

The Epistemology of Person-Centered Ethnography

The heart has its reasons of which reason knows
nothing: we know this in countless ways
—BLAISE PASCAL, *PENSÉES*

In writing against the rationalists who argued that reason was capable of revealing to each person all that she needed to know, Blaise Pascal argues that the mind can only take us so far and that there is rightly motivated action with its origins in the heart, in the tenaciously held position of faith, that reason can neither understand nor express. This anti-rationalist epistemology, later espoused by such philosophical greats as Søren Kierkegaard, is one voice in Western philosophy, a voice that Unni Wikan seems be ignoring in her critique of Western epistemology. It seems, however, that such streams of thought ought to be credited by Wikan for her desire to liberate Western social scientific inquiry from the traditional antimonies and ideological insistence on detached, rational objectivity that has come to dominate Western analytic philosophy since the advent of positivism.

In Wikan's ethnography, *Managing Turbulent Hearts*, the widely cited idea that Balinese do not express emotions, as advanced by Clifford Geertz and others, is eschewed. In fact, in postulating a Balinese formula for living, Wikan advances that Balinese do experience and are capable of reading one another's emotions, upon which she builds her critique of Western understandings of the apprehension of knowledge and personhood. This conclusion is intimately linked to her person-centered ethnographic method, although the causal connection (from method to epistemological stance) that she advances may be challenged. It is important, however, to analyze Wikan's methodology and her overt statements about her epistemology before making a comparison of them to

certain trends in Western philosophy that she has erased in her iconization of all Western philosophy as positivistic in nature.

In distinction to Geertz's study of person, time, and conduct in Bali, Wikan argues that anthropologists need to be attentive to "the lived significance of cultural concepts...why people act as they do...[and] the continual contestability of truth and circumstance in people's lives" (W, 12). We are immediately presented with a juxtaposition, or rather an integration, of methodological interests and concerns with definitions of personhood and knowledge. In understanding people, we need to be concerned with the *significance* of cultural concepts. The actual meanings of the cultural concepts are not as important as how the concepts are used, how they are embodied, or rather in Wikan's person-centered language, how people embody such cultural concepts. There is a striking similarity of this claim to a leading voice in contemporary philosophical pragmatism, Richard Rorty. Wikan invokes Rorty in her epigraph at the head of chapter fourteen, however, in a different work than that cited by Wikan, Rorty makes a claim that is particularly resonant with that of Wikan. In distinguishing himself from Umberto Eco, Rorty argues that a pragmatist's view of the distinction often drawn between meaning and significance is that "all anybody ever does with anything is use it. Interpreting something, knowing it, penetrating to its essence, and so on, are all just various ways of describing some process of putting it to work" (Rorty, 134). That is to say that the meaning of something *is* the same as its significance; a cultural practice, therefore, can be seen as having meaning only insofar as it is used. The role of the anthropologist is then to attend to how these cultural concepts are used. Wikan's acknowledgement of this position is profound, in

that it is at one and the same time a claim to an epistemology at variance with the dominant analytic philosophy and a methodological clarion call for anthropologists.

Continuing to address the same vision that Wikan has for anthropologists, we see that in order to get at such significance, to determine how it is that people embody, use, and manipulate cultural concepts is to explore the motivational effect of such cultural concepts. Anthropologists need to be attention to “*why* people act as they do.”

According to Rorty, people act the way they do in order to muddle through, to cope with the world. “Pragmatists...start with a Darwinian account of human beings as animals doing their best to cope with the environment” (Rorty, xxiii). Wikan embraces a similar view as well, as she argues that “socialization consists in teaching the young how to cope, how to steer clear, and how to respond when misfortune nevertheless strikes” (W, 32).

The role of cultural concepts is to motivate people, to allow them to cope with their world, a world that is largely a social construction of all such cultural concepts.

Methodologically to attend to this kind of information, to discern how “cultural templates penetrate to the innermost of people’s souls” (W, 17) requires a detailed analysis of the entire of a person’s life:

We should follow people *across domains* to discover what are the meaningful connections *they* perceive and the distinctions that *they* draw. Lives inevitably have some kind of unity—even when compartmentalized into roles and positions and partitioned by physical structures. It is this wholeness we need to grasp in order to understand what is at stake: and that is not done by relegating existences to either ‘public’ or ‘private’ realms (W, 18).

The final aspect of Wikan’s proposed study of persons rather than culture involves the recognition of “the continual contestability of truth and circumstance in people’s lives.”

This pluralist vision of truth is highly consonant with that of Rorty, who argues that “the objective—subjective distinction is replaced by distinctions between relative ease in getting agreement” (Rorty, 51). Thus the goal of inquiry is to achieve a usefulness, a

usefulness that is represented by a shared knowledge achieved through dialectic exchanges. The goal of the anthropologist is to recognize this contested nature of cultural concepts, concepts that are deployed strategically to solve problems and towards particular ends. We see in this understanding of anthropology an understanding of the way in which the Balinese just as much as we ourselves live by a contingent “application of concepts in a particular context in life” (W, 13).

Further highlighting the role of anthropological inquiry in raising one’s awareness of their epistemological grounding, Wikan argues that “meanings should be such as people themselves entertain at some level of consciousness and expression” (W, 15). Thus the anthropologist is to get at the universal, anthropologically generalizable through the study of the particular, the individual. These should not be imposed by the anthropologist, but should ideally be proposed by the people whom one is studying. For this reason “the truly significant meanings of symbols, signs, and events are such as propel and constrain people, and thus it is to *their* lives one must look to grasp what is entailed” (W, 19). In order to understand what motivates people, to understand the lived, embodied experience, one must probe the reasons espoused by informants themselves.

This methodological position, although useful, presents some problems. Wikan seems to be assuming a type of immediacy and in denying her role in selecting what information is to be published and in asserting that “context, then, did not entail a systematics (in which case it would necessarily have been *my* systematics) of observation, but an immersion in the relationship through participation in those parts of the flow of their lives into which they were willing to incorporate me” (W, 280), she is not only denying any opacity between her and her informants, but denies that she is deploying a systematic

epistemological position, albeit one in dialogue with her informants. In assuming that she, as a sensitive anthropologist, can “come to see the world—in a way—*through* her [informant’s] eyes” (W, 25) she is actually, I argue, missing one of the major epistemological points of those on whom she is drawing. Whether acknowledged or not, Pascal, Rorty and Renato Rosaldo all play a role in structuring Wikan’s epistemological position. Wikan argues that Rosaldo presents an understanding of knowledge in which “all angles of vision are particular ones and thus the sense that people make of their experience, the interpretations they draw, and the actions they embark upon proceed from singular rather than general viewpoints” (W, 23). This epistemological position accepts, as part of the human condition, what it means to *not* be able to fully perceive what another is thinking or doing. While this, in some sense, may be a refutation or limitation on the application of the theory of mind, it seems to me that Wikan attributes a greater ability to her own analytic inquiry than warranted, while at the same time denying her role in mediating her informant’s life, a position that seems to express the very hubris that Wikan is trying to avoid.

Given that Wikan argues that “it is an everyday existential dilemma for Balinese that they cannot know what significant others truly feel and hence what the motivating drive behind their actions might be” (W, 34), it is even more surprising that she would claim that *she* could know this with any certainty. In his own peculiar way, Rorty falls into a similar trap as Wikan, in asserting that through empathy, that which allows us to know and experience the Other, will guide us in “devising ways of diminishing human suffering and increasing human equality” (Rorty, xxix). Rorty’s project does not assume, however, in the same way that Wikan’s epistemology does, that we can *know* what it

means for another to suffer, what it means for another to feel like we do. Rather, he assumes that we can know what it means to alleviate these conditions, to *imagine* what the other might be feeling. This explicit reference to *imagination* as the very vehicle of empathy relies on an understanding of theory of mind. A theory of mind is, simply put, the ability to impute to another a mental state similar to one that one might experience for herself. This does not make any claim to actually know what the other *is* feeling, but rather serves as a basis for action, a much more humble claim than Wikan makes, in arguing that she has been able to penetrate her informant.

Despite my critique of Wikan, she does understand that imagining a state of mind of another is not the same as actually knowing the state of the other.

Not only can we not split people up into different realms and analyze each in its constituent elements, but we must assume that people carry a representation *of* themselves *as* they move and that this constitutes part of the cultural construction of the self. Moreover, it seems plausible to assume that ego construes alter as *also* carrying such a representation, so that when they meet, each carries a conception of the other as 'double-anchored.' This then would form part of the cultural construction of the self and the other (W, 115).

Despite this recognition that the self and importantly the idea that one can understand the other is constructed, it is surprising that Wikan then claims that "Balinese *do* often see through; that they try to do so even if they can't, but may still think they do; and that they attribute feelings, attitudes, and motives to each other on that basis" (W, 115-116). What is of interest to the cultural anthropologist, or so I would argue, is that they *do attribute emotions to one another*, something Geertz argued did not take place on Bali. However, Wikan's claim to be able to distinguish between instances when Balinese do see through and when they merely think they can see through asserts that there are times when people can get it right, a proposition that is not consonant with that of philosophical pragmatism, which hitherto Wikan has been seeming to embrace. Rorty argues with William James

that the truth *is* that which is expedient and useful, therefore to assert that there can be a correct apprehension of another—seeing through—is spurious and should be restated rather in terms of how effective action is that is planned based on one’s inference of another’s state.

Despite some occasions when Wikan does not seem to fully embrace or at least fully articulate her indebtedness to certain antirationalist positions in Western philosophy, there are some other times that she does so in a very explicit manner. For example, returning to the discussion of Wikan’s methodology, she suggests that “an outsider’s conception of logic or typology cannot serve as a measuring stick for what should or should not be included in our analyses” (W, 46) and we “should start, methodologically, with people’s compelling concerns as they were evinced through their everyday life experiences” (W, 47). I could not agree more, however, I am not sure that this is possible to the degree that Wikan and would hope. Rorty argues, in agreement with Wikan, that we “must abandon the traditional philosophical project of finding something stable which will serve as a criterion for judging the transitory products of our transitory needs and interests” (Rorty, xvi). The Hegelian project, which sought establish the *maßstab* by which to measure all knowledge has to be abandoned with the entirety of the Enlightenment Project that hubristically imagined it possible to have impartial and acultural “reason” as the core of the acquisition of all knowledge. Wikan argues for a more humble approach to anthropological analysis, recognizing that even as the anthropologist serves to mediate the experience of the other, she must do so by being “subjective in the sense of deploying oneself and one’s own, always limited and partial, sources of insight—a particular vantage point” (W, 267).

The anthropologist cannot assume that she has *the* point of view from which to make claims about the cultural concepts used by her informants, however, consonant with the pragmatist's project, the anthropologist should engage in "a groping for understanding, followed by the feeling that one has reached that and gone beyond, only again to plunge deeper into an awareness that the profoundest answers conceal genuine riddles" (W, 271). Our knowledge is always tentative and always in need of revision. Clifford Geertz recognized this in the very study of Bali which Wikan critiques for being too removed from the people and having missed the actual deployment of emotions in Bali. But in failing to recognize Geertz's own recognition of the incompleteness of partiality of his study, Wikan has also failed to recognize that Geertz did not "get it wrong," but rather was interested in a different set of questions than she was. Ironically, the very methodology that Wikan argues led her to the epistemological position assayed in this essay ought to have led her to recognize the correctness of Geertz's argument insofar as it furthered the project of anthropology and ushering in a way of thinking about the world as socially constructed that has allowed her own epistemology to make sense to other anthropologists.

The larger questions raised by my analysis of Wikan's epistemology and its relation to the methodology of person-centered ethnography requires us to ask, with Wikan, how it is that we are "to identify valid knowledge, relevant knowledge from different existential viewpoints" (W, 273). She argues that "a view of cultural knowledge as distributive and situated [does not] resolve what is at stake—for it is a question not of fitting pieces into a jigsaw puzzle but of grasping *lived-in worlds of compelling significance*" (W, 273). Although couched as a critique of cognitive anthropology, this takes us back to the

distinction made earlier, between meaning and significance. Cultural anthropology since Geertz's appropriation of Max Weber has been overly concerned with meaning, ignoring the embodied significance of such cultural concepts that Geertz argues are vehicles of meaning. In having coming to better understand and empathize with the Balinese, Wikan was able to make good use of the Balinese concept of feeling-thinking, which bears a striking similarity to the idea of the heart's reason invoked in the epigraph of this paper.

In further arguing that Western epistemology could learn a great deal from Balinese ethno-epistemology, Wikan draws attention to the holistic way in which "ethics, experience, and knowledge are interwoven in this view of science. Validity and relevance are also of the essence" (W, 279). This is one of the most succinct statements of pragmatic, antirationalist philosophy I have ever found. Knowledge cannot be divorced from its uses, such that the classic philosophical question of "What is the truth?" comes to be replaced by that more important question which is both logically and chronologically prior to questions of truth, namely, "How ought I to live my life?" Knowledge is granted utility insofar as it connects to life, solves problems and allows human beings to cope in the world in which they live. How relevant this knowledge is comes to be known through the deployment of the knowledge in situations in which it may be validated, verified—made true—in social circumstances.

Wikan is correct in asserting that "the prevalent Western epistemology is fundamentally culture-bound" (W, 279), however, not all aspects of Western philosophy, culture-bound as it and any other systems will necessarily be, are to be derided in the way she has derided an iconized version of Western thinking. In erasing aspects of Western philosophy upon which she relies, whether explicitly or not, Wikan may be seen as

foreclosing the possibility of deriving useful concepts from other “subaltern” philosophies of the West. Pragmatism, especially as represented by Rorty, is only the most recent example of antirationalist philosophy and offers the possibility of rendering “difference relatively insignificant in the face of that which counts more: shared human experience” (W, 282). There are problems with formulating such a universalizing statement out of what is an explicitly particularistic philosophy, however, I would take Wikan’s final call for openness as a call not only to be open to non-Western traditions of epistemology and for anthropologists to learn from the categories of their informants, but to also be open to antirationalist strands of thinking in Western philosophy: “Let us show enough humility toward other traditions of knowledge that we are open to the insights they teach” (W, 282).