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Valuing Epistemic Heritage without Embracing Relativism

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I would like to thank Aleksandra Łukaszewicz for her interest in my work and words of appreciation. Her reply gave me the chance to better specify the overall purpose of my article (Mazzocchi 2022), together with some key points and their broader implications.

Beyond Cultural and Epistemic Relativism

First and foremost, it was not my intention to support a ‘relativist point of view’ as a prerequisite for the endorsement of a broad epistemic pluralism, neither in the form of cultural relativism, nor in the possible related form of epistemic relativism.

Cultural relativism is usually portrayed through the formula ‘there is a single one world but multiple cultural representations of it’. An *a priori* dignity is recognized to all cultures, although only one of them is usually viewed as capable to meaningfully think such a relativity.

Especially the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology (e.g. Heywood 2017) has questioned the above formula. First, by introducing a methodological issue, i.e. the need for a radical openness to ‘difference’. Ethnographic data should have the possibility to question the theoretical assumption that are used to make sense of them.¹ By embracing this methodological tenet, anthropologists come to discover that the very idea of ‘culture’, i.e. the *raison d’être* of anthropology, in particular in its opposition to the idea of ‘nature’, is not experienced as such by many communities around the world (e.g. the Hagen people studies by Marylyn Strathern). Rather, it is likely to be another Western construct.

Second, by shifting the focus to the ontological level with the purpose of investigating, instigated by ethnographic evidence, alternative ways of ‘composing the world’ (Wagner 1975). We should assume, as proposed by its supporters, the reality of *multiple worlds*, following the principle of ‘ontological self-determination’ of the collectives involved (Viveiros de Castro 2014).

Of course, my article mostly tackled the epistemic level. Consequently, it was more concerned with making their ‘epistemological self-determination’ possible. This might be related to another postulate, which Viveiros de Castro (2014) uses to depict the panpsychism inherent in the Amerindian perspectivism: existing is having a perspective. All living beings (thus not only humans) are such just because of their ability to adopt a particular perspective. For such a reason, the Amazonian indigenous cosmos includes multiple ‘perspective centres’, each linked to a specific degree of personhood (see also Kohn 2013).

My focus was yet limited to human perspectives. Each perspective can be depicted as a *view from somewhere*, which is able to shed light on some aspects or portions of reality only at the price to overshadow others. Therefore, all perspectives provide glimpses of reality, but never

¹ Taking it to its extreme, this appears a hyper-empiricist stance. Not only because of the ‘theory-ladenness’ of data and observation, but also because, as shown by the development of Western science itself, there are specific circumstances in which arguing ‘against experience’ is epistemically proper.

its totality. At the same time, each perspective is also linked to the web of existing perspectives that all together form the overall epistemic sphere.²

Of course, the notion of ‘perspective’ has played a key role in several philosophical projects like those of Leibniz and Nietzsche. The world as represented by a monad or soul corresponds to the world viewed from a particular internal perspective. Nevertheless, Leibniz, in a famous passage of his *Monadologie* (1714), made it also clear that, although there are many different ‘living mirrors’ of it, there is still a single one universe:

Just as the *same* city viewed from different directions appears entirely different, and, as it were, multiplied perspectively, in just the same way it happens that, because of the infinite multitude of simple substances, there are, as it were, just as many different universes, which are, nevertheless, *only perspectives on a single one*, corresponding to the different points of view of each monad (§57, emphasis added).

We can know that the city (or the universe) seen from different viewpoints is yet the same city (or the universe) precisely because of the existence of a single unitary structure underlying the ‘translation’ of perspectives.

Perhaps we should resolve to speak of reality both in a singular and plural form. But to do this we should also recognize that considering the ontological and the epistemological sides as neatly separable may be misleading. Usually, what we consider as the world is, truly speaking, the *world-for-us*. On the other hand, ‘reality’ is both the result of a process, as it is shaped in our minds, and its starting point, as our minds have arisen and are in the world.

In a previous article (Mazzocchi 2018), I sketched a proposal of perspectivism, dealing with both metaphysical issues, e.g. attempting to make sense of the idea of world-for-us, and epistemological issues, e.g. discussing the possibility of multiple epistemic frameworks. I suggested a distinction between two meanings of ‘reality’, i.e. a primal dimension and multiple worlds-niches (i.e. the worlds-for-us). The niches correspond to what different collectives have contributed to build, resulting from their activity of setting boundaries and focusing on particular sets of relationships. However, they do not stand apart from the primal reality, which might be portrayed as a matrix of infinite possibility; rather they correspond to some of its possible actualization, or, to put it in Feyerabend’s (1999) terms, to stable structures of ‘responses’, showing how ‘Being’ reacts when it is stimulated or investigated in a particular way. If this is the case, then ‘reality’ can be viewed at the same time as *one* (i.e. the primal matrix) and *multiple* (i.e., the various worlds-niches).

² This sphere somehow resembles Lotman’s (1990) idea of the semiosphere, i.e. the ever-evolving semiotic space, which arises from the complex intersection of multiple centres, each with its own perspective and language. Lotman underscores the value of thinking *with* others, rather than *against* them, also focusing on the notion of ‘border’, i.e. a space that at the same time unites and separates, which can work as a crossing point and promote interchange and creolization.

We should suppose that the existence of multiple knowledge pathways is inherently entangled with the existence of multiple niches. And here another disputable form of relativism enters the scene, namely *epistemic relativism*, which usually takes the form of assuming an a priori ‘equal validity’ of all knowledge systems — as they are all relative — thus before investigating their content and meaning.

Leibniz (1875–90) would contrast this position by supposing the existence of a hierarchy of gnoseologically different perspectives, from purely sensitive knowledge towards forms of knowledge based not only on experience but also on the intellect. Feyerabend (1999) would instead assume that there are constraints upon human epistemic agency. In his view, reality is highly *pliable*, thus it makes room to multiple ways of knowing and living. However, it offers *resistance* too. Whereas it responds ‘positively’ to many different (e.g. epistemic) approaches, which ‘fit’ it in a way or another, others “find no point of attack in it and simply collapse” (145). Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that all perspectives have the same epistemic value.

Describing ‘reality’ as a combination of pliability and resistance is insightful. However, having described it as a matrix of infinite possibility, I cannot ascribe the feature of resistance to (what I have called) the primal reality. These patterns of resistance might emerge within the multiple domains of the worlds-niches, being them as many as the existing niches; although this is a decent hypothesis, it would allow for reasoning that only applies to the specific niche in question. In other respects, this idea would also be congruent with the possibility that there are multiple possible ways of judging the relative value of an epistemic system, owing to the existence of multiple possible points of view (epistemic polycentrism).

Otherwise, it might be supposed that the expression of the elemental matrix takes an initial direction in the form of a basic core of determination. This could be thought as a sort of substratum from which all niches arise, thus also preceding any possible cultural differentiation. As far as this elemental structuration takes place, the surfacing of some embryos of resistance is also allowed, providing a minimal basis against which the ‘fittingness’ of different epistemic undertakings is tested.

Epistemic Heritage and Its Preservation

My article was concerned with ‘cultural heritage’, critically reflecting on its conception but still using the language of that domain. The notions of ‘culture’ and ‘cultural diversity’ were primarily employed in a ‘pragmatic’ fashion to indicate specific modes of being in the world, which are also linked to specific ways of knowing, of distinct collectives. Its main point was that epistemic diversity should be recognized as an essential value: it is our epistemic heritage.

Why is today this particular type of heritage so important? What makes this moment in history an opportunity to look at it with new eyes? It is the future towards which we are heading. Clearly, we cannot predict its precise course; however, due to climate change and the overall trajectory of the Anthropocene, we must expect that it will be very challenging.

The last generations are experiencing the threat of species extinction and planetary catastrophe with an unprecedented clarity. It is thus crucial to investigate the (sociocultural and historical) patterns that brought us here, especially their dependence on the mindset of modernity, which nurtured dualistic schemes and patterns of separation, together with universalist pretensions.

Such an epistemic heritage takes the form of multiple ways of composing and classifying the world, multiple ways of knowing and developing technology, and multiple ways of relating to nature. It is a living reservoir of cognitive and adaptive means. For a long time, we have precluded the possibility to fully consider the potential inherent in it by considering a great part of this heritage as linked to primitive or outdated conceptions. It was much easier to view its expressions as material to be studied from our specialized perspectives than valuing the alternative perspectives they incorporate.

As discussed by Latour (2013), the ‘Modernists’ (*Modernes*) consider themselves as released from superstition, due to a ‘disenchantment’ of the world, and the only holders of great scientific and technological achievements. On the other hand, we have embraced a particular style of living, which has led us to progressively lost the sense of interconnectedness with nature. The current environmental crisis is, not by chance, the culmination of the direction followed by modern societies in the last few centuries.

In contrast with the ‘Modernists’, Latour identifies another category, namely the ‘Earthbound people’ (*Terriens*), who instead still rely on long-standing traditions and have kept a sense of non-dualistic unity with nature. For example, in the perception of many indigenous groups, the cosmos is highly interconnected — though not necessarily ‘harmonic’ — and each of its elements is a potential agent, rather than an object of exploitation or calculation. Indigenous knowledge holds deeper conceptions of sustainability and a cultural expertise on how to put them into practice (e.g. McGregor 2004; Whyte, Caldwell, and Schaefer 2018). In virtue of them, novel capabilities of ‘interventions’ on the world might be gained.

Of course, having in mind the existence of epistemic heritage is not enough; we should also engage in preserving it. But how to accomplish this is far from being a trivial issue. In this respect, it was not my intention to suggest specific measures or protocols, like those included in the various Conventions on Heritage regarding other forms of heritage.

In the Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention (2003), intangible heritage is described as encompassing knowledge systems too, also recognizing the threat posed to it by globalization and patterns of cultural homogenization. In principle, the Convention admits that most of this heritage is *embodied* in people (e.g. local communities), together with the importance of safeguarding processes and conditions that allow for cultural reproduction. In practices, however, it continues to reiterate approaches (as the ‘list and inventory’ one) that contribute to commodify the epistemic heritage: knowledge elements too come to be viewed

as ‘objects’ (of preservation), isolating them from their broader background and multilevel interconnections.

More than formal arrangements for protecting epistemic diversity or engaging in an ‘active’ preservation, there is the urge for an overall stance, i.e. a sort of philosophical appreciation (which might then also be evoked in some formal documents). It was for this reason that I recalled the distinction between the ‘descriptive’ and ‘normative’ thesis of knowledge pluralism. One thing is, in fact, to merely acknowledge the *existence* of multiplicity, to tolerate multiple localized ways of knowledge production as a matter of ‘respect’, yet not attributing to their outcomes a full epistemic potential (but perhaps the status of *belief*). Willing to take as epistemic validation criteria what other communities consider as such, and as ‘facts’ what they regard as facts, independently from their oddity to our eyes, is yet a different story. This stronger thesis takes seriously the possibility that there could be multiple genuine epistemic traditions, different localized ways to be ‘epistemically successful’, and perhaps multiple models of rationality.³

Algorithmic Knowledge and Virtual Artworks

The last part of Łukaszewicz’s reply regards some aspects of cultural heritage that deeply depend on technological developments, although focusing on issues not addressed by my article.

First, she wonders about the status of the knowledge generated through NLP algorithmic technologies, specifically the GPT3 language model, i.e. a huge neural network machine that uses deep learning to generate human-like texts, still requiring an (expensive) training and the support of human editors to provide significant outcomes (Floridi and Chiriatti, 2020). Łukaszewicz focuses on questions like (i) whether algorithmic means of similar fashion – which find correlations in immense amounts of data and use them to make ‘predictions’ – are able to generate genuine epistemic systems; (ii) whether the knowledge they generate should be considered part of the human or transhuman heritage; (iii) whether it should be preserved.

Now, it is right to be enthralled by the new possibilities provided by technological innovations. Still, we should also consider that, despite their technical complexity and relatively opacity to human understanding, the processes primarily involved in the aforementioned systems are rather simple, i.e. relying on correlations, statistical induction, and calculation. They self-learn on an inductive basis, basically assuming that the future will

³ A misjudgment that is often made in this regard is attempting to explain one situated system through the criteria and procedures of another situated system. As pointed out by Wittgenstein (1979), this way of proceeding risks to put us in the condition of attempting to understand the meaning of the word ‘checkmate’ without having knowledge of the game of chess. In philosophy just like in anthropology, there is the need to recognize that the investigated communities have themselves the cognitive resources to define their own stance and knowledge categories. Fully recognizing this would be an act of deeper respect and epistemic justice.

resemble the past,⁴ and somehow reflecting the Google-like way of ‘thinking’. An embodied mind is, however, also linked to further dimensions of human experience, including intuition, aesthetic sense, affection and existential memory.

Several scholars have also underscored how nowadays machines are not able to ‘understand’ the results they generate. Even having access to all the possible data and correlations among them, even having more refined statistical tools to analyze such correlations, to make sense of this multiplicity we still need concepts — for example, in the form of some theoretical accounts (e.g. Bencivenga 2017) — to unite separate parts into a whole. Artificial Intelligence does not yet reach the conceptual level of knowledge, working mostly in an additive fashion (Han 2021). Its knowledge generation process mostly entails making data ‘actionable’, i.e. reliable enough to justify some kind of action (Amoore 2011).

Furthermore, machines standardize, giving the sense of being neutral and not affected by human bias. However, one of the points of my article was that knowledge is linked to the real experience of a living tradition. The strength and identity of an epistemic endeavour strictly depends on its perspectival and contrastive nature, i.e. the ability to represent the viewpoint of a specific community in a given historical moment. Our epistemic heritage corresponds precisely to the plurality of perspectival knowledge, which arises from the diversity of viewpoints.

Therefore, more than offering answers to Łukaszewicz’s queries, I feel the need to add further questions: what type of knowledge can be produced by means of algorithms? What type of heritage are we talking about? Are we sure that advanced NLP systems will lead to the reconstruction of the notion of knowledge (Maciag 2022)?

Łukaszewicz also highlights how it is possible to create items like virtual artworks that, while originating from a dualistic intellectual milieu, are not anymore accountable in dualistic terms. This circumstance actually confirms the shortcomings of rigid dichotomic approaches, the entanglement of categories like material and immaterial, as well as their evolvability and relativity to the standpoint from which they are examined. In her words,

These artworks are neither material nor immaterial. They are materially different from physical objects in everyday life, being elaborated through a matter of digital rather than physical characteristics. It is reasonable to say then that though they are material in some sense, they should belong to intangible cultural heritage. However, their intangibility is only a relative category, because when they are considered from within the physical space they can be treated as intangible—yet considering from within the virtual space, they are tangible and can be touched or moved in this space (Łukaszewicz 2022, 46).

⁴ This is not, of course, the place to discuss Hume's well-known sceptical argument, which however does not preclude the possibility to perform proper inductive reasoning (e.g. Howson 2000).

All the aforementioned issues are surely worth to be considered. However, since they regard the implications of Western technological development, they narrow the focus to an *intracultural* level. My piece was instead mostly concerned with comparing different cultural frameworks, their knowledge systems and understanding of heritage.

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