

EPISTEMIC BELIEFS AS BASIS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

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Abstract

Many conflicts in the world today, in the areas of politics, religion and ethnicity, are reflections of a dearth of understanding among cultures. Several studies have identified the need for cross-cultural understanding and tried to establish a basis for it in human biological make-up, the universality of emotions and lived experience. However, these attempts have not satisfactorily addressed the universal epistemological basis for cross-cultural understanding, the absence of which has caused social conflicts to persist. This paper therefore, provides an epistemological foundation for cross-cultural understanding in terms of the relationship between basic and non-basic beliefs, with a view to establishing that epistemology, a traditional branch of philosophy, can be made to bear on contemporary social and political problems. The paper adopts aspects of Donald Davidson's theory of triangulation. This theory states that two persons from different cultures cannot have an incommensurate basic belief about an object, if the same object serves as the origin of the belief as well as justifier of the said belief. Analytical, critical and reconstructive methods of philosophy are employed in this research. The paper finds out that recognition of overlap of primary beliefs between cultures serves as the main basis for facilitating the resolution of conflicts engendered by cross-cultural misunderstanding. Therefore, a universalist epistemology of beliefs constitutes an essential basis for cross-cultural understanding. The paper shall be divided into four segments. The first part examines the nature of epistemic beliefs, while the second segment delves into the two major kinds of beliefs – basic and non-basic beliefs. The third part makes an in-depth analysis of epistemic beliefs as basis for understanding. The last segment is the conclusion.

Keywords: Cross-cultural understanding, Belief, Epistemology, Triangulation

Introduction

One of the major problems confronting the world today is the problem of tension of identities. Culture has become a major reason why so many societies are plunged into one form of war or the other. By culture, we are referring to the embodiment of a world-view learned and transmitted through beliefs, values and practices, including religious and spiritual traditions. Culture encompasses a way of life informed by the historical, economic, ecological and political forces of a group. These definitions suggest that culture is fluid and dynamic and that there are both culturally universal phenomena and culturally specific or relative constructs. In recent times, there has been an ongoing tension in the world that scholars of culture have not been able to properly explain. Some of the cultural tensions include the menace of Boko Haram in Nigeria, Al-Shabaab in Somalia and Kenya, Al-Qaida in Iraq and Yemen, etc. And the political tension between the United States and North Korea.

Against this background, the major question is: what can be responsible for these tensions and how can they be resolved? One school of thought holds that the problem of cultural

tension is one that is tied to the very core and nature of humankind – for this school, human nature is selfish, individualistic, and naturally conflictive, that cultures will naturally pursue their interests defined as power, and that such interest will come into conflict with those of other cultures leading to the inevitability of conflict – in a sentence, cultures are incommensurate and as such, there will always be conflicts. This is the position of the realist theory of conflict (Best, 2006:21). One may ponder whether the egoistic nature and feeling of self-preservation inherent in world cultures negate a possibility for cross-cultural understanding. A different school of thought answers in the negative that in spite of the flaws in human nature and the idea of incommensurability among world cultures, cross-cultural understanding is possible (Wiredu, 1996:5). If we go with the latter school, what is the basis for cross-cultural understanding? This problem has plagued researchers for ages and attempts have been made to answer the question in the affirmative. However, most of the attempts failed in adequately establishing a basis for it. For instance, Charles Darwin rests the possibility for cross-cultural understanding on the ‘universality of emotions theory’, which hinges directly on common ancestry for all humans. This position was countered by Ekman in (Lewens 2007:157), when he writes that common ancestry does not in any way explain why diverse cultures express emotions in the same way. Consequently, Kwasi Wiredu rests his analysis on two important factors: (1) the universal mode of human cognition, and (2) the actuality of inter-conceptual scheme dialogue (Wiredu, 1993:151). This position also has its shortcomings because for him, understanding is hinged on mutual respect among cultures. This implies that without respect, no understanding. There was also an attempt by Wilhelm Dilthey in (Schmidt 2006:32) to establish a basis for cross-cultural dialogue which he did through the introduction of lived experience even though he failed to explain his idea of what he considered as a lived experience.

It is against this background that this paper argues that the basis for cross-cultural understanding rests in the interconnectedness of human beliefs. Irrespective of cultural differences, our beliefs as members of the human family are interconnected. It is the interconnectedness of beliefs that makes cross-cultural understanding possible. The paper argues that every sociological context as in Dilthey, evolutionary context as in Darwin, and biological context as in Wiredu rest on beliefs, and it uses the views of Donald Davidson, Harris and Doyal, and more recently, Hamid Vahid to buttress its position. In the next section, we shall examine the nature of epistemic beliefs.

The Nature of Epistemic Beliefs

By beliefs, we are referring to the primary cognitive state that represents the world as being in a certain way, regulating our behaviour and guiding us around the world (Vahid, 2009:4). The question that comes to mind is whether we can categorically say that any cognitive state qualifies as belief. This is far from being the case because for a cognitive state to qualify as belief, according to Vahid it must meet certain conditions that are epistemic in nature. These conditions include: (1) commitment to truth (2) sensitivity to evidence – for a belief to be termed reasonable or rational, or for it to be properly designated an epistemic belief, it must

possess an adequate ground for justification. This is where the idea of perceptual beliefs comes into play – i.e. beliefs that are governed by evidential norms in the sense that a rational perceptual belief is one that is supported by sensory experience. This implies that the idea of basic belief that provide evidence for the other beliefs are founded on experience (3) Epistemic beliefs also have the feature of eliciting certain behavioural patterns from those that hold these beliefs. Before we examine how the interconnectedness of human beliefs can engender understanding across cultures, we shall first consider the classes of beliefs.

Basic and Non-Basic Beliefs

Beliefs as we have mentioned, are distinguished from other cognitive states by the fact that they are sensitive to evidence. Evidence, however, can either be doxastic or experiential. By being doxastic, we are referring to evidence that cannot be justified by perceptual states or experience. Our concern in this paper is tied to the latter kind of evidence; that is, the experiential evidence. Even though there have been questions as to the epistemic liaison between sensory experience (perception) and belief, there is a dichotomy between foundationalism and coherentism in terms of structure of justified beliefs. To the coherentists, for a belief to be true, it has to fit neatly into a given system of beliefs or rather, it should be explained within the given system that generated it. The foundationalist on the other hand, justifies a belief as true only if it is traceable to an object causing stimuli that generated it. Having made that point, for the purpose of consistency, we shall limit ourselves to the foundationalist theory as a viable justification for beliefs irrespective of cultural standpoint.

Beliefs, to say the least, are of two kinds; namely, primary (basic) beliefs and secondary (non-basic) beliefs. By primary beliefs, we are referring to the belief states that are caused by common natural objects in the world such as trees, mountains, rain, and so on. At this level of belief, there is usually not much disagreement because our beliefs are justified by these common denominators observed in nature. For instance, a Hausa man and a Spaniard may not have much to disagree about concerning the phenomenon of rain at the basic level. The Hausa man knows he will be wet if he goes out in the rain. The Spaniard has the same belief about being wet in the rain. At this point, both the Hausa man and the Spaniard's belief concerning rain is tied to and justified by common object – rain. At this point, there is usually no disagreement. If this is the case, why do cultures still disagree especially when beliefs are justified by common objects? This question is addressed at the second level of belief known as the non-basic beliefs. At this level of belief, interpretation sets in. For instance, even though the Hausa man and the Spaniard both have the same basic belief about being wet if one goes out in the rain, yet the Hausa man may hold another belief still about rain that if he goes out in the rain he might get lucky all through that day. The Spaniard may not agree with the Hausa man's interpretation of the rain phenomenon this way. It is at the non-basic level that disagreement sets in.

Technically, basic beliefs are those beliefs that acquire their justified status without standing in any relevant relation to other beliefs, whereas, non-basic beliefs or secondary beliefs are

arrived at by reasoning (broadly construed from basic beliefs) (Vahid, 2009:69). Reasoning can only confer justification if the beliefs from which we have reasoned are themselves justified. So, there has to be a set of basic beliefs whose justification obtains independently of other beliefs – these beliefs are what we refer to as basic or primary beliefs. And the basis for cross-cultural understanding rests on the basic and not the non-basic beliefs.

Basic Beliefs as Basis for Cross-Cultural Understanding

As earlier mentioned, belief is the paradigm propositional attitudes that regulate our actions and guide us around the world. It represents the world as being in a certain way, and it is said to be true if its representation matches its content. Consequently, to believe a thing, is to represent it as true. This means what distinguishes beliefs from other cognitive states like assumption, supposition, and imagination is its commitment to truth. Once the truth of a belief has been established, it carries some dispositive attitude towards that particular belief. The question now is how is truth conferred on a belief? Does it vary from culture to culture or do all cultures come to the tribunal of common experience to confer truth on a belief? Truth is conferred on a belief if that belief matches or represents what generates it and this is the same in all cultures. That is to say, for a belief to properly qualify as being epistemic, it must be based on evidence. The evidence in turn serves as the justifier for that belief state. This also means beliefs must have referents.

Consider for example, a class of beliefs about the spatial world whose members have the content that a particular mind-independent thing is determinately thus and so. Consider now how a Hausa man trying to explain certain *a priori* facts to someone from a different culture by means of descriptive analysis that $4+4 = 8$ will be able to achieve his aim especially where language is different and there is nothing to which his analysis refers. No amount of analysis can help achieve this when there is no referent.

Consider another scenario where his explanation involves bringing together four stones, and another four stones, in this case, understanding is made easier since his analysis will involve a form of demonstration – referents. This implies that, where the Hausa man's analysis is not purely descriptive because it involves some form of demonstrative components, the cultural other stands a better chance of understanding him because of the availability of referents. The point here is that, beliefs cannot be about individual things merely by containing descriptions, but must ultimately inherit the individual components of their content from perceptual demonstratives, i.e. from experience having intentional content of that "thing is thus" (Ibid.6). If our belief justifiers all have referents and our referents are those things or objects in nature like lakes, trees, etc. our beliefs about them irrespective of cultural standpoint cannot be incommensurate. There must be areas where my belief as a Hausa man must interconnect with that of the Spaniard for the simple reason that they share common referents. To this end, objects that give evidence to our beliefs at the same time serve as justifiers. So the interconnectedness of human beliefs can be justified on the basis of common justifiers for the contents of these beliefs.

Accordingly, we would say that perceptual experiences, as intentional states whose objects are aspects of the external reality, give rise to ‘demonstrative’ beliefs with the same or overlapping content. From our analogy, the Hausa man and the Spaniard share objects with the beliefs they give rise to. This may be what Vahid re-echoes when he writes that, “There is a conceptual link between the basis of a belief and its content (object) (Ibid).”

Against this background, I shall invoke Davidsonian idea of triangulation to strengthen my argument on how beliefs overlap irrespective of cultural standpoint. Before I do that, I will simply state some important points on Davidson’s project on radical interpretation, where an interpreter seeks to understand the language of an alien community without any antecedent knowledge of their thoughts or what their words mean. Assumptions involved in Davidsonian project provide an appropriate epistemic setting whereby the question of basing relation can be pursued without incurring the charge of circularity.

According to Davidson, belief ascription is constrained by the principle of charity. As emphasised, the process of charitable belief ascription is characterised by the aim of maximising truth and minimizing falsity in the speaker’s belief-system, which is actually how epistemic justification is generally characterised, namely, in terms of the aim of maximisation of truth and minimisation of error in an agent’s body of beliefs. (Davidson: 2002:76). Justification is widely understood as an evaluative concept whose attachment to a belief makes the belief worth having from the epistemic point of view – which as just noted is the goal of maximizing truth and minimizing falsity in a large body of beliefs.

According to Davidson, interpretation rests on reflections on what assumptions the interpreter has to make so that he could bring into harmony the concepts of the theory of interpretation with the speaker’s behavioural evidence. Adopting the radical interpreter’s stance, thus, requires that the meaning of an utterance and the object of a thought depend on how a speaker is embedded in her environment. To identify Davidson’s interpretation of meaning of a speaker’s utterance, I observed that the principle of charity has to be evoked. The problem is that charity requires only that a speaker’s belief about her environment be true. More is needed to ensure that these beliefs are actually correlated with the conditions that prompt them so that statements of such conditions can be taken to express the content of her beliefs. This means that, the thought of a speaker will depend on what causes it.

In case of a single responder, however, what she is responding to is indeterminate. If we take response to be just a causal relation, the production of an effect on an agent by a cause in her environment, then an agent responding to the environment can be regarded as responding to everything along the chain of stimulation. In order to generate a determinate interpretation, therefore, there must be some objective ways to select one of the links as the correct one. So, there must be an objective way of narrowing down the choice of the relevant causes of the speaker’s thoughts. What objective criterion can tell us what the thought is all about? The suggestion Davidson made here is ‘triangulation’. That is, the idea that what the speaker’s thoughts are about makes sense only against the background of a pattern of interaction with

the other speaker. So, we have the interpreter and the speaker triangulating upon mutually salient stimulus. Otherwise the stimulus is arbitrary and nothing ensures that any one's thoughts are about the external world as opposed to say, internal neural firings.

For instance, an observer's thoughts (Hausa man) about trees, are typically caused by trees. However, to determine the typical cause, we need to look at a number of situations in which tree-thoughts are caused and see which elements these situations share. The idea is to locate the stimulus typically causing the tree thoughts. Davidson's proposal is a form of triangulation, where one line goes from the first observer (Hausa man) in the direction of tree, and another line goes from the first (Spaniard in the direction of the tree, and the third line from the second observer). Where the lines from the Hausa man and the Spaniard to the tree converge, there the stimulus is located. On this, Davidson writes:

Until the triangle is completed connecting two creatures and each creature with common features of the world, there can be no answer to the question whether a creature is discriminating between stimuli at the sensory surfaces or somewhere further out, or further in. Without this sharing of reactions to common stimuli, thought and speech would have no particular content – that is no content at all (2002:76).

The point Davidson is making here is that our beliefs form a web because of their convergence on stimulus causing objects. For any form of understanding to take place, the perceptual beliefs must triangulate at some point. The point at which these perception beliefs triangulate are usually on objects in the world that are common to all cultures—stones, trees, lakes, etc. These are said to be responsible for our beliefs about them and the world. In the face of this convergence, how can we completely fail to understand each other? Consequently, because of content and shared objects of stimulus, beliefs are interconnected and the interconnectedness of beliefs makes for the possibility of cross-cultural understanding.

From our exegesis so far, a Hausa man can understand a Spaniard or an English man to the extent to which their perceptual beliefs converge. This may be why culture may be insignificant while reacting in the face of danger. Let us for the sake of known cultures tend to respond in the same way in the face of thunder '(aradu' in Hausa). The senses of apprehension that tend to cease the English man and Hausa man when lightning strikes in anticipation of thunder point to the fact that their beliefs concerning the phenomenon of thunder overlap at the basic level. Although at the secondary level, they may have different interpretations to this phenomenon, like thunder being as a result of the collision of electrically charged particles in the sky for the English man, or being the result of activities of certain divinities for the Hausa man, the truth remains that in spite of their cultural standpoint, something remains that cuts across their beliefs in the phenomenon - hence their similar reaction in sensing it. That thing that prompts their belief is embedded in their sharing a common belief justifier. This implies that the overlap of beliefs can serve as basis for understanding the cultural 'other'.

As stated earlier, epistemic beliefs are distinguished from other cognitive states because of the epistemic features - truth, evidence, and ability to elicit some form of behaviour on those that hold these beliefs.

So far, we have been able to argue that one of the factors that make a belief true is its ability to refer to something i.e., for a belief to be true, it must have a referent or correspond to reality, cohere within a system of other beliefs or put to test to be sure action matches words. This is not true for Western epistemology only but can also be applied to Hausa conception of truth (*gaskiya*). The idea *gaskiya* as expressed in Hausa language shows that once a statement deviates from what is accepted as paradigm case, it immediately ceases to be the truth but falsehood. This implies truth corresponding to reality or what is the case. But if what is the case always requires evidence of that which is objectified, then the English man and the Hausa man will always present the same evidence as basis of their beliefs in their respective cultures. Where this is the case, the argument of not understanding each other at all cannot be said to be plausible. The evidence cultures proffer for their respective beliefs have a common referent – nature. Wittgenstein underscores this point as quoted in Bell when he writes:

What is spiritual in all human beings lies in the connectedness of such phenomena as death, birth and sexual life, and in our way of acting that express the depth of joys, sufferings, hopes, desires associated with these phenomena. These are what “we really know” they play a part in philosophies and what we come to find interesting (Bell, 2002:9).

According to Wittgenstein, the evidence for interconnectedness or overlap of beliefs is centred around the fact that human experiences are similar to all cultures and in our discussions as members of the human family the possibility of not understanding the other at all is impossible given the common denominator evoked by all cultures as forming the basis for their beliefs.

It is against the above background that I argue that nature is one and objective, and at the same time, not an exclusive property of one culture. Because nature is objective, the idea of cultural incommensurability may no longer be tenable. Since nature is one, it follows that members of divergent cultures justify their beliefs on the same objective nature. This being the case, there must remain elements stemming from nature that can be identified in all cultures. The presence of these elements explicated in constitutive activities makes the theory of web of beliefs plausible.

The third feature that a belief must meet for it to be designated epistemic is that it must be able to elicit some form of behaviour on those holding that belief. This idea leads us to human sensuous activity. The thrust of this feature is that because our beliefs interconnect, we are able to carry out certain human practices irrespective of cultural standpoint. These common human practices are embedded in labour. Labour has the property of being intelligible and can be understood across cultures even when no word is uttered. This would not have been possible if beliefs do not form a web. So cross-cultural understanding is founded on web of beliefs that find outlet in labour.

Cross-cultural understanding comes from labour that is not restricted or limited to a group of people, culture, race, or religion but rather labour cuts across the whole human race and serves as vehicle for conveying meaning even when words are scarce. According to Doyal and Harris, “the view that structures of meaning are created on the foundation of human labour is not one that most would... dispute” (Doyal & Harris: 1983:60). Two culturally different aliens can still make sense of each other even when neither understands the language of the other because of the role of ‘human constitutive activities’. By constitutive activities we are referring to those activities that every human being must indulge in irrespective of his cultural leanings. Because these activities are not culture-bound. These include activities like eating, sleeping, agricultural production, reproduction, construction, sheltering, healing, playing, etc. None of these can be done in any old way. They are constrained by the laws of nature, as they affect, for instance, human biology and health, the communication of certain types of emotion, processes of agriculture and technological production, and the possibility of representing, communicating and storing information (Ibid).

The point we are making here is that, practical foundation helps agents of different cultures to engage one another even when language is different because of the interconnectedness of their beliefs. As earlier stated, for beliefs to be true, they require commitment to evidence. This implies that our beliefs are susceptible to empirical contingencies. That is to say, our beliefs are dependent for their justification on experience and human experiences overlap. The overlap in human experiences, their ideas of truth, and the common justifiers inherent in all human beliefs serve as the evidence that makes for the possibility of cross-cultural understanding.

Conclusion

I started by making the point that most problems in the world are tied to the inability for world cultures to understand themselves. This implies that where there is understanding, there will be less tension of identities. Different schools have tried to rest cross-cultural understanding on common ancestry, biological make-up, lived experience, etc. The fact remains that all of these will only be possible if and only if human beliefs overlap. For human beliefs to overlap, there must be a common referent or must be generated by common objects that serve as the cause and justifier of the belief state. Where this is the case, that is to say where objects serve as causes of belief states, two individuals from different cultures with the same object as belief justifier cannot have incommensurate belief about that object. Therefore, the paper concludes that epistemic beliefs are not only the basis but also serve as justification for the possibility of cross-cultural understanding.

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