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**Towards Decolonising. A Translating World Philosophy**

**Concepts as Praxial in Institutionally Working Disparate Epistemic Traditions**

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# Towards Decolonising. A Translating World Philosophy.
## Concepts as Praxial in Institutionally Working Disparate Epistemic Traditions

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## Abstract

The presentation introduces a translating world philosophy focused through epistemics. This involves articulating epistemics as collective actions in the here and now through which answers to politicoepistemic questions are enacted in the workings of concepts expressing a variety of epistemicities. In turn, this involves recognizing that the concepts through and in which such epistemics are rendered, as sets of practices, nothing more or less.

Re-conceptualising concepts *as* concepts began for the author with numbers in Yoruba classrooms in Nigeria, where alternative concepts of enumerated length seemed to circulate as simultaneously distinct, and in combination. Having fallen foul of the metaphysical commitments embedded in both dualistic and monistic conceptions of concepts in the past attempts to analyse and interpret experiences of this phenomenon (Verran, 2001; 2015),[1] here I ask about possibilities for praxial concepts. Inspired by two suggestive papers John Dewey published in 1922[2], as a concept of concepts, the model is articulated within explicit and minimalist metaphysical commitments which evade both dualism and monism. Recognizing that in 2022 the terms monism and dualism mean something other than they meant in 1922, I argue that in 2022 a Deweyan experiential naturalism where concepts are conceptualized as entities that eschew both contemporary monism and dualism in rendering metaphysical commitments through experience (Shook, 2000),[3] affords generative possibilities for translating world philosophies as they meet in institutional workings. The concept of praxial concepts affords institutionally working of disparate epistemic traditions together and separately, generating a decolonial institutional ethic.

## Introduction

I begin by situating this talk as a contribution in world philosophies. I am proposing a translating world philosophy focussed through epistemics, which in the tradition of John Dewey, I style as an experiential naturalism secured by pragmatic metaphysical commitments. I claim a translating world philosophy is a prerequisite for developing a decolonising institutional ethic.

A contemporary pragmatist form of naturalist philosophy, I take this translating world philosophy as one among many world philosophies, all of which translate to varying degrees and by various means. While most contemporary academic philosophies posit naturalism as metaphysical commitment, outside the academy most world philosophies are mystic or super-naturalistic in articulating their metaphysical commitments. Like almost all contemporary philosophies situated in the institution of the modern academy, the naturalistic philosophy I outline here identifies its origins in the institutional workings of one of the polities of Ancient Greece. Using the ancient terms of that origin, it secures itself through means which evade *muthos*— narratives of humans and human-like figures which sometimes take the forms of non-human animals, enacting various forms of sociality. In these narratives (myths) the enactments of the figures offer foundational answers to questions of ethos, value and telos, along with those of 'What is?', and 'Who knows it?', and 'With what form of certainty?'. In contrast the translating world philosophy I work with, like other academic philosophies, derives from the shift to *logos*—the diagrammatic version of articulating metaphysical relationalities that Plato took on from the institutional setting of Greek mathematicians, translating their methods into the workings of the *agora* and which in turn, Aristotle innovated in (Netz, 1999:289).[4]

In many collections of essays in 'World Philosophies', a description of this translating world philsophy would not find a place. This philosophy has not arisen as an expression of a particular world culture. Yet this translating world philosophy might be located in a category of the collection of essays that Edelglass and Garfield gathered together in 2011.[5] It fits into the final category of their taxonomy, 'Global Philosophy'. This is a category of essays in world philosophy that do not clearly belong in any category of the culture-based taxonomy of world philosophies that organises most of that book. The 'left-overs' gathered under the category 'global', treat an indigenous philosophy, feminist philosophies, a philosophy of (postcolonial) reparation, and cosmopolitanism. We might name these as 'worlding' or 'globalising' philosophies,[6] seeking to contribute in remaking our worlds. They are arising out of particular sociopolitical problems; they are not proposed primarily as expressions of found cultures.  Including the translating world philosophy in this category, recognises its origins in efforts to decolonise modern institutions.

## Knowledge as Institutionally Situated

In academic philosophy the second half of the twentieth century was characterized by vibrant movements towards recognizing and articulating the socialities of knowledge. Social epistemology, largely animated by feminist philosophers seeking to articulate the structuring roles of the sociobiological category of gender in epistemological matters, together with the

differently situated sociology of knowledge that intervened decisively in philosophy of science and mathematics, succeeded in establishing a widespread acceptance of knowledge as social at its core. Knowledge traditions are situated in, and co-constituting of, particular social orders articulated as various institutions: particular gendered, racialized, and classed social orders. Knowledge became widely recognised as institutionally situated and acceptance of that situatedness has further fostered movements for change.

The point I want to make in emphasising knowledge as social and as institutionally situated, is that such institutional situation is what *all* traditions of knowledge—modern academic and otherwise, hold in common. Irrespective of the type of means adopted in articulating metaphysical commitments, in the terms of Ancient Greece, with *muthos* or *logos,* a knowledge tradition and the practices in which it has life, happen in and as organised collective life forms—institutions. Irrespective of whether metaphysically secured by myth, or by articulating rational grounds, or by citing praxis (as the philosophy I propose here does), knowledge traditions are social and subject to explicit and active organisation; they are unfolding events that might be intervened in.

This brings me to the need to recognise that institutions sometimes work disparate knowledge traditions simultaneously, and evince varying degrees of denial and recognition, in doing so. This might be attempted in institutions of all sorts, with differing forms of reflexivity—and success. Epistemically speaking, to go-on in such a situation requires recognising an ever-lurking incommensurability. In many institutions such inconvenient actualities will likely be treated either by dismissing otherness, by becoming paralysed in the face of difference, and/or by resort to some form of epistemic bad faith—or some combination of all three. The point is that, often despite good intentions, these are unethical epistemic demeanours. They effect colonising and epistemic injustice unnoticed and surreptitiously. Nurturing an institutional decolonising ethos requires explicit avoidance of these strategies, and active collective development of alternative means of going on together respecting difference.

It is a career had in just such institutions—first in Yorùbáland in Nigeria, and later in northern Australia, that has led me to articulate what I am naming here as a translating world philosophy. I offer possibilities for institutions to reflexively and collectively develop alternative epistemic strategies in fostering alternative epistemic demeanours. This translating philosophy has emerged in the working of modern institutions warranted as "knowledge institutions" among which I include universities, schools, and museums, as well as governance institutions (Jackson 2019).[7] To the extent such institutions take decolonising seriously, they will establish spaces where negotiation of epistemic matters is supported—politicoepistemic spaces. Dissensus must be the starting point, what can be negotiated in such spaces are limited and partial. Explicitly situated consensus can be achieved on particular issues. Specifying what is happening in such spaces when disparate knowledge traditions are engaging institutionally, as 'working disparate knowledge traditions together and separately', is important. Keeping the doubled-ness of 'connection and separation' explicit, foregrounded, and up-front, is required in order that the often quite disparate metaphysical commitments might be mutually recognised and respected (Verran, Spencer, Christie, 2022).[8]

I pause here to briefly consider a couple of examples. First, I point to the work of Contemporary Indigenous Knowledge and Governance at Charles Darwin College of Indigenous Futures Education and Arts.[9] In beginning to incorporate teaching/learning and researching in particular Indigenous Australian philosophies into the curriculum of our university, it is openly recognised that the university and the academic disciplinary knowledge traditions that find shelter there will be changed as institutions. Negotiating and developing ways to work these disparate knowledge traditions together while simultaneously keeping them distinct, will effect shifts on both sides (Verran, 2018:127).[10]
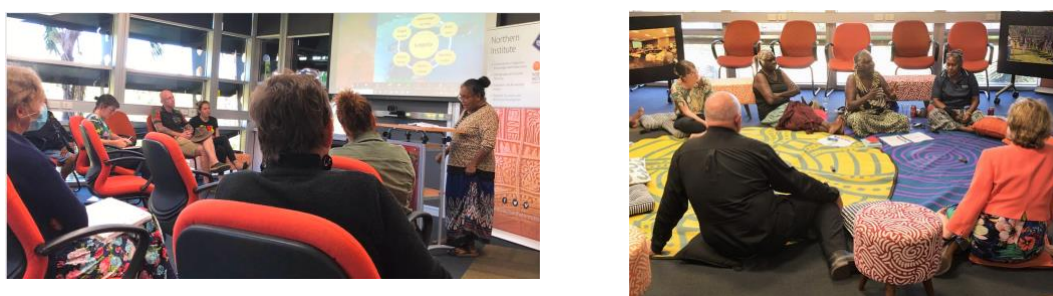


Figure 1. Working a politicoepistemic space in Charles Darwin Uiversity, 2021

One such concept that is recognised as needing radical re-negotiation as a concept in this institutional epistemic space, is the concept of 'language'. Here orthodox academic linguistics takes words and phonemes to as part of brain structure and current "linguistic definition of language is narrowed to describe largely the aspects of human vocal interactions that happen to be preserved by typical alphabetical orthographies" (Port, 2010: 305).[11] Those who claim that no fundamental distinction can be made between linguistic practices and other similar forms of expression like culture-specific gestures and facial expressions see language as invested in human bodies in action (Verran, 2001:221), or social norms Harris, (1981).[12] These contesting traditions of academic linguistics see the scientific linguistics orthodoxy as a profoundly influential "language [misapprehension] deeply entrenched in Western culture. The origins of this [misapprehension] can be traced back over two millennia and more to the Classical period of ancient Greece" (Harris, 2002: 1).[13] (Re)conceptualisation of the concept of

language needs to be an active part of the institutional academic work if an Indigenous academic linguistics is to work as connected to and distinct from modern scientific linguistics.

Second, I point to a European Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin,[14] in particular a recent exhibition staged at its Bode Museum, 'Beyond Compare'.[15] My concern about the 'Beyond Compare' exhibition is that it failed to recognise the museum as a knowledge institution, and failed to recognise the disparate *epistemic* traditions in which the art works displayed in that brilliant exhibition, come to life.
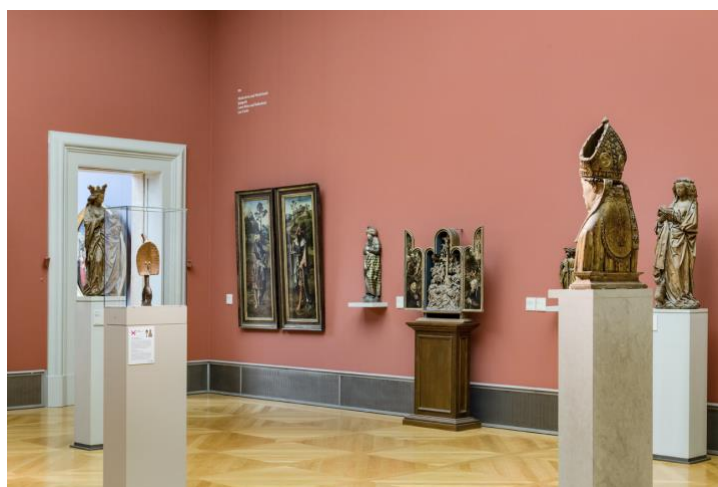


Figure 2. A diminutive Bwiiti figure from nineteenth century Gabon lights up the room in concerting gothic-era art objects depicting Christian religious iconography. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst. Photo: Wolfgang Gülcker, Berlin.

The exhibition passed-up on the possibility of beginning to negotiate as a matter of politicoepistemics, the tense relations that surround the actualities of the continuing presence of African art works in European institutions. Here the very concept of 'artwork' as it comes to life in museums, is in urgent need of problematising and active re-negotiation on a case-by-case basis. Such problematising of the concept should be associated with the establishment of institutional spaces for politicoepistemic negotiation and diplomacy in museums (Verran, 2019; 2021: 149).[16]

### Concepts as praxial: a beginning in nurturing a decolonial ethos

In 1922 John Dewey published two papers under the title "Realism without Monism or Dualism". The claim he made was that empirical inquiry is feasible *without commitment to existential metaphysics in either dualist or monist forms.* (Dewey, 1922a and 1922b). Much of the text of those papers is given over to defending his philosophy from critiques that had recently targeted it, yet intriguingly Dewey homes in on time as the clue to what affords inquiry that abstains from metaphysical commitment as either monism or dualism (Dewey, 1922a: 309). Temporality as affording epistemics through experience was something that subsequently, Dewey came back to many times in his writings.

Before distancing himself from both dualism and monism, in seeking to precisely account a metaphysical base sufficient for empirical inquiry, Dewey identified temporally moderated experience as 'irreducibly' the world of knowing (Dewey 1915: 335).[17] Announcing that metaphysical inquiry is not his concern, he explains his task as having truck with metaphysics only to the extent of identifying those minimalist "ultimate traits of the world" (Dewey, 1915: 345), which properly should mark knowledge based in experience. As I read him, Dewey proposes an epistemics marked as expressing temporality; as bearing witness to the world's happening. This in turn suggests concepts as 'events' which Dewey defines as "a qualitative variation of parts with respect to the whole which requires duration in which to display itself" (Dewey,1926:253).[18]

This leads me to envisaging concepts as sets of practices happening in the present, in any and all here and nows, held to account in being properly epistemically agential, and not by social norms or by cognitive standards as dualists and monists claim. Rather it is in active engagement with further practices that concepts' epistemicities are rendered accountable (Kenney, 2015). I name these as praxial concepts and distinguish them from the 'regularist' and 'regulist' forms of concepts accounted by Brandom (1994).[19]

Such concepts are accountable as particular concepts through further ramifying practices extending from a particular situated present. On this *accountabilist* conception of practices as concepts and concepts as practices, any particular enactment of practising can be held to account as a correct or incorrect performance of a concept. Such holdings-to-account become integral to practisings held to be particular concepts, and the practisings of holding to account, and the practisings of holding to account those practisings that hold to account, too are subject to holding to account. All practisings can be done correctly (enough) or incorrectly. If done incorrectly, then that enactment would too appropriately be accountable in turn, by responding to it as a mistaken holding-accountable. And, so on and so forth. Such a conception of practisings as concepts, as practisings constituted by the mutual accountability, have concepts as held together (or not), as endless tensioned ramifying between events, practisings in the present. The proposal for praxial concepts has them as bearing various epistemic

potencies—ontological, epistemological, axiological, and teleological. Such epistemic potencies are variously deployed in and as institutionally situated sociomaterialising practices the face of arriving futures.

## A translating philosophy developing an institutional decolonial ethos through praxial concepts

In conclusion, by returning to the shift that began in the 1970s, whereby knowledge as a social phenomenon came to be a widely accepted proposition, I briefly describe how I see praxial concepts as affording nurturance of a decolonial ethos in politicoepistemic spaces negotiating epistemic matters of various particular sorts negotiated as scenarios, or indeed actual situations. Part and parcel of the shift of epistemics towards the social was the subsidiary contention of rationality as social, this featured as part of both the social epistemology and some sociology of knowledge as movements for reform. In the former, normative arguments saw social categories powered by irrational political forces like those that sustained patriarchal social forms, were seen as deflecting the development of a rational social order. Sociology of knowledge, particularly sociology of scientific knowledge, on the other hand set out to empirically reveal the means by which such skewing from a rationally organized society was accomplished.

From the 1970s on, in developing a normative epistemologically focussed program, sociology of knowledge in the guise of the Edinburgh school 'strong program' asked questions about the interplay between epistemic and social orders in any given human institution (Barnes, 2002: 3).[20] An alternative ontologically focused such program styled as 'actor-network theory', equally focused on articulating relations between knowledge orders and social orders (Latour, 2005).[21] Showing empirically that knowledge orders and social orders cannot be understood in isolation from each other, and in contrast to earlier sociology of knowledge, that this applied even in analyses involving the most esoteric forms of scientific and technical knowledge, this insight was summed up by the historical sociologists Shapin and Schaffer with the adage "Solutions to the problem of knowledge *are* solutions the problem of social order" (Shapin and Schaffer, 1985:332).[22] And this conclusion still holds today in the social sciences, as social constructivist and material semiotic orthodoxies. Here social forms are understood as effected in conceptual forms that instance epistemic forms. The assumption that accompanies this social science orthodoxy is that social orders are accomplished in consensus, and that consensus is stabilised in the workings of epistemics where knowledge institutions have a crucial role.

This brings me to decoloniality and its challenges. As a movement decoloniality also links epistemic and social orders. Yet, in contrast to the orthodoxy that consolidated in postcolonial modernity after the 1970s, decoloniality insists the links between epistemics and social orders are emergent unfolding events, not once and for all impositions of a specific settlement, as for example, the settlement that occurred in early modern Europe. In the colonial aspects of modernity, this form was imposed by force and violence on many other places and peoples, effectively overwhelming the forms of the links between epistemics and social order that may have held sway there for many centuries.

A decolonising ethos refuses that colonising mentality claiming that social orders that prioritise  political *dissensus* are required for decolonising and that in good governance links between epistemics and social order should be negotiated on a case by case in properly constituted politicoepistemic spaces situated within institutions, particularly knowledge institutions. *But this is only feasible when concepts are recognised and accepted as praxial entities bearing particular epistemic agencies*. Within a carefully nurtured dissensus, limited and partial consensus is achievable in particular situations of governance working with and in particular concepts (Hayashi, Bow, Tarbett-Buckley, Spencer, Norrington, West, Verran, submitted).[23] What is needed in a decolonising epistemics is a capacity to diplomatically negotiate links between disparate epistemic traditions that clash and contest in abutting and abrading in institutional life. Strategic, partial and ephemeral as necessary, this enables knowledge communities enacting governance of alternative social orders to go on together in dissensus. Praxial concepts which can contribute enough openness and enough closedness are crucial.

In the two examples I alluded to earlier—a university curriculum where attempts are underway to establish a functioning politicoepistemic space where ontological, methodological, epistemological, teleological and axiological matters might be negotiated, and a museum which has yet to recognise itself *as* an institution where such a space is needed, a translating world philosophy enables going on together doing difference in epistemic good-faith.

[1] Verran, Helen (2001). *Science and an African Logic*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; Verran, Helen (2015). "Comparative Philosophy and 'I'" *Confluence. Online Journal of World Philosophies* Volume 3, 171-188.

[2] Dewey, John (1922a) 'Realism without Monism or Dualism I: Knowledge Involving the Past', *The Journal of Philosophy* 19 (12): 309- 317; Dewey, John (1922b) 'Realism without Monism or Dualism II', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 19(13): 351-361

[3] Shook, J (2004). "Dewey's empirical naturalism and pragmatic metaphysics", *Transactions of the Charles S Peirce Society A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy*, volume XL, number 4: 731-42.

[4] Netz, Reviel (2003). The Shaping of Deduction in Greek Mathematics: A Study in Cognitive History, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] William Edelglass and Jay L. Garfield (eds) (2011). *The Oxford Handbook of World Philosophy* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[6] 'Worlding and globalizing' the use of verbal noun phrase here, attempts a shift from naming of being, to naming of doing.

[7] Jackson , Vicki (2019) "Knowledge Institutions in Constitutional Democracies: of Objectivity and Decentralization" Harvard Law Review Blog https://blog.harvardlawreview.org/knowledge-institutions-in-constitutional-democracies-of-objectivity-and-decentralization/ "Knowledge institutions are fundamental components of successful constitutional democracies ...Knowledge institutions should not be understood as a branch of constitutional government, but rather as a necessary organ of constitutional democracy, existing across public-

private divides. ...Knowledge institutions may be public – in addition to government offices discussed above, these include some universities and libraries. Centrally important public functions may be performed by some government knowledge institutions".

[8] Verran, H, Spencer, M, Christie, M. (2022). "Ground Up Inquiry: Questions and Answers About the Emergence and Development of a Northern Australian Tradition of Situated Research" "Ground Up Inquiry: Questions and Answers About the Emergence and Development of a Northern Australian Tradition of Situated Research", *Learning Communities Journal*, Number 27: 3-14

[9] Contemporary Indigenous Knowledge and Governance https://www.cdu.edu.au/northern-institute/research/contemporary-indigenous-governance-knowledge-and-science

[10] Verran, H. (2018). "Politics of Working Cosmologies Together While Keeping Them Separate." in *A World of Many Worlds,* Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser (eds). Duke University Press.

[11] Port, R. F. (2010). "Language as a Social Institution: Why Phonemes and Words Do Not Live in the Brain", Ecological Psychology, 22:4, 304-326,

[12] Harris, R. (1981). *The language myth*. London, UK: Duckworth.

[13] Harris, R, (ed) (2002). *The language myth in Western Culture* Surrey: Curzon Press

[14] Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst https://www.smb.museum/en/home/

15 Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/beyond-compare-art-from-africa-in-the-bode-museum/.

[16] Verran, H. (2019). "Generative Ruptures and Moments of Confluence" *Journal of Wold Philosophies* 4: 55-60.; Verran, H. (2021). "Trafficking Vague Cosmological Boundaries: Towards Knowing Experiential Relationality in Museum Epistemics" *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, vol. 15, no. 2: 149-164.

[17] Dewey, J. (1915) 'The Subject-Matter of Metaphysical Inquiry', The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods 12 (13):337-345

[18] Dewey, J. (1926). "Events and the Future", The Journal of Philosophy vol 23: 253-258/

[19] Brandom, Robert (1994) *Making It Explicit Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

[20] Barnes, B. (2002). "Thomas Kuhn and the Problem of Social Order in Science" in Nickles (ed.) *Thomas Kuhn*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 122–141.

[21] Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling Society*

[22] Shapin, S. and Schaffer, S. (1985). *Leviathan and the Air-Pump. Hobbes, Boyle, and the Experimental Life*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

[23] Hayashi, Y., Bow, C., Tarbett-Buckley, C., Spencer, M., Norrington,L., West, S., Verran,H. (submitted). "Working with Concepts. A Decolonial STS Sensibility and the Politicoepistemics of Never Ceded Sovereignty in Northern Australia"