. Within this form of epistemic pluralism, in so far as it proceeds from a common and shared worldview, one can pursue and probably achieve some consensus from the different knowledge claims produced.

From the three prominent metaphysical schools of thought in Western philosophy – idealism, materialism, and creationism – consensus may be reached. For instance, In a Platonic sense, objects in the world of Idea or Form cannot be added to or be reduced in number. For Democritus, atoms cannot be added to or reduced in number. The Supreme Being in most creationist accounts cannot increase or decrease in perfection or substance. Thus, one can argue that the three prominent metaphysical schools listed above have something in common: a *constant* that cannot

² J. A. I. Bewaji, *An Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge: A Pluricultural Approach* (Ibadan: Hope Publication, 2007), 31.

³ Max O. Hallman, *Traversing Philosophical Boundaries*, 2nd Ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2003), 664.

be added to or decreased. Also, within a given worldview from which epistemic claims are made, one can argue, to a reasonable extent, for better or best, more or most reasonable and coherent ways of justifying reality.

The other form of epistemic pluralism can be derived from the different ways peoples of different races and cultures of different continents conceptualize reality and justify their knowledge claims. Here, people of the same race and continent who accommodate more than one distinct and different worldview or paradigm for making sense of their experience of reality also comes in. The worldviews or paradigms in question here are distinct, different, and unique. A worldview or paradigm that reduces reality to material things is unique, or radically different from a worldview that reduces reality to ideas in the human mind; it is also unique and radically different from a worldview or paradigm that is a unitary world of material and nonmaterial realities (a unitary world of material things and minds or spirits or vital force). The epistemology that each of these radically different and unique worldviews or paradigms will produce will also be radically different and unique to the peoples, races, or cultures that produced them. And, since persons, to a large extent, are products of the society, environment, religion, or culture in which they were nurtured and educated, it will be difficult (if not impossible) to synthesize radically different and unique epistemologies into one without being excessively biased to the particular or preferred epistemology with which one attempts the synthesis. It is also difficult, if not impossible, to access different epistemologies from a neutral point of view since we were nurtured differently. This further explains why “The justification of knowledge claims varies from culture to culture, and from one epoch to another.”⁴ An example of two worldviews with radically different perceptions of reality is given below:

And, just as Western epistemologists who believe in materialism philosophise within the scope of materialism with

⁴ Sylvester Idemudia Odia, *Personhood and Epistemic Interactivism in Indigenous Esan Thought* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2019), 2.

which they make meaning out of their experiences, so also African epistemologists who believe in the unitary world of the material and the nonmaterial realities philosophise within the scope of those realities with which they make meaning out of their experiences.⁵

To be fair to the epistemologies produced by radically different and unique worldviews or paradigms, one has to access them from their unique point of view, and produce them as alternative epistemologies to be taught to all persons to enable them exercise freedom of choice in choosing an epistemology for themselves. And, after a choice is made, no epistemologist or group of persons who favour a particular epistemology should consider their choice of epistemology as the better or the best of all the epistemologies so far produced by humans. The most they can comfortably say is that their epistemic preference, after due consideration of all the epistemologies available, is the one that will enable them make the best of their experiences of reality. This attitude of broadmindedness is also a pointer to epistemological humility.

For sure, champions of objectivity will find the above view most likely unacceptable, and may even say it promotes relativism. However, the position of this paper is that within the schools of thought in epistemology that proceed from a given worldview or paradigm one may strive to arrive at objectivity. But among different and unique epistemologies that cut across cultures and races one should accommodate relativism in the spirit of epistemic pluralism. In other words, within epistemologies one can argue for objectivity within relativity. This is because in every radically different and unique epistemology (which is relative to other radically different and unique epistemologies) there is the possibility of objectivity that may be arrived at via synthesis of the schools of thought that share in the worldview that produced it.

⁵. Odia, Personhood and Epistemic Interactivism in Indigenous Esan Thought Odia, 13.

The Judaeo-Christian Worldview:

In the Western philosophical tradition within which one can situate the Judaeo-Christian worldview, there are many worldviews. Three worldviews readily come to mind: materialism, idealism, and creationism.

Materialism is the philosophical position “that only physical matter and the properties of physical matter exist.”⁶ It can also be seen as the view that “all that exists is material or is completely dependent on Matter for its existence.”⁷ Upon this philosophical position is built the theory of Atomism, the Big Bang Theory, and Evolution Theory among others. Contrary to materialism, and unique and distinct from it, is the theory of idealism. Idealism is the philosophical position “that holds that the most important element in the nature of reality is mind or spirit.”⁸ In other words, “there are no material objects, only minds and their ideas.” Here we have Plato's idealism (in his world of Idea or Forms), Berkeley's Subjective Idealism, Hegel's Absolute Idealism, etc.

Creationism, which is the Judaeo-Christian world view, is the view that God, the Supreme Being, is real, exists, and responsible for our existence or creation.¹⁰ Or, put in another way, “By Creation we are referring to the theory that the universe and all life forms came into existence by the direct creative act of a Creator external to and independent of the natural universe.”¹¹ Similar to the worldview of African cultures, Creationism as conceived in the Judaeo-Christian tradition believes in one unitary world made up of the material and nonmaterial world. The material world is made up material things (animals, plants, rivers, sky, planets, mountains,

⁶. Hallman, *Traversing Philosophical Boundaries*, 662.

⁷. James A. Gould, Ed., *Classic Philosophical Questions*, 7th Ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1992), 335.

⁸. Richard H. Popkin and Avrum Stroll, *Philosophy Made Simple*, 2nd ed. Revised (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 130.

⁹. Hallman, *Traversing Philosophical Boundaries*, 660.

¹⁰. Hallman, *Traversing Philosophical Boundaries*, 116.

¹¹. Duane T. Gish, “Creationist Science and Education”, in G. Lee Bowie, Meredith W. Michaels, & Robert C. Solomon, Eds., *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*, (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomas Learning, 2004) 134.

etc.), while the nonmaterial world is made up of spirit beings created by God (angels, demons, spirits or souls of saints/ancestors) and the human souls (the life given breath in humans that proceeds from the Supreme Being and that can survive the demise of the human body).

In the Creationist tradition, knowledge belongs to the Supreme Being alone. In the Augustinian tradition, the Supreme Being, however, infuses knowledge about creation to humans. The human soul is a rational soul that interprets imperfect sense data in search of eternal truth. Humans are able to attain this eternal truth through divine illumination: “By grace, the light of God illuminates the reason (sapientia) unchanging truths, enabling the mind to grasp them. These truths and ideas are in the mind of God and were used to fashion the universe.”¹² Also, from the perspective of St Thomas Aquinas, the human being is a fusion of a body and a rational soul to the extent that to have knowledge of nature and the Supreme Being both the senses and the rational soul play significant rolls. True knowledge takes place “when the intellect conforms to the thing itself and finds its being and nature in God's creation.”¹³ Humans are to develop a relationship with God who possesses the blue print about creation so that they can have a share in knowledge and consequently acquire wisdom.

Prior to the theory of divine illumination of St. Augustine, and natural theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, one can advance the theory of direct/immediate conversation or communication between humans and the Supreme Being in the Garden of Eden. This direct conversation or communication as a method of acquiring knowledge from the Supreme Being we shall now discuss.

The Garden of Eden:¹⁴

It is recorded in the Bible that in the Garden of Eden the Supreme Being

¹². Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *Christian Philosophy: A Systematic Narrative Introduction* (U. S. A.: Baker Academic, 2013), 71.

¹³. Bartholomew and Goheen, *Christian Philosophy: A Systematic Narrative Introduction*, 89.

¹⁴. Genesis Chapter 2: 8 – Chapter 3: 7.

comes in the cool of the evening to engage in conversation with Adam and Eve (believed to be the first male and female created by the Supreme Being). After sometime, an event took place popularly referred to as the “Fall”. It is the event of the disobedience of Adam and Eve. This event introduces contraries—the instruction of the Supreme Being, on the one hand, and the contrary instruction of another being (the serpent) believed to be an evil being. These two instructions pertain to a reality in the middle of the Garden of Eden – the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil¹⁵ (of which the knowledge of good and evil is studied in ethics). These two instructions are contrary or opposed to each other, though they are of the same reality or issue. This introduces into human history different ways humans can be made to perceive the same reality: the command of the Supreme Being forbids humans of eating of the fruit along with possible punishment or consequences of mortality; while the contrary view of the serpent (representing the evil one) encouraged the eating of the fruit with the possible benefits of immortality – becoming like gods with the ability of knowing good and evil.¹⁶

The above event was the first test of the exercise of freedom of choice for Adam and Eve. For the freedom of choice to be a genuine one it has to be pluralistic in form. It has to be a choice between two different and unique epistemic positions within the same worldview. Giving the limits of human judgement about facts of reality from sensation or experience (for the fruit was pleasing to the eyes and appetizing), and the limits of reason (that had not fully contemplated and fathomed the possible benefits of obeying the commands of the Supreme Being; as well as the possible consequences of obeying the serpent) Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree at the middle of the Garden of Eden, and the consequences of disobeying the Supreme Being followed. They then realized that they have been deceived by the serpent. They can now make moral decisions (about good and evil) alongside factual decisions (“what is”) about reality and be responsible for the consequences of their moral and factual decisions. Stanley Rosen gives an epistemic explanation of this whole

^{15.} Genesis. 2: 16 – 17; 3: 1 – 7.

^{16.} Genesis 3: 5.

phenomenon this way:

Let us say for the moment that there are two main types of knowledge. One type is of how things are; the other type is more complicated and includes knowledge of good and evil as well as the beautiful and the ugly. We often refer today to these two types as knowledge of facts and values. In the Bible, the latter kind of knowledge is more fundamental than the former. This is illustrated by the story of the Garden of Eden, in which God forbids Adam and Eve to taste of the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. God is silent about knowledge of truth and falsity, but this knowledge comes only after expulsion from the Garden of Eden. It depends upon our fallen condition, which in turn is brought about by knowledge of good and evil. Knowledge of both kinds is thus presented in the biblical account as a consequence of human disobedience, or, in other words, of our imperfection.¹⁷

The reality that Adam and Eve were subjected to before the “Fall” is radically different from the reality they were subjected to after the “Fall”, even though these two radically different realities are from the same worldview – Creationism. Thus, the epistemology that can be deduced from the state of Adam and Eve before the “Fall” is not the same with the one that can be deduced from their state after the “Fall”. The epistemology that can be deduced before the “Fall” is a type of idealism (an understanding of material things from the perspective of the Creator who is not a material reality), while the epistemology that can be deduced after the “Fall” is a type of humanism (an understanding of material things solely from the perspective of humans uninfluenced by the perspective of the Creator). However, it suffices to say for now that this radical difference between the two realities points to epistemic pluralism within Creationism.

In addition it is important to note that the essence of Judaism and

¹⁷ Stanley Rosen (ed.), *The Philosopher's Handbook: Essential Readings from Plato to Kant*, (New York: Random House Reference, 2000), xv – xvi.

Christianity seems to be the agenda of arriving at a synthesis that will take humans back to the original state of direct relationship with the Supreme Being (which, as explained above, is a type of idealism) but operating from the current state which is a type of humanism.

Let us further examine another incident recorded in the Bible that points to epistemic pluralism, an incident that took place at the Tower of Babel.

The Tower of Babel:¹⁸

The confusion of the languages of humans in the story of the Tower of Babel is another account that points to epistemic pluralism in Creationism. The story is that humans were united with one language and unity of purpose. Thus, it is possible for them to achieve anything they make up their minds to achieve. In the story, humans set their minds at building a tower up into the sky to possibly reach the throne of the Supreme Being which they believed was up in the sky. I doubt if it is possible to reach the throne of the Supreme Being who is a nonmaterial reality (heaven) through a material means (a tower). However, this action of humans could symbolize many things, one of which could be the ability to achieve a chosen possible goal which may not be positive and could be detrimental to humanity. In any case the Supreme Being intervenes by upgrading humans from mono-lingual to multi-lingual for two possible reasons: (1) to help humans out-grow the pride (as a result of the “Fall”) that human reason alone is capable of attaining all the truths of reality just because they speak one language and conceptualize reality from the language they speak (especially as a mono-lingual person perceives reality from the limits of his or her linguistic schemes built upon his or her worldview, and this can be very myopic); (2) the need to vary the language of humans so that different conceptual schemes can be produce which in turn can produce different epistemologies capturing different aspects of reality which, when properly harnessed, can produce a close to complete picture of reality.

However, the introduction of many languages by the Supreme Being led

^{18.} Genesis 11: 1–9.

to the abandonment of the project of building a tower to the sky, and also led to the separation and spread of the human race along linguistic affinity to all parts of the world. One of the consequences arising from the introduction of many languages was the movement of humans to other parts of the world, and this movement subsequently led to the different ways humans conceptualise their experiences of reality influenced by their environment.

Now, giving the assumption and fundamental belief that the Supreme Being is infinitely perfect one can reasonable argue that the act of multiplying the language of humans is ultimately for the good of humans. And, giving that different languages have different logic and create in the users (speakers of the language) different conceptual schemes with which meaning is made of human experiences of reality, one can also reasonably argue that the various worldviews and epistemologies that sprang from them are of immense good to humans.

Since the event of the Tower of Babel is one that took place after the “Fall” of humans, and in union with the position of this paper that the “Fall” of humans created a different reality from the initial one before the “Fall”, one can hold the position without fear of contradiction that from the event of the Tower of Babel, it seems the Supreme Being prefers variety of conceptual schemes to a lone conceptual scheme. This suggests epistemic pluralism in the perception, conception and understanding of reality.

Epistemic pluralism embraces different worldviews or paradigms of interpreting and understanding the experiences of reality. The duty of the epistemologist is to critically expose these worldviews or paradigms and state the areas they are connected and interrelated, or the areas they are radically different from one another. Any contradiction discovered in the belief of a people in relation to their interpretation or understanding of the experiences of reality should be resolved within their worldview or paradigm. If the contradiction cannot be resolved within their worldview or paradigm, then one can speak of a contradiction. Most of the so called

contradictions in the worldview or paradigm of a people are judged from the perspective of an alien cultural beliefs and practices, or from another worldview or paradigm. It seems difficult for a people to consciously accomodate a contradiction from within their conceptual scheme, worldview or paradigm. Understanding seemingly contradictions in a people's worldview or paradigm as it relates to knowledge discovery is one of the major tasks of epistemologists.

Furthermore, from the two experiences of the “Fall” of Adam and Eve, and that of the Tower of Babel, it is pertinent to note that the various ways humans conceptualize their experience of reality points to the rich diversity of reality. The human environment is not the same. People live in diverse environment and the environment influences their conception of and interpretation of their experience of reality. Thus it will be a grave disservice to humanity if epistemologists succeed in reducing human explanation and understanding of the various experiences of reality to that of a particular culture, paradigm, worldview or conceptual scheme.

Conclusion

The story of Adam and Eve and the reality they perceived before and after the “Fall” point to epistemic pluralism within Creationism. Since the tempter did not essentially change the worldview of Adam and Eve, but simply gave another epistemic interpretation of the possible consequences of eating of the fruit, one can deduce two epistemic positions within the same worldview of the Supreme Being as Creator. Thus, the event of the “Fall” adequately captures the first sense of epistemic pluralism within the same worldview. Furthermore, within this first sense of epistemic pluralism one can strive to arrive at an epistemic objectivity that will be a resume of the two conflicting and different epistemologies towards arriving at an epistemic position that captures the essence of the worldview in the current confused fallen state of humans.

In the case of the multiplication of languages at the Tower of Babel, one can see the second sense of epistemic pluralism at play. The different

worldviews and consequent epistemologies that emanated from the event at the Tower of Babel was monumental. This explains why the conceptual schemes deduced from the language of some cultures are very different and unique compared to those of other cultures. This suggest not only epistemic pluralism in the second sense as explained in this paper, it also suggests epistemic relativity.

However, epistemologists who champion objectivity across languages and cultures should first and foremost recognize and accept epistemic pluralism. Such a recognition of epistemic pluralism, especially as deduced from the Judaeo-Christian point of view espoused in this paper, will not support a reduction or subsuming of all worldviews or paradigms into a particular prevalent or dominant worldview or paradigm. All efforts to push down the throats of humans a single metaphysics or worldview or paradigm in the name of objectivity will be myopic and, if successful, will make humans intellectually poorer than we currently are.

Since epistemic pluralism in the second sense, as understood from the Judaeo-Christian point of view, evolved from a single language (from which all other languages emerged), there is the possibility of attaining a synthesis that could lead to objectivity in epistemology. But until we have truly excavated, understood and appreciated all epistemologies, the business of striving at objectivity cannot begin, and, if attempted, will be biased and unachievable.

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