Journal for the History of Knowledge

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For a Multiple Decentering of the History of Knowledge

▼ **FORUM ARTICLE** in *Decentering the History of Knowledge*

▼ **ABSTRACT** In this overview, I argue that the history of knowledge needs a decentering, not only with regard to geography and to the disciplines under scrutiny, but also with regard to the relations between knowledge 'proper' (i.e., discursive and secular knowledge) and religious or mystical forms of knowledge. Given the importance that religious practices and institutions have historically had for the development of different forms of knowledge, the changing religious articulation of the very notion of knowledge deserves more systematic attention. I will also argue that categories like 'knowledge' and 'truth,' and norms of correctness, display a more radical historical contingency and variability than is allowed for in many exercises in the history of knowledge.

▼ **KEYWORDS** Epistemology; ethnocentrism; non-Western traditions of knowledge; normativity; historicity

▼ **ISSUE** Volume 5 (2024)

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Cite this article: Michiel Leezenberg, 'For a Multiple Decentering of the History of Knowledge', *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, 5 (2024), 199–207 <https://dx.doi.org/10.55283/jhk.18552>

DOI: 10.55283/jhk.18552

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These days, "decolonization" is all the rage, but in the long run, the less dramatic project of "decentering" or "diversifying" our academic knowledge practices may be more productive and less polemical. I will be arguing that the recent field or discipline of "history of knowledge" has taken some important steps in this direction but may yet proceed rather further along this path. Obviously, any such decentering should start empirically with more sustained attention to knowledge practices in different parts of the world, and with a critique of, and systematic attempt to move beyond, the Eurocentric narrative that is still presumed in all too many studies and discussions. Here, however, I would like to argue that the history of knowledge can and should be decentered also in more theoretical and conceptual terms; this would involve a rethinking and repositioning of the very notion of knowledge (and, relatedly, of truth, correctness, etc.) it presumes.

But, first, let me discuss some relevant empirical findings and developments of recent years. As the very title of his famous *History of Western Philosophy* suggests, Bertrand Russell acknowledged the existence of non-Western forms of philosophy, and forms of knowledge more generally, but he could still confidently assert that, prior to the ancient Greeks, no mathematics proper existed, and that the ancient Egyptians and Babylonians knew no deductive reasoning based on general premises but only "rules of thumb."[1] To stay with ancient Mesopotamia, Russell's sweeping judgment has been overthrown by spectacular recent research findings concerning mathematical practices,[2] and possibly by suggestive—if controversial—recent speculations concerning the existence and extent of philosophical thinking.[3] Analytically, such findings invite us to explore in greater detail the question of exactly what concepts and practices of knowledge these intellectual traditions involved. For example, Van de Mieroop identifies Akkadian *kitti* as expressing the Mesopotamian concept of truth, but does not elaborate; hence, it does not become clear what kind of phenomenon or relation it is, whether it is persons, statements, or others who are truth-bearers, etc.[4] Thus, one still awaits for Mesopotamia (and, in fact, for other traditions) a study comparable to Marcel Detienne's landmark *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece* (1996 [1967]). Likewise, one would like to know whether the Babylonians perceived any qualitative differences between astronomical and mathematical thinking, on the one hand, and a kind of philosophical thinking that has been qualified as hermeneutic, on the other.

More generally, one may look at the emergence of the history of knowledge as continuing, or radicalizing, developments within the already institutionalized discipline of the history of science. In fact, that discipline had already

1 Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 3.
2 Robson, *Mathematics in Ancient Iraq*.
3 Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks*.
4 Ibid., 140.

witnessed a series or sequence of decenterings. Initially, studies focused on formalized and mathematically expressed natural sciences such as physics and astronomy in the early modern and modern periods, but later work quickly expanded to less formalized disciplines such as chemistry, to life sciences such as biology and medicine, etc.

For a long time, however, the history of science steered clear of the social sciences and the humanities. Despite a number of important exceptions,[5] the history of the social sciences has hardly been developed (let alone integrated into the history of science at large), perhaps in part because the social sciences have long tended to be seen—by definition—as modern and dealing with modern societies. For this reason if not for others, Ibn Khaldûn with his famous *Muqaddima*, or introduction to history, has long stood out as a historical anomaly.[6] Likewise, it was only from the turn of the twenty-first century that the history of the humanities first emerged as a topic worthy of investigation in its own right, and was subsequently institutionalized as a discipline with its own conferences and its own journal, *History of Humanities*.[7]

Simultaneously with these disciplinary decenterings, a series of geographical and political decenterings has occurred, especially in the wake of the 1980s development of postcolonial studies (which had also led to important redescriptions of the history of both the natural sciences and the humanities in colonial and postcolonial settings), and subsequently in the wake of the rise of "global," "connected," or "intertwined" history,[8] which not only de-emphasized the role of Western traditions of knowledge but also called for greater attention to interconnections between civilizations or traditions hitherto seen as largely if not entirely isolated and self-contained.

Such findings and suggestions, however, have yet to affect the still-predominant picture. Daston has argued that there is a great and indeed urgent need for a new narrative to replace the old narrative of the scientific revolution as marking the birth of modernity and of modern science as purely western.[9] One may perhaps add that to the extent that there is an intellectual historiography of the modern humanities at all, this historiography likewise, albeit with some significant exceptions, both continues to be shaped by Eurocentric conceptions about the Renaissance in the singular and about humanism as a uniquely Western achievement in the service of a unilinear historiography of secularization.

Daston adds that we need a new narrative that is as sweeping and memorable as the one it is meant to replace: a narrative of modernity and Western uniqueness that still informs introductory undergraduate courses, not

5 See, for example, Heilbron, *Rise of Social Theory*, and Heilbron, *French Sociology*.

6 See, for example, Al-Azmeh, *Ibn Khaldûn*.

7 The best-known and most influential single study in this respect is undoubtedly Bod, *A New History*. For a precursor, see Leezenberg and De Vries, *History and Philosophy*, first published in Dutch in 2001.

8 See, for example, Subrahmanyam, "Intertwined Histories."

9 Daston, "The History of Science," 149.

to mention public and political (and, in fact, increasingly politicized and polarized) discussions about a scientific modernity presumed to be Western (and perhaps one should add, capitalist) in origin by both its defendants and its critics.[10] Against this persistent ethnocentrism, she notes other decenterings in the history of science, for example attention to the history of 'substandard' forms of knowledge such as the skills of craftsmen and outdoors practical experts, and the medical recipes of women and other non-certified healers, and the rise of what she calls the "history of learning," the latter also covering philology and, more generally, the humanities.[11]

Here, however, one should probably add religious learning as well—a topic oddly absent from much recent work both in the history of the humanities and the history of knowledge. In fact, the history of knowledge—whether or not decentered geographically—appears to continue to be informed by a pronounced secularist bias. Renaissance humanism obviously and famously had a secularizing tendency that—intentionally or unintentionally—undermined the authority both of the Church as an institution and of Christian traditions of learning. But that need not (and, in fact, for centuries did not) imply that knowledge was seen as in any important way *distinct* from what we nowadays call "religion."

The religious character or constitution of much knowledge is, or should be, clear even from the Western tradition alone; it becomes even clearer when we look at other traditions. As such, it also points to the need for a more sustained comparative study of *concepts* of knowledge or wisdom. For example, Arabic Islamic *'ilm* ("scientific," or demonstrative, knowledge) is opposed to *hikma* (wisdom in a wider sense) and *ma'rifa* (gnosis or mystical insight); all three notions, however, clearly include religious aspects or elements. Thus, for classical Muslim 'ulama or learned men, demonstrative knowledge of first principles of the cosmos is as rigorous a science as any, but it concerns a topic we would nowadays qualify as religious.

Within the Indian tradition, to mention but one example, Mayahana Buddhist authors distinguish *jñana* (conceptual or discursive knowledge) and *prajña* (non-discursive knowledge of an ineffable "ultimate truth," *paramârtha*). Accordingly, they distinguish "worldly" (that is, conventional and discursive) and ultimate truth. The precise conceptual status and role of the various notions of truth involved (*tattva*, *satya*, etc.) has not been explored in detail,[12] but it seems clear that knowledge in this specific tradition has an irreducibly soteriological aim, and has an importantly if not irreducibly

10 Such as Bod's valiantly non-Eurocentric attempt at such a sweeping narrative by distinguishing between pattern-seeking and pattern-rejecting tendencies. See Bod, *A New History*, and Bod, *World of Patterns*. However, one may doubt whether this narrative is as captivating as Daston hopes.

11 Daston, "The History of Science," 143.

12 I am not aware of any detailed analytical investigation of Indian conceptions of knowledge, meaning, and truth, but this may merely reflect my lack of relevant specialist training.

ineffable and/or embodied dimension, in particular as the result of practices of meditation.

In pre-Han China, different notions of knowledge appear to have clear religious and/or mystical, and in part embodied, aspects or overtones. Thus, in *Analects* VI.20, Confucius characterizes wisdom (知 *zhī*) as involving both duties to men and respect for but aloofness from spiritual beings. Thus, even in an author held to be as "humanist" or "secular" as Confucius, the main notion of wisdom appears to have clearly religious or spiritual overtones or aspects.

The Confucian ideal of learning was implicitly and in places explicitly contested by the Daoist ideals of "unlearning," "spontaneity," and "not-acting" (*wu wei*). It is only in later debates between members of the so-called hundred schools, however, and in later pre-Han texts such as the *Mohist Canons*, that questions concerning methods and criteria for winning debates or discussions are more systematically posed and discussed.[13] It appears that "knowledge" (知 *zhī*) and "wisdom" (indicated by the cognate 智 *zhì*) were used almost interchangeably until the so-called *Mohist Canons* (A3-6) made a serious attempt to clearly distinguish between the faculty for knowing, the activity of trying to know, the actual achievement of knowledge, and the resulting state of understanding. Subsequently, propositions A88-B12 of the same work discuss the relation between names and things, and—in a sense—knowing and naming.[14] The question is whether in the Chinese tradition different ideas of knowledge or wisdom are essentially or by definition linked to any particular notion of truth or rationality, and what these notions amount to substantially.

All this, however, is only a beginning. A rather more elaborate, and far more challenging, task would be to trace the history of *practices* of knowledge, or of knowledge *as* practice, in these and other traditions. For example, the very fact that there is a rich and refined Chinese vocabulary for persons in possession of knowledge—including terms such as *sage* (*zhēnrén* 真人), *learned man/scholar* (*rú* 儒), and *gentleman* (*jūn zǐ* 君子)—suggests that in this tradition, knowledge was very much seen as not only a source for but a form of social distinction. And, in fact, the Confucian notion of learning, with its ideal of the gentleman, embodies not only knowledge or learning, but also social distinction, and, in fact, social power (*dé* 德).

Put differently, knowledge is not a natural kind but a social practice. As such, it is historically and geographically specific; it is linguistically constituted and power-saturated; and, perhaps most importantly for our present purposes, it is informed by a historically specific and variable normativity concerning both contents and aims of knowledge. That is, the very norms of what constitutes correct or true knowledge and of what knowledge ideals, or rather what aims a particular form or body of knowledge should have, should be historically explored rather than theoretically presumed.

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13 For an engaging introduction to these debates, see Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*.

14 Graham, *Later Mohist Logic*, 266-67, 336-64.

It is here that the history of knowledge may profit from (renewed) contacts with philosophy. As already observed by Ian Hacking,[15] and as explored in detail by Loraine Daston and others, the systematic study of notions of knowledge, rationality, and truth in relation to their opposites (which may be identified as ignorance, error, intuition, opinion, and so on) may help us see how local and contingent they really are.[16] Modern Western philosophers working in both the analytical and the continental traditions have in fact long discussed the historicity of knowledge, but their philosophical ideas may not yet have been taken sufficiently seriously in more empirical studies in the history of knowledge.

Thus, Richard Rorty has famously argued that the picture of knowledge as representation historically originates in Descartes, and is based on an image, or metaphor, of the mind as a mirror.[17] This argument implies that premodern philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle had radically different conceptions of knowledge based on very different images or metaphors; indeed, Rorty argues, Aristotle presumes an image of the mind as an eye. As a result, Aristotle's concept of knowledge involves not a representation of, or a true judgment about, an object, but rather an *identity* with the thing known.[18] Accordingly, he continues, neither in Plato nor Aristotle can we find anything like a theory of knowledge in the modern sense of the word—that is, in the sense of an account of how to close the gap between theory and evidence.[19]

Instead, Rorty develops what he calls a "pragmatist account" of knowledge in terms of social practices, and of hermeneutics not as a way of knowing, or as an improved successor discipline, but as a way of coping.[20] This argument crucially relies on Wilfrid Sellars's famous claim that knowledge is irreducibly normative, and should be analyzed in terms of social practices rather than mental states. Empirical knowledge, Sellars argues, is a self-correcting enterprise; that is, it is not a static representation or state but a rational practice.[21] In itself, this analysis may still seem to imply a rather ahistorical conception of knowledge, but at least it opens the way for a more historicizing account in terms of linguistic and social practices; to some extent at least, Sellars attempts to develop such an account.

Although it appears to have been developed largely independently, this line of argument shows intriguing parallels with a number of ideas in continental thinkers. Thus, in his 1938 lecture, "The Age of the World Picture," German philosopher Martin Heidegger explores the ontological presuppositions of modern natural science as based on experiments, as formulated in

15 Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, 8.
16 Elshakry, "Beyond a Singular History," 3.
17 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror*.
18 Ibid., 144.
19 Ibid., 263. See also Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter*, 43.
20 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror*, 356.
21 Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy," § 39.

mathematical terms, and as applied in technology. He argues that what we call science (*Wissenschaft*) differs in its very essence from what the ancient Greeks called *epistèmè*. It rests, he argues, on a historically specific reification of beings so as to make it possible to represent them. Science-as-research, that is, only appears in the modern period in Western Europe. But Heidegger's points also extend to the humanities: "in the historical human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*), 'source criticism' corresponds to the experiments of physical research."[22] That is, both nature and history become objects of explanatory representation. In other words, according to Heidegger, modern Western European knowledge transforms both nature and history into beings, and objectifies them in research: it creates its very objects of knowledge as capable of being represented. The modern natural and human sciences, in short, involve, or rather constitute, a particular kind of object, a particular understanding of beings, a particular concept of truth—and a particular concept of knowledge. But not only are the objects of knowledge historically constituted; Heidegger's account also allows us to think of the notion of a *subject* of knowledge as a typically modern, and specifically European, phenomenon.

One does not have to share Heidegger's metaphysical and other concerns and preferences to appreciate that he is on to something here: the radical historical variability of the very notion of knowledge, and of both the objects and subjects it involves. In a very different way, these possibilities were also explored in Michel Foucault's archeological and genealogical discussions of the "human sciences." Especially fruitful is Foucault's suggestion that knowledge is inherently and internally—if variably—linked to historically specific modes of power. For the most part, Foucault's genealogical analyses have restricted themselves to early modern and modern forms of knowledge in Western Europe (with a few marginal but significant exceptions). In his 1971 lectures at the Collège de France, however, he attempts to sketch a genealogy of knowledge in ancient Greece, the details of which may also be fruitful or suggestive for other exercises in the history of knowledge. In part in an implicit but unmistakable reaction against Heidegger's speculative history, Foucault traces the development of the ancient Greek notion of knowledge (*epistèmè*) in genealogical terms, in particular as a reaction against the sophists, as part of an account of knowledge that is formulated neither in epistemological nor in naturalist terms, but in terms of a non-epistemic, violent, and historically variable "will to know."[23]

Some of these ideas may also be found in individual works in the history of knowledge, but I think they can and should be employed more systematically, and developed in a less ethnocentric manner. Despite the sustained critiques of authors such as Heidegger, Rorty, and Foucault, it appears that exercises in the history of knowledge, apart from a number of laudable exceptions, are still very

22 Heidegger, "The Age," 62.
23 Foucault, *Lectures on the Will*.

much predicated on a tacit presupposition of knowledge as representational; despite the existence of traditions such as Buddhism or Islamic mysticism, they also seem predicated on an assumption that knowledge proper is propositional or discursive, and secular or non-religious in nature (or put differently, that knowledge proper is based on worldly rather than religious authority).

Above, I have been advocating a multiple decentering of the history of knowledge. This decentering not only, and most obviously, involves a geographical and historical shift and greater attention to forms of knowledge outside of Europe, but also an analytical shift away from an assumed mentalist or cognitivist concept of knowledge in terms of representation toward a conception in terms of social practices, which are linguistically articulated, power-saturated, and irreducibly if variably normative. Most importantly, such a decentering would also allow us to take seriously forms of knowledge that principally and self-consciously transcend discursive or conceptual knowledge, as in some forms of religious and mystical wisdom. Such a perspective should not and indeed cannot aim at a general definition of a natural kind of *knowledge*, let alone any attempts to identify an essence informing or constituting all conceptions and practices that can be headed under that term, but it can help us think of knowledge in less static terms as mental states, and in more dynamic terms of practices or processes. As such, it focuses our attention on aspects or dimensions of embodiment (and, by extension, variable relations between body and mind), normativity, and power or authority. Put differently, there is room, not only for a history of knowledge that is alive to questions of conceptual change and domination, but also for a historically aware anthropology of knowledge.

About the Author

Michiel Leezenberg teaches in the departments of philosophy and classics at the University of Amsterdam. He has published widely on the history and philosophy of the humanities and on the intellectual history of the early modern Muslim world; among his current interests are Buddhist philosophy and the role of women in the history of philosophy.

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