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# 1 Scholarly ways of knowing: an introduction

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The title for the workshop from which this volume evolved was 'Epistemology and the Scholarly Medical Traditions'. The original idea was to look at the question, 'How did Galenic, Chinese and Āyurvedic doctors use written texts as authorities for their claims to knowledge?' Contributors were left considerable freedom, however, to interpret the original title as they pleased because enforcing any particular orientation would have risked subverting our comparative enterprise before it had begun.

That proved to be a wise decision. In our very first session together, Jim Hankinson defined 'epistemology' as 'a self-conscious theory of knowledge'. A little later, Judith Farquhar observed that, for a Sinologist, every word of that definition would have to be reinterpreted, 'quite possibly including "of"'. As the reader will discover, 'epistemology' turns up frequently, and it is indeed a troublemaker. It has a decidedly Eurocentric ring to it. In an effort to avoid some of the pitfalls associated with the term, this essay will step back a bit and reflect, historically, anthropologically and meta-epistemologically, on the ways in which these traditions have (or have not) claimed special status for their scholarly medical knowledge at various times in history.[1]

But first, a word or two is needed about the overall strategy of the volume. All the chapters are devoted to the past except for those by anthropologists Judith Farquhar and Lawrence Cohen who talk about present-day events in China and India, respectively. In retrospect, I regret the omission of something about modern Unani medicine so as to

[1] See Ian Hacking, 'Historical Epistemology', an unpublished discussion paper for the Chicago–Paris–Toronto graduate students' workshop, University of Toronto (October, 1993). Hacking sees historical epistemology as dealing with 'organizing concepts that we are stuck with' such as objectivity (p. 24f.). Moreover, 'historical epistemology is . . . totally locked into the Western tradition of reason and causality in which philosophy, science, and history arose, and it has no pretension to go beyond that' (p. 29). From Hacking's perspective, this introduction is an exercise in historical meta-epistemology because, on the one hand, it seeks a level that will reach beyond the Western tradition, but on the other hand, addresses a classical epistemological question – how is knowledge, in this case medical knowledge, legitimated?



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have touched on living examples of all three traditions. But, in a book such as this, comprehensiveness is just not possible.[2] Also omitted is any extended reference to modern medicine, or 'biomedicine'. This omission was deliberate, not because our medicine represents some sort of culture-free, transcendent truth but because we wanted to compare text-based traditions.

As for what is in the volume, a look at the table of contents will reveal that half of it is devoted to Western medical history, especially Galenism, while the Chinese and Āyurvedic traditions share the remainder.[3] This imbalance was intentional, for a major aim of the exercise was to bring historical Galenism into its rightful place as an obvious subject for comparison with the other great traditions. Several of the scholars who are presently leading the way in this kind of comparison – people such as Geoffrey Lloyd, Nathan Sivin, Shigehisa Kuriyama and Francis Zimmermann – are contributors to this volume.

The central purpose of the book is to offer for comparison some studies on the ways in which healers in the three great scholarly traditions of medicine claimed to know something about the promotion of health and healing. What makes comparison seem promising is that the knowing involved has certain characteristics in common. First, all these scholarly healers (with the exception of the Hippocratics) rest their claims to healing power largely on knowledge which is grounded in the study of written texts. They are not shamans, craftsmen, wise women, bonesetters nor folk healers. For the most part they do not claim to get medical knowledge through direct revelation, mystical experience, simple trial and error, nor even through mere apprenticeship, however much apprenticeship may also be involved. They are all scholars of literate traditions.

Second, such learning is at least partly theoretical, and, as such, operates at the interface between human beings and the universe. Like religion, medical theory (or doctrine) is cosmic in its orientation.[4]

[2] See 'The Comparative Study of Greco-Islamic Medicine: The Integration of Medical Knowledge into Local Symbolic Contexts', by Byron and Mary-Jo DelVecchio Good, and indeed the whole volume of which it is a part, Charles Leslie and Allan Young (eds.), *Paths to Asian Medical Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992). The Goods' article is on pp. 257–71. The other classic of comparative studies in this field, of course, and the original inspiration for this volume is Charles Leslie (ed.), *Asian Medical Systems: A Comparative Study* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

[3] As this introduction argues, and the rest of this volume attests, there are just as good (and just as dubious) *historical* grounds for speaking of 'Western' as for 'Eastern', 'Chinese', or 'Āyurvedic'. Like all conventions, they have their benefits and their costs.

[4] For example, the ubiquity of concepts about a correspondence between the microcosm and macrocosm.

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Third, however theoretical or abstract, learned medical knowing must confront experience, in fact some of the most profoundly important human experiences – health, illness, disease, pain, suffering, birth, death. Therapy involves interacting with the world.

Having staked out what I see to be the common ground on which a comparison can be made, my aim in this introductory chapter is to mine the contributions to this volume for what they can tell us about knowing in the three traditions.[5] As a preparation for that exercise, though, I want to dwell for a moment on the fundamental issue of knowledge and knowing, because the following chapters suggest basic differences among the traditions, and within individual traditions at different times, with respect to their attitudes towards knowledge and the knowing person.

If, for example, we compare the classical Greek tradition with its Chinese and Āyurvedic counterparts, a difference is already apparent. In the latter two, knowledge gets much of its status from the person who knows it, while, in ancient Greece, the known gets much more of its status from the knower's capacity to justify it in terms of other knowns. And connected with that need to justify is the very Western phenomenon of active epistemology.

In an effort to design some analytical tools that would deal with this difference, two concepts were constructed and given names: 'gnostic' and 'epistemic'.[6] Largely on the basis of the contributions to this volume, I then tried to think through, in idealized terms, what these contrasting concepts could mean. On the one hand, it seemed, gnostic knowing is centred on the knower. Knowledge is certified by the status of the knower. It is acquired through learning and experience. The student is a disciple who is guided by an orthodoxy which is elaborated, corroborated, enriched and embellished by experience. Study is as much a rite of initiation as it is learning. The highest goal is wisdom.

On the other hand, epistemic knowing is centred on the known. The credibility of the known is grounded in how it is known ('methodology'), and attention is focused at least as much on the constitution of knowledge as on the means of its transmission. Rather than as an accompaniment to learning, experience is often set up in opposition to intellectual pursuits of theory making, reasoning and rationality. The relation of student to teacher is problematic because epistemology

[5] I have richly benefited from the comments of several contributors and colleagues who read earlier drafts of this introduction. Nevertheless, any ideas or interpretations put forward here that do not appear in subsequent chapters or references are entirely my own responsibility.

[6] In using 'gnostic' I am not referring to 'Gnostic', though the choice of the term was influenced by some of Gnosticism's ideas about knowledge.

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furnishes the final criteria of certification. To the extent that epistemological principles have been established, the role of experience is also defined by those principles. The ultimate goal may be wisdom, but it is often thought of as expertise.

In its idealized form, gnostic knowing cultivates stories of transcendent origins in divine authority or the superior knowers of a golden age, and reveres continuity through genealogies and lineages (of persons and/or texts) that tie the known to those transcendent knowers. More loosely, this value is manifested simply as archaism. Epistemic knowing, on the other hand, depends on the things already known, and concerns itself less with continuity than with justifiability (rational and/or empirical, depending on the epistemology espoused). Moreover, whereas the gnostic reverence for knowers often accommodates multivocal knowing when there is a multiplicity of superior knowers (gods, sages, etc.), the epistemic variety more typically combines its focus on the known with a commitment to univocal truth. And finally, keeping in mind Hankinson's formula for 'epistemology', but backing up to the level of our meta-epistemology, we might think of gnostic scholarship as self-consciously cultivating superior knowers, while epistemic scholarship self-consciously searches for ways to justify knowledge.

Those familiar with the work of Max Weber will no doubt notice that there are some interesting similarities between these two concepts and his three types of 'authority'.[7] Epistemicism makes one think of his 'legal' authority, and gnosticism sounds like some combination of his 'traditional' and 'charismatic' forms of authority.[8] But it would not serve our present purposes to follow up on these resemblances which are by no means straightforward.

On the other hand, the manner in which Weber used his types of authority as 'heterogeneous elements' which are always 'combined in different historical configurations' captures very well the way I intend gnosticism and epistemicism to be understood. As spelled out above, I am not suggesting that they will be found as 'pure types' in history, but am proposing them, rather, as 'clear concepts' for analysing the combinations of ways of knowing that actually turn up in the three scholarly traditions.[9]

Besides emphasizing that the notions of gnosticism and epistemicism are meant more to serve as heuristic devices than to reflect historical

[7] I am grateful to Allan Young for drawing this to my attention.

[8] In a preliminary version of his chapter in this volume, Nathan Sivin spoke of 'charismatic scriptures' as sources of Chinese traditional medicine.

[9] With respect to Weber's concepts and how he used them, I am employing the language of Reinhard Bendix in his *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 290–7, esp. p. 296.

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realities, there is a second methodological point that I would like to make. A number of constraints oblige me to treat the history of the three traditions, themselves, in superficial, schematic and discontinuous ways. These constraints are first, that this introduction must be brief; second, that I want to focus largely on the richly suggestive material furnished by the succeeding chapters; and third that, despite the generous help of several of the contributors,[10] I can make no claim to the kind of expertise that would be required for an adequate historical overview, even of Western medicine, let alone of the other traditions. Therefore, as the reader proceeds, both the concepts of gnosticism and epistemicism, and the analysis which follows, should be looked upon largely as suggestions for thinking about the history of scholarly ways of knowing in the three traditions.

Perhaps this is also the best place to clarify a third point. Weber treated his three elements as 'types of authority'. In this essay, I am treating gnosticism and epistemicism as types of knowledge legitimation or ways of knowing. When *we* study these types, *we* are engaging in epistemology; we are behaving like the followers of epistemicism insofar as we are studying knowledge legitimation in and of itself. But we are not behaving entirely like classical epistemics in that our disciplinary perspectives are not those of philosophy, nor even cognitive psychology, but rather those of history and anthropology. This socially oriented approach positions us better for our study of gnosticism where the concerns of legitimacy are (in the idealized type) more the *social* concerns of legitimating the knower than the philosophical concerns of legitimating the known.

In addition, this social perspective helps in another way. We are engaged, here, in the study of what people *claimed* to be the basis of their knowledge, i.e., in *the study of their rhetoric and behaviour* insofar as it was aimed to convince themselves and others that they were indeed in possession of the truth, or at least of knowledge of special value. The motives behind that rhetoric and behaviour were undoubtedly many and varied. Those motives may have often included the desire for truth, but not always. Indeed, with respect to scholarly medicine, it is clear that the strongest motives usually had to do with a desire to maintain health and promote healing, on the one hand, and to gain a social purchase over the patient and/or one's rivals, on the other.

Now, keeping these methodological points in mind, let us turn to a contemplation of how gnosticism and epistemicism might have played out in actual historical situations. To begin with, the different values

[10] I want particularly to thank Nathan Sivin and Geoffrey Lloyd in this regard.

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expressed in gnostic and epistemic ways of knowing no doubt reflect the wider frameworks of meaning and value, the 'cosmologies' as it were, of the societies that subscribed to them. In classical Hindu thought, for example, it is spiritual moral order that dominates, while in classical Chinese thought it is more of a civil moral order. In either case, though, the fundamentals of how the world works are underwritten by the status of transcendent or at least superior knowers who reveal them. Greek thought, on the other hand, seems to have evolved in a somewhat different direction.[11] In particular, with 'the invention of nature'[12] comes a philosophical tradition (chiefly Aristotelian) that does not depend on revelation for its foundational knowledge.[13]

True, Greek nature is divine, and, in view of its divinity, in some sense a knowing other. (For example, nature is a skilled craftsman; nature does nothing without a purpose, etc.) Yet, from the human perspective, it is not knowing in an altogether helpful way. It is as if society were situated, not at the feet of a divine revealer, so much as inside its knowing self, and having to infer that knowing from the state it finds nature to be in. As a result, the Greeks had only their own all-too-human knowers (i.e., natural philosophers), to tell each other about it.

This is a bit fanciful,[14] but what I am trying to suggest is a congruence between the gnostic way of knowing and cosmologies headed up by knowing and revelatory others, on the one hand, and between the epistemic way of knowing and cosmologies dominated by a 'nature' which, if knowing, is nevertheless accessible to humans largely as a non-communicating other.

I do not mean to suggest by this that any of the cosmologies of the three classical societies was unitary or unchanging. They are as historical and pluralistic as the communities which gave them expression. By the same token I do not mean to imply that they were 'mentalities' that necessitated the particular ways of knowing which they reflected.[15] I am

[11] For a comparison of ancient Chinese and Greek cosmological thinking, see G.E.R. Lloyd, *Demystifying Mentalities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 4, pp. 105–34.

[12] G. E. R. Lloyd, 'The Invention of Nature', in his *Methods and Problems in Greek Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 417–34.

[13] For earlier Greek thought, see Edward Hussey, 'The Beginnings of Epistemology: From Homer to Philolaus', in Stephen Everson (ed.), *Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 11–38.

[14] And greatly oversimplified. For a detailed discussion see Owsei Temkin, *Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), esp. ch. 15, pp. 197–208. However, no ancient Greek healing gods (and particularly Asclepius) gave rise to a *scholarly* medicine based on revealed knowledge conveyed by teachers and texts. Asclepius, for instance, *was* the healer.

[15] See Lloyd (note 11). Later in this essay, I shall return to the issue of cultures and cosmologies.

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only saying that these different cosmological outlooks came with different potentialities for ways of knowing just as they did for what was known. In short, a cosmology offers its own ways of legitimating knowledge.

But I have a reason for taking such a broad and roomy perspective. It helps us when we shift our focus from the last five hundred years BC, i.e., roughly the classical period in which each of the traditions was born, and begin to roll the camera of history forward over the next fifteen hundred years. For it allows us to take notice of another difference between the Greek medical tradition and those of the East – the successive transplantation of the former into a series of other cosmologies not only different from the one in which it was born, but cosmologies that fostered different ways of legitimating knowledge.

Our knowledge of the history of Chinese and Āyurvedic medicine is limited, particularly from a comparative perspective of the kind that would help us here. Nevertheless, it is clear that we tell their stories very differently. For there is no counterpart to our Western account of a corpus of ancient texts migrating for over eight hundred years (and some parts for more than fourteen hundred years), starting eastward from the Aegean, then circling clockwise around the Mediterranean basin via North Africa, and ending up in Western Europe after 1000 AD. In their journey, these texts passed through early Christianity, Judaism and Islam, and then into medieval Christian Europe, writings that were translated, often serially, into Persian, Syriac, Hebrew, Arabic and Latin. Once more, at the end of the Middle Ages, they received a new infusion of texts translated from the Greek. Indeed, the very existence of this narrative is testimony to our Western proclivity for focusing on an ontologized 'knowledge' rather than on the knowing society.[16]

In the course of its remarkable journey, this body of literature was itself subject to much variation in its constituent parts by virtue of the ever-changing amounts of omission and addition. Of more importance here though is the fact that very different societies, with different languages, religions and cosmologies, constantly transformed and retransformed this legacy from ancient Greece. Admittedly, the Chinese and Āyurvedic texts were not static either, but the central theme of our stories about them is much more one of continuity and return to traditionalism than of geographical migration and profound linguistic and societal transformation.

[16] Apart from providing a rich body of literature for historians to work on, the story of 'Galenism' has undoubtedly been shaped by longstanding values that privilege scholarship and cultivate the central narrative of 'Western' history – the roots of modern European and North and South American society in Greek and Roman antiquity.

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### Scholarly texts

Perhaps this difference will become sharper if we look more closely at that Western migration of texts in the context of gnostic and epistemic knowing. The period from before the time of Hippocrates in 400 BC to that of Galen six hundred years later seems to offer the purest instance of what I am calling the epistemic approach to knowing (at least before the modern era, which is not being considered here). In Geoffrey Lloyd's exploration of epistemological issues in early Greek medicine, and Jim Hankinson's description of the growth of medical empiricism in later antiquity, we get a detailed introduction to this story and to its strong epistemic character.[17] Consistent with this, texts served throughout only as vehicles for discourse and communication. In terms of Faith Wallis' typology (p. 125), they were not 'sacred' nor 'classic', but just 'plain' texts.

This situation may have been changing, however, even during Galen's own lifetime. Certainly for him, and for many of his contemporaries, Hippocrates had taken on god-like qualities. Moreover, by the fourth century, i.e., well before the rise of Islam, the text had definitely become invested with a significance consistent with gnostic knowing: Galen's own works were beginning to enjoy a privileged status and Galen, both as the source of Hippocratic knowledge and in his own right, was becoming a superior knower, even though both were pagans in a now predominantly Christian cosmology. By the time of the rise of Islam in the seventh century, there was a fairly strong gnostic tradition of medical knowing centred on the Galenic texts.[18]

As with Christianity, in the Muslim religion itself we have an example of a very strong gnostic tradition of knowing in which the Koran is the epitome of a sacred text. Yet, just because the lineage of the Koran was so clear and so exclusive, the ancient Greek knowledge of nature and medicine lay outside this main trunk of relatively pure gnostic knowing.

With regard to Arab-Islamic medicine, then, the ancient Greek legacy of natural and methodological philosophy and medicine was assimilated into early ninth-century Islam. But, even though the ancient texts were privileged, those privileges were not generally on a plane with the gnostic knowing that society bestowed upon its indigenous, religious verities. Not surprisingly, Arabic scholar-practitioners eventually began to add to

[17] Indeed, the empiricists were explicitly anti-gnostic. (See Hankinson, p. 68).
[18] Owsei Temkin, *Galenism: Rise and Decline of a Medical Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973), esp. ch. 2, pp. 51–94; also, Temkin (note 14), esp. ch. 5, pp. 47–50.

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the Greek inheritance on the authority of their own experience and understanding.

Even in this greatly simplified account, it is clear that both epistemic and gnostic elements are present and our sharp distinction between their idealized types has been blurred. Over the centuries, the cumulative impression one gets from the early Christian and Arabic handling of the ancient corpus is that of archaism and learnedness. This is gnostic to the extent that the ancient texts are revered because they are ancient. It is also gnostic in its cultivation of learnedness. But ultimately the degree of gnosticism involved must be measured by the degree to which those texts serve as a framework that constrains meaning and the possibilities for new knowledge by virtue of their authors' transcendent authority.

If the Arabic regard for these medical texts wasn't thoroughly gnostic, neither was it as actively epistemic as it was among the ancient Greek authors whom Lloyd and Hankinson tell us about. Compared to the Greeks' self-conscious and unresolved struggle and competition over theories of knowledge, the Arabic approach was epistemologically more passive. Its epistemological activity resided in the fact that it applied the methodologies of ancient philosophy (most particularly Aristotle, but also Galen and others) to the medical knowledge of antiquity in order to make it more 'rational', more consistent, systematic and coherent, i.e., in true epistemic spirit it tried to make that knowledge more or less self-consistent, quite apart from its being ancient. But it was a passive, i.e., traditionalized, epistemology insofar as it privileged and took for granted both those methodologies and that knowledge *because* they were ancient.

When we compare this with Faith Wallis' chapter on the composition of texts and manuscripts in early medieval medicine, these epistemic differences become even more apparent. On the one hand, the early medieval, Christian, European society that Wallis is talking about was, like its Islamic contemporaries, observing a religious brand of gnostic knowing.[19] On the other hand, the situation of its medical knowledge was quite different. For one thing, by comparison with the Arabic world, the residues of ancient learning were fewer, less accessible because of the loss of the Greek language, and without extensive cultivation in formal institutions of learning. In addition, Wallis draws our attention to two other curious differences: the apparently deliberate decanonization of the medical texts; and the striking omission of the theoretical parts from this ancient medical lore.

Wallis argues that the exclusion of theory was because pagan world views conflicted with Christian doctrine. However, in the course of their

[19] Though not, of course, Gnosticism.

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highly selective, and at times quite irreverent gatherings of ancient texts, these early European scholars also tell us much about their own epistemological attitudes. On the one hand, to cultivate (i.e., translate and put together) the practical parts was to invest this ancient knowledge with some sort of value. On the other hand, such texts were not sanctified. They served merely as quarries to be mined, the useful ore to be separated from the pagan dross of a divine nature that did not need God.

What is also striking about these texts is that they are not so much epistemologically passive as indifferent. Along with an absence of natural philosophy is an absence of epistemology altogether. Discontinuous bits of ancient medical knowledge are harvested as ingredients for distinctively medieval recipes of knowing (the *florilegia* or anthologies), so that, even more than in the Arabic world, the 'self-consciously anti-theoretical and anti-canonical textual practices' of early medieval Europe (p. 126) do not fit a neat pattern of medical knowing that is either gnostic or epistemic in character.

On the strength of this example our sharply contrasting notions of gnostic and epistemic need not only to be gradated towards each other, but also to be brought into triangular relation with a third pole – that of pragmatic eclecticism where there really isn't that much explicit concern to justify knowing one way or another. This is surely the most common approach to knowing in most societies, West or East, most of the time. Its absence from our discussion up to now is largely an artefact of our focus on scholarly knowing.

Now we come to the closing centuries of pre-modern Europe. Given that this is the era of Scholastic Galenism, and given the rhetoric of the 'scientific revolution' that came after, we are accustomed to perceiving it as *the* Western example of a text-based tradition of what I am here calling gnostic knowing. According to this stereotype, Aristotle, Hippocrates, Galen and the wise sages who followed, like Avicenna, are the revered authors, if not of the truth then at least of the next best thing. The historical record, however, does not entirely support this caricature.

In the first place, throughout Islamic society and the European Middle Ages medical knowledge was subordinate to the knowledge of nature and both were below religious certainties in the hierarchy of cognitive privileges.[20] As Amos Funkenstein points out in his commen-

[20] Indeed, the very fact of this hierarchy is evidence of an epistemic and characteristically Western intellectual climate (Funkenstein's 'Commentary', this volume). For the status of medicine among the 'sciences' in Arabic scholarship, see Dimitri Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1988), pp. 150–2.

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