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# *In Search of Human Universality: Context and Justification In Cultural Philosophy*

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## *Introduction*

In this paper, I defend a view of cultural philosophy that involves a critical, analytical, and systematic study of beliefs, epistemic practices, and theories of different cultures. I then provide a theoretical motivation for this view in terms of the nature of justification and its social or contextual component. I argue that this motivation involves the principle of moderate cognitive relativism, and I defend it as a foundation for cultural philosophy. In doing so, I reject a foundationalist and objectivist view of justification, and offer an alternative intersubjective view. I engage, in the process, the ideas of some contemporary philosophers in analytic epistemology who have addressed the nature of justification, belief, and truth, and their place in the conception of the nature of knowledge. In particular, I explore whether their postulated bases for justification with respect to knowledge are objective or contextual. In arguing for a contextual basis for justification, I draw from their arguments in support of a socialized and naturalized epistemology. Such arguments are logically motivated by the idea that certain natural, social, and cognitive aspects of justification are necessary components of knowledge, that justification is necessarily shaped by social, cultural, and pragmatic contexts. It is useful, therefore, to explore the different social and cultural aspects of justification across various cultures. Such cross-cultural exploration, I argue, assumes that people in different cultures share some basic rationality in terms of a

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set of epistemic practices. This involves (1) the ability to reason and use available evidence to support one's beliefs; and (2) the ability to recognize human fallibility so as to modify one's beliefs in the face of appropriate counter-evidence.

A critical exploration of cultural beliefs will enable us to see how people make rational or justificatory connections among their socio-culturally structured evidence, counter-evidence, relevant alternatives, and beliefs. It will also allow us to see that evidence or counter-evidence that is available in one socio-cultural context may be unavailable in another, and to explore the relevance of this fact for the global justification of a belief. My argument for moderate cognitive relativism is partly a response to Appiah's criticism of the plausibility of cultural philosophy. He argues that cultural philosophy involves strong cognitive relativism, because it implies that truth is relative to culture and the conceptual schemes embodied therein, a view he regards as implausible. Although I am willing to grant the plausibility of his argument against *strong* cognitive relativism, I argue that it does not undermine the possibility of cultural philosophy. This is because such philosophy does not, as Appiah argues, imply strong cognitive relativism and thus its implausibility does not affect the possibility of valid cultural philosophy. In short, the issue of the truth of beliefs and statements that is raised by strong cognitive relativism is not the issue raised by cultural philosophy.

Some preliminary remarks may help establish the context of my argument. The contemporary quest for multiculturalism in higher education has inspired a renewed interest in cultural philosophy or the philosophy of different cultures. This trend is said to be necessary because of its relevance to the contemporary transnational, multicultural, and global context. Cultural philosophy is promoted as a philosophy of integration and tolerance, which will enable us to arrive at global justification and an idea of rationality that will cut across cultures.<sup>1</sup> This trend toward multiculturalism has also been engendered by postmodernism in different intellectual domains: an attempt to question and break with the ideology of universal and absolute truth claims that are embedded in reason, which every inquiry or

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<sup>1</sup> For the view that cultural philosophy should be a philosophy of integration and tolerance, see K. C. Anyanwu, "Cultural Philosophy as a Philosophy of Integration and Tolerance," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 25, September 1987, 271-287, reprinted in A. Pablo Iannone, ed. *Through Time and Culture: Introductory Readings in Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994).

meaningful discourse is supposed to unravel. Postmodernism in philosophy, in some sense, attempts to articulate different cultural ways of life, of perception, and of interpreting reality and experiences, in the name of what I characterize as cultural philosophy or philosophy of culture. According to Appiah, "Modernism saw the economization of the world as the triumph of reason; postmodernism rejects that claim, allowing in the realm of theory the same multiplication of distinctions we see in the cultures it seeks to understand."<sup>2</sup>

As a result of the postmodernist movement, it has become somewhat unfashionable to criticize other cultures and especially to regard them as "undeveloped" from what is called a "Eurocentric" rationalist, foundationalist, and universalist perspective.<sup>3</sup> This, according to Anyanwu, is because the supposition "that all nations will embrace only one ideological doctrine is contrary to the evidence of culture and history."<sup>4</sup> Thus, "Nowadays anyone who takes this view (or who entertains the notion of 'progress' in whatever regard) is likely to be treated with high contempt as a dupe of the old-style Whiggish 'meta-narrative' which presumed to compare different cultures in point of their advance toward [Eurocentric] universal standards of humanity and reason."<sup>5</sup> For instance, according to Anyanwu, "each nation seems to enforce her values on other nations or despise those nations whose values differ from her own."<sup>6</sup> I do not espouse a strict postmodernist view in this article; but both my stance and the issues I raise are similar to those of postmodernism. This stance involves an attempt to engage in a cross-cultural dialogue and to avoid the *imposition* of a 'universal ideology' thought to be applicable to all cultural contexts. The spirit of the postmodernist stance, which parallels the spirit of my idea of cultural philosophy, involves what Appiah calls

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<sup>2</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 145-146.

<sup>3</sup> I am not necessarily criticizing *using* what is called a Eurocentric rationalist and foundationalist perspective that is couched in universalist terms to judge other cultures. I am only suggesting that the hitherto universalist, rationalist, and foundationalist perspective is parochial because it does not take cognizance of many other cultural views. Thus, I am suggesting that we can arrive at a broader and more synthetic, rational, universal, and foundational standard that is globally and multiculturally inclusive in outlook.

<sup>4</sup> Anyanwu, *op. cit.*, 494.

<sup>5</sup> Christopher Norris, *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 28.

<sup>6</sup> Anyanwu, *op. cit.*, 494.

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the rejection of the exclusivity in different domains. Such a conception of cultural philosophy, however, is in need of a plausible philosophical argument or epistemic principle that will sufficiently motivate and provide a foundation for it. Such a principle, moreover, should lend credence to the kind of critical cross-cultural dialogue needed in cultural philosophy; it should also engender true global justification and rational knowledge, in order to avoid extreme relativism. The principle for cultural philosophy provided in this essay is intended to meet these requirements.

***Appiah on Cultural Philosophy:  
Cognitive Relativism and Foundationalism***

According to Appiah, if the notion of cultural philosophy is to make sense and avoid the implication of cognitive relativism and incommensurability, then it should involve efforts to prove that many beliefs, especially fundamental beliefs held in the different cultures to which philosophy is prefixed, are true, universally and objectively.<sup>7</sup> As such, the various explanations and theories offered in defense of such beliefs have to be rationally believable to all persons irrespective of their conceptual scheme and cultural background. This is because human rationality is universal and independent of cultural background; thus all persons can rationally comprehend the truth of a proposition and understand a belief as worthy of acceptance (based on its truth). The universal rationality underlying the subject matter and method of what Appiah calls “formal” philosophy, which is absent in cultural or “folk” philosophy, suggests that a meaningful and true philosophical belief would be universally comprehensible and believed to be true by all rational persons irrespective of their particular culture. In short, for Appiah, the rationality or acceptability of a belief cannot be relative to a system of beliefs, culture, or conceptual scheme. On the other hand, Appiah also suggests that the beliefs, theories, concepts, and issues treated by cultural philosophy, such as his example of witchcraft in African cultures, would be true and meaningful only within a particular culture and corresponding conceptual framework, such that they cannot be translated into or understood within a different cultural scheme. Thus, as mentioned, for Appiah cultural philosophy necessar-

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<sup>7</sup> Anthony Appiah, *Necessary Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), especially 200-220.

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ily entails cognitive relativism. Cultural philosophy, as he conceives it, implies that what is true in one culture may be false in another.<sup>8</sup>

Appiah defines cognitive relativism as the doctrine that “reasonable people, on the basis of reasonable interpretation of their experience, can come to have different and apparently incompatible theories of the world, and there may be no evidence or argument that can show which of them is right.”<sup>9</sup> Given this broad definition, cognitive relativism is a true thesis, because different sets of incompatible statements about a fact constitute a set of conflicting premises, and people could reasonably arrive at incompatible interpretations or conclusions about the fact in question.<sup>10</sup> Several of their arguments could either be valid or unsound. The issue, however, is whether the reasonableness of their beliefs should be determined on the basis of the soundness or the validity of the argument. In my view, the reasonableness of the argument, in a philosophical context, must be determined by its validity and not by its soundness, because philosophers are not equipped beyond the common sense of ordinary people to ascertain the truth of beliefs. Appiah himself distinguishes between strong and weak cognitive relativism. According to him, “strong cognitive relativism holds that what is *true* is relative to a conceptual scheme and that what is true for one may be false for another.”<sup>11</sup> Weak cognitive relativism holds “that what it is *reasonable to believe* is relative to a conceptual scheme, and that what it is reasonable to believe in one conceptual scheme it may not be reasonable to believe in another.”<sup>12</sup> Weak cogni-

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<sup>8</sup> The view Appiah is criticizing, strong cognitive relativism, is a metaphysical view. It is similar to the view espoused by Crispin Sartwell, *Obscenity, Anarchy, Reality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1996). This is different from the epistemic view of cultural philosophy for which I am arguing. Sartwell argues that there is no reality which is independent of our perception or interpretation: things are the way they appear to us. What we perceive are not delusions but a true mirror and microcosm of reality. He argues that “you already believe that this world is as real as anything can be. That is why the real is a shock, or why the experience of shock is important: because it brings us back to the real and, thus, to ourselves” (4). He goes on to argue that “‘I’ at any given point am what the situation is making of what situations have made. . . . [E]xistence is always in this sense relational, is always *particular* existence, that is, situated existence. Ontology is *in that sense* conventional” (36).

<sup>9</sup> Appiah, *Necessary Questions*, 211.

<sup>10</sup> Appiah distinguishes between strong and weak versions of this thesis—which I shall address later. He argues that this thesis is true only in the weak sense, and its truth gives credence to folk philosophy. I provide a third, more moderate version, the truth of which, I argue, gives credence to cultural philosophy.

<sup>11</sup> Appiah, *Necessary Questions*, 211.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* I understand ‘reasonable’ here to mean his subjective sense of justification.

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tive relativism, he argues, follows logically from strong cognitive relativism but not vice versa. He argues that strong cognitive relativism is false because it implies that two incompatible claims or propositions about the same subject could both be true. If there are two theories that make incompatible claims about the same single universe, then such claims, by virtue of being contradictory, cannot both be true of the same single universe. Only one of these claims could be true. Thus, for Appiah, strong cognitive relativism, insofar as it denies that only one of these claims could be true—and holds that both claims could be true—must be false.

The epistemic issue raised by cultural philosophy is not that of truth, but that of justification, the reasonableness of people's thinking/ beliefs, and the adequacy of the evidence for their belief in a given socio-cultural context of available evidence, relevant alternatives, and counter-evidence. Such reasonableness is not contingent on the truth of the beliefs to be justified, because it is a commonplace in contemporary epistemology that the truth of a belief is not a necessary condition of its justifiability. In other words, a justified belief does not necessarily have to be a true one. If truth were required, this condition would be too strong for justification, to the extent that it would make justification unattainable. The problem of whether truth is a necessary condition for adequate justification was highlighted by the counter-examples offered by Edmund Gettier in his seminal article "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"<sup>13</sup> Gettier questioned the hitherto accepted logically necessary and sufficient conditions of justified true belief (JTB) for knowledge and highlighted a problem with the objective conception of knowledge, which came to be known popularly as 'Gettier's problem.' He raised the question of whether we can specify a set of logically necessary and sufficient (objective) conditions for a belief to be adequately justified and hence to be regarded as knowledge. Gettier identified situations where the conditions of JTB cannot be used as criteria to determine who really knows, since the justification employed can be undercut by the possibility or existence of some objective evidence or truth that cannot be accessed epistemically.

*Cultural philosophy seeks justification or reasonableness of beliefs.*

The voluminous literature that followed Gettier's article highlighted how the attempt to find the ideal (logical and objective) conditions for knowledge ignores the day-to-day lives of people and the limited context for knowledge and justification that is available to hu-

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<sup>13</sup> Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis* 23 (1963).

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man beings. This led to the attempt to articulate the contextual, defeasible, and causal accounts of knowledge to which I have alluded. Thus, Ernest Sosa argues that we should depart from the traditional analysis of knowledge by placing justification of beliefs in the relative context of an epistemic community.<sup>14</sup> This stance not only gives credence to the need for cultural philosophy, but holds that, to provide an adequate theory of justification, cultural philosophy should also help us to critically explore, analyze, and articulate in an integrated and synthesized form a broad or global contextual basis for epistemic justification. Here I wish to caution that while I accept Crispin Sartwell's view that a theory of justification does two important things—"(a) giving general procedures for inquiry, and (b) setting out standards for evaluating the productions of inquiry"—I do not accept his view that "an account [of justification] is not part of the theory of knowledge."<sup>15</sup> That is, I do believe that justification should be a condition for knowledge, that knowledge involves more than truth and belief. Sartwell seems to suggest that it is only the *end* that determines whether one has knowledge, that the *means*, i.e., the justificatory procedure, is irrelevant. Such a view is unacceptable because it implies that one can have knowledge by guessing, if the guess is a true belief. Cultural philosophy can help to provide an adequate theory of justification by clarifying and constraining the nature and procedures of inquiry that could yield knowledge.

Regarding the "Gettier problem," Alvin Plantinga argues that, as a matter of fact, truth is usually not (and perhaps ought not to be) considered a necessary condition for rational justification.

[C]onsider Newton's belief that if  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$  are moving colinearly, then the motion of  $z$  with respect to  $x$  is the sum of the motions of  $y$  with respect to  $x$  and  $z$  with respect to  $y$ . No doubt Newton was rational in accepting this belief; yet it was false, at least if contemporary physicists are to be trusted. And if they aren't—that is, if they are wrong in contradicting Newton—then they exemplify what I'm speaking of; they rationally believe a proposition which, as it turns out, is false.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ernest Sosa, "How Do You Know?" *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 1974.

<sup>15</sup> Crispin Sartwell, "Why Knowledge is Merely True Belief," *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. LXXXIX, No. 4, April 1992, 168.

<sup>16</sup> Alvin Plantinga, "Rationality and Religious Belief," in Daniel Kolak and Raymond Martin, *The Experience of Philosophy* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993), 276.

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My defense of cultural philosophy has its foundation in the plausibility of what I construe to be *moderate* cognitive relativism. This stance involves a contextual view of justification without specifying the condition of truth as a necessary condition of justification. Moderate cognitive relativism holds that what one can *humanly* know, which is the *undefeated justified belief*—or the belief for which one has ‘reasonable justification,’<sup>17</sup> as having the highest probability of being true—is relative to one’s conceptual scheme and the evidence available in one’s community. Moderate cognitive relativism implies weak cognitive relativism, but the converse is not the case.<sup>18</sup> It is my view that moderate cognitive relativism is plausible, a plausibility which derives from the view that human knowledge is fallible, and that such knowledge—in terms of its connection to evidence and justification—has social, cultural, and pragmatic components. As such, the evidence that exists in a culture or social context other than one’s own, which one does not and cannot humanly possess at a particular time as a member of a particular social or cultural group, cannot undermine one’s justified belief. The view espoused in this article in relation to cultural philosophy is that a plausible account of justification should be evidentialist, intersubjective, and contextual. In other words, justification should be based on the *available* evidence and counter-evidence in a particular socio-cultural context which people can access intersubjectively. Availability here should not be construed in terms of what is objectively available, but what is intersubjectively and contextually available within a socio-cultural context.

*Cultural philosophy based on moderate cognitive relativism.*

The strength of Appiah’s argument against cultural philosophy—to the effect that it implies strong cognitive relativism—derives from three questionable assumptions. The first involves the idea that debates, arguments, problems, issues, and theories in philosophy fundamentally have to do with the truth of beliefs and propositions. In my view, issues in philosophy have to do with the reasonableness of theories, their implications, and the process of reasoning that leads to a be-

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<sup>17</sup> My use of ‘reasonable’ here is stronger than Appiah’s subjective sense of justification; it means an intersubjective and contextual sense of justification.

<sup>18</sup> Appiah’s strong cognitive relativism is a metaphysical or logical antirealist position about the nature of external reality and truth. This does imply my view of moderate cognitive relativism, but the converse is not the case, as I shall show. One can accept (as I do) a moderate (epistemic) view of relativism without accepting the strong (logical or metaphysical) view. Inquiry about external reality presupposes (logically) that there is a reality to inquire about, even if we may not be able fully to access that reality.



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lief, and not with the truth of the belief. (I shall address this issue in some detail later after setting the proper context.) The second questionable assumption holds that the objective epistemic notion of justification is the proper account of justification. This view involves the following thesis: a person S is objectively justified in believing a proposition p if and only if, (i) p is true, (ii) S has a set of evidence e for p which is entailed by the truth of p, (iii) e discounts all possible counter-evidence and is undefeated relative to the set of *all* truths regarding p. This account involves the idea that in order for a person to be justified in believing a proposition, the proposition must be true, and the person must be aware of this truth and all the truths relevant to the target proposition. In other words, the person must be aware of all the relevant counter-evidence and be sure that it does not render the belief false, and that all possible counter-evidence is accounted for or discounted by virtue of her evidence or justification. This view of justification, called foundationalism, holds that there ought to be one absolute, indubitable, and objective basis for knowledge which transcends socio-cultural contexts of evidence; it presupposes an ideal cognizer who is supposed to be apprised of all the possible relevant facts or evidence objectively necessary for her belief to be adequately justified. Since human beings are not ideal cognizers, this objectivist and foundationalist view of justification is problematic. I offer a plausible alternative intersubjective view.

*Foundationalism that ignores historical contexts is inadequate.*

An attempt to find a philosophical principle such as moderate cognitive relativism—with the underlying idea that we consider the social context of justification—as an underpinning and motivation for cultural philosophy must involve, in my view, a philosophical rejection of foundationalism. This will involve, according to Appiah, the “rejection of the mainstream consensus from Descartes through Kant to logical positivism on foundationalism (there is one route to knowledge, which is exclusivism in epistemology) and of metaphysical realism (there is one truth, which is exclusivism in ontology), each underwritten by a unitary notion of reason. . . .”<sup>19</sup> I reject, in some sense, the following stances: *a kind* of (1) foundationalism in justification, (2) determinate universal content of rationality, and (3) objective epistemic justification. I reject these stances only if they implicitly or explicitly preclude the different socio-cultural and natural contexts of justification and knowledge, and the need for a critical cross-cultural dialogue.

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<sup>19</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 143.

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My rejection is motivated by what contemporary philosophers consider a plausible set of fundamental epistemic norms: that “basic states” can be employed as the foundation for the content of our reasoning in order to arrive at a reasonable justification for knowledge. According to John Pollock,

Our epistemic norms permit us to begin reasoning from certain internal states without those states being supported by further reasoning. Such states can be called *basic states*. Paramount among these are perceptual and memory states. Arguments must always begin with basic states and proceed from them to nonbasic doxastic states.<sup>20</sup>

*Reasoning begins from internal states of belief.*

These basic epistemic states, although foundational, are in large part relative, because they are shaped by the context of our social and cultural conditions. These socio-culturally determined basic states and other evidence or counter-evidence play a crucial role in our reasoning and justificatory process and thus cannot be ignored.

In this regard, Alvin Plantinga has argued that there is a phenomenological (experiential) component of justification which contemporary philosophers have not appreciated with respect to the nature of justification and its place in the analysis of knowledge. He argues that it would be irrational not to believe that our basic epistemic states, such as immediate perception, are likely to be true, because we could hardly be mistaken about them. “There are plenty of possible worlds in which I mistakenly believe that there is a red book on my desk; it is at least plausible to hold that there are no possible worlds in which I mistakenly believe that I *seem* to see a red book there.”<sup>21</sup> The fact that what *seems* to us to be a basic epistemic state is immune from error may be taken as a plausible basis to rationally believe in it. This, however, does not rule out the fact that problems with the perceptual process underlying basic epistemic states could exist, which could have a bearing on the intersubjective adequacy of the content of what *seems* to us. For instance, although we may not be mistaken about the fact that we are hallucinating, the veridical nature of the content of our hallucinatory experience may not have intersubjective validity. Cultural philosophy involves an attempt to critically examine these states and evidence, and the role they play in persons’ epistemic reasoning. It would be difficult to claim that people of a particular culture are hallucinating or being deceived about the contents of their basic epistemic states

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<sup>20</sup> John Pollock, *Knowledge and Justification* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 187.

<sup>21</sup> Plantinga, *op. cit.*, 279 (emphasis is mine).

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and the process underlying them. Even if this is the case, the veridical nature of their hallucinatory experience can only be determined by engaging in a critical cross-cultural dialogue. Such dialogue would enable us to articulate what it means to say that a belief *x* is justified for a person *P* in a global socio-cultural or naturalized sense. This is to the extent that such a global sense of justification involves, and is derived from, a synthesis or integration of different socio-cultural and naturalized views held by diverse groups of persons.

*Inquiry  
presupposes  
external  
reality.*

The plausibility of the basic epistemic norms referred to above and the phenomenological component of justification is also given credence by John Searle's argument for the plausibility of "background capacities," on the basis of which we are able to construct social reality.<sup>22</sup> He defines "background capacity" "as the set of non-intentional or pre-intentional capacities that enable intentional states to function."<sup>23</sup> For instance, some background beliefs, metabeliefs, and capacities help us to determine when a belief is reasonable to accept. In this sense, such beliefs and capacities predispose us to epistemic behaviors and practices; they predispose us to categorize or see things or events in a particular way. In this sense, I accept the idea that a theory of justification is an account of the process of inquiry employed to arrive at some adequate representation of reality. Moreover, according to Searle, "Actual human efforts to get true representations of reality are influenced by all sorts of factors—cultural, economic, psychological, and so on. Complete epistemic objectivity is difficult, sometimes impossible, because actual investigations are always from a point of view, motivated by all sorts of personal factors, and within a certain cultural and historical context."<sup>24</sup> This statement should only be accepted as an epistemic view. My concern is with the process of inquiry that will lead to an adequate representation of reality in a global sense, a process which ought to consider the constraints posed by socio-cultural factors. Like Searle's, the view I espouse does not suggest a metaphysical implication that such an epistemic stance renders external realism implausible. Searle's view seems quite plausible: although social reality may be constructed, such construction depends on the existence of an external reality that is independent of human interpretation or perception. As Searle remarks, epistemological concerns about in-

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<sup>22</sup> John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 132-137.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

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quiry can never provide sound arguments for antirealism, because inquiry necessarily presupposes a reality about which we are attempting to inquire.<sup>25</sup>

Empirical investigations have shown that there are differences in individuals' perceptual abilities which are connected to their abilities to make inferences. Some of these abilities derive from persons' attempts to adapt and cope with their particular environments. In other words, one's environment places pressures on one's rational abilities, and human beings develop those abilities which enable them to cope with such environmental pressures. This point is illustrated in the comparison between the Temne of Sierra Leone in West Africa and the Canadian Eskimos. The Temnes live on land covered with a lot of vegetation, and they are mostly farmers. Thus they have a lot of visual stimulation from the environment. The Eskimos live on bare land and are mostly hunters, which requires them to travel far and wide. It has been observed that the Temnes and the Eskimos have developed different perceptual skills and inferential patterns, ones shaped by their socio-cultural environments, in order to cope with their different environments.<sup>26</sup> The fact that a context can shape or determine a person's cognitive abilities illustrates that there are socio-cultural and pragmatic aspects of justification, knowledge, basic epistemic states, and other rational and cognitive processes. According to Annis,

*Historical context can help shape cognitive abilities.*

The empirical evidence indicates that the ecological and cultural characteristics of a society affect perceptual skills and inference habits. There is also evidence of cultural influences on memory, learning, and problem solving, as well as influences on other elements of the cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domain. If we take inference habits, patterns of reasoning, and the acquiring of beliefs under certain conditions as epistemic practices, then it is clear that our epistemic practices are variable across populations. No adequate theory of justification can ignore these differences. The kind of contextually dependent perceptual skills shown among Temnes and Eskimos indicate that social-cultural contexts affect how we develop reliable habits of making inferences, patterns of reasoning, or modes of acquiring beliefs. Hence, we need to critically explore, as an epistemic obligation via cultural philosophy, the cultural contexts in which different people develop those abilities on the basis of which they acquire and justify their beliefs, in order to see what each culture can learn from another, as a

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed account of this difference, see J. W. Berry, "Temne and Eskimo Perceptual Skills," *International Journal of Psychology* 1 (1966), 207-229.

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basis for arriving at globally justified beliefs and process of justification.<sup>27</sup>

Justification cannot be based on an objective foundation because the justification of beliefs about reality, like the concepts of “empty” and “flat,” can only be what Dretske calls “relationally absolute”: that is, absolute only in relation to the available evidence in a particular socio-cultural context.<sup>28</sup> As Dretske explains: “although nothing can be flat if it has *any* bumps or irregularities, what *counts* as a bump or irregularity depends on the type of surface being described. Something is empty . . . if it has nothing in it, but this does not mean that an abandoned warehouse is not really empty because it has light bulbs or molecules in it.”<sup>29</sup> This is a conceptual basis for the intuitive plausibility of fallibilistic epistemology. The idea here is that the nature and context of the subject matter about which people talk will determine what is to count as evidence, counter-evidence, defeater, or *relevant* alternative. This is where socio-cultural context comes into play. A social epistemic context of evidence is required to circumscribe relevant alternatives because one cannot have absolute standards for all cases of knowledge or justified beliefs. Having such standards without a context to delimit evidence would imply that one should have an infinite set of ideally and objectively true beliefs. One would need to possess all the possible beliefs in every conceivable circumstance and culture in order to know or be justified in any context. This would be the only way to rule out the possibility of any defeater or counter-evidence lurking in the background to defeat one’s justification. Otherwise, *merely possible* counter-evidence lurking in the background would count as a relevant alternative that would need to be discounted in order for justification to occur. But we cannot seek the justification for our beliefs on the basis of *merely possible* evidence and counter-evidence that do not jibe with the social-cultural context.

### ***Moderate Cognitive Relativism, Truth, and Incommensurability***

The third of Appiah’s questionable assumptions is that strong cognitive relativism implies incommensurability. Appiah’s definition of cognitive relativism and his argument against the strong variant pre-

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<sup>27</sup> David B. Annis, “The Contextual and Cultural Component of Epistemic Justification—A Reply,” *Philosophia* 12 (1982), 54.

<sup>28</sup> Fred Dretske, “The Pragmatic Nature of Knowledge,” *Philosophical Studies* 40 (1981).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 366.

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supposes that, if there is no evidence or argument to show which of two competing theories is right, this is because the two theories are incommensurable. In other words, the fact that what is true or what is reasonable to believe as true is relative to one's conceptual scheme and context implies that the different theories, beliefs, and contexts, in terms of the associated concepts and their meanings, are incommensurable with one another. The incommensurability thesis seems to imply a denial of the possibility of universal rationality. Such a possibility allows for the universal understanding and acceptability of a belief as reasonable by virtue of the fact that the evidence universally points to its truth. The denial of the possibility of universal rationality implies that we cannot arrive at the reasonableness of a belief on the basis of some available evidence which, although contextual, may be seen by a process of critical dialogue as having cross-cultural validity.

I understand the incommensurability thesis to say the following: X and Y are incommensurable paradigms, theories, or justified beliefs, if and only if the exponents of X cannot *understand* Y, probably because of differences in epistemic, metaphysical, and semantic assumptions, such that the concepts in X are not transferable and translatable into Y; and, further, that it is logically impossible for the exponents of X to *accept* Y, and vice versa, because of the impossibility of transferability and translatability. Thus, to say that Jack has a reasonable justification J<sub>j</sub>, relative to a context J<sub>c</sub>, for a belief J<sub>b</sub>, implies that if Tim has a reasonable justification T<sub>j</sub>, relative to a context T<sub>c</sub>, for a belief T<sub>b</sub>, then Tim cannot understand Jack's concepts and vice versa. Moreover, the incommensurability thesis implies that Jack cannot accept Tim's evidence T<sub>j</sub>, Tim cannot accept Jack's evidence J<sub>j</sub>, and T<sub>j</sub> cannot be transferred and translated into or informed by J<sub>j</sub> in context J<sub>c</sub> and vice versa. It is pertinent to stress that moderate cognitive relativism does not imply incommensurability. Moderate cognitive relativism with respect to the reasonableness of a belief in contexts T<sub>c</sub> and J<sub>c</sub> does not necessarily imply *fundamental* differences in logical, epistemic, metaphysical, and semantic assumptions in contexts J<sub>c</sub> and T<sub>c</sub>; hence it does not deny the possibility that concepts and evidence can be translated and transferred across socio-cultural contexts. Justification for a belief can be transferred and translated from one socio-cultural context to another, because the similarity in the process of reasoning would allow it.

The possibility of such transfer, and the fact of human fallibility in a social context of evidence, lend credence to the need for a critical cross-cultural dialogue about evidence in order to arrive at a global

justification of any belief that does not ignore the human socio-cultural condition. Moderate cognitive relativism does not imply incommensurability, because it is underlined by the following: (1) that justification involves the preponderance of evidence in a particular context, and (2) that rationality involves (i) the ability to see degrees of strength and the adequacy of justification or evidence at different times and contexts in order to employ it in one's epistemic reasoning to justify a belief, (ii) the ability to modify one's belief and doxastic attitude in a social context in the face of some new information and evidence that points to truth, and (iii) the ability to transfer relevant information from one context to another. Thus, the relative difference in people's justification in the face of evidence in different socio-cultural contexts does not imply that a person's evidence in one context cannot be transferred or translated to another context. Hence, although moderate cognitive relativism specifies that we take into consideration different socio-cultural human conditions, it does not imply incommensurability.

Social factors and natural human conditions have much to do with justification, as regards the standards by which people should determine which evidence or counter-evidence is relevant, when there is a preponderance of evidence, and whether the evidence or counter-evidence that one does not possess should undermine one's justification and knowledge claims.<sup>30</sup> In suggesting that there is a necessary social aspect of justification, Pollock argues,

We are 'socially expected' to be aware of various things. We are expected to know what is announced on television, and we are expected to know what is in our mail. If we fail to know all these things and that makes a difference to whether we are justified in believing some true proposition P, then our objectively justified belief in P does not constitute knowledge.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>30</sup> For such views regarding the social component of knowledge, see Stewart Cohen, "Knowledge, Context, Social Standards," *Synthese*, Vol. 73 (1987), 3-26; Gilbert Harman, "Reasoning and Evidence One Does Not Possess," in Peter French, Theodore E. Uehling, Jr., Howard K. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), Vol. V, 163-182; Gilbert Harman, *Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy*, 73.20 (1976); Keith Lehrer and Thomas Paxson, Jr., "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief," *Journal of Philosophy* 66.8 (1969); Peter Klein, "A Proposed Definition of Propositional Knowledge," *Journal of Philosophy* 68.16 (1971).

<sup>31</sup> Pollock, *op. cit.*, 192.

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The necessary basic information in a socio-cultural context provides the foundational basis (in a relational sense) for our evidence, on the basis of which we engage in epistemic reasoning to justify our beliefs. In other words, even if a belief is objectively true, if you lack the requisite information which has a bearing on the justification of your belief, you cannot be said to have knowledge. It is obvious that you may have some information in one socio-cultural context, which has a bearing on the justification of a belief, that another person in another socio-cultural context may not have regarding the same belief. Assuming that people in all cultures have the basic rationality to use evidence to support their beliefs, how ought the people in different cultures to determine when a specific belief is justified? (We do not have *a priori* reasons to assume that people in other cultures lack basic rationality, since to do so would be to imply that they are fundamentally and blatantly stupid.) This question, which implicitly denies incommensurability, calls for cultural philosophy and cross-cultural dialogue. Lack of such critical dialogue would imply by extension that, if there is information in another culture that you do not have which has a bearing on the justification of your belief, you cannot be said to know. But it is simply impossible for you to have such information at the time. One way to know the information in one culture that may be relevant to the global justification of a belief in any culture is to engage in cultural philosophy. This will allow the transfer and translation of evidence across cultures, in order to arrive at a global sense of justification. This will also help examine some basic epistemic (memory and perceptual) states that people in different cultures use as evidence to justify their beliefs. Whether these different epistemic states have a bearing on the justification of beliefs in other cultures could also be examined.

This kind of critical dialogue which underlies cultural philosophy involves the attempt to critically understand the nature of evidence, defeaters or counter-evidence, relevant alternatives, and the evidential relation between a target belief and available evidence. The plausibility of such dialogue, and its foundation in the social context of justification and moderate cognitive relativism, derives from the idea that such dialogue would broaden, globally, our epistemic base of evidence, including relevant alternatives and defeaters. If we know the evidence and counter-evidence that exist in different socio-cultural contexts, we will be able to expand our overall epistemic base, on the basis of which we can judge whether our beliefs are justified. This view, I think, is the motivation behind the exploration by Western



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medical doctors of 'holistic medicine,' which treats human ailments as having physical *and* spiritual components: an idea that is informed by the traditional cultures, beliefs, and practices of peoples in Asia and Africa. Western medical doctors think there are things they can learn from other modes of healing (herbal, acupuncture, spiritual, psychosomatic, and homeopathic) that are not offered by the physiological and biochemical explanatory basis for treating illness. If this enterprise is reasonable, it shows the need for cultural philosophy. Cultural philosophy would allow us, for instance, to analyze the beliefs involved in the different modes of healing, to explore their pros and cons, and to determine whether a particular belief is worthy of acceptance or modification. This view is consistent with Appiah's notion of rationality: "rationality in belief consists in being disposed so to react to evidence and reflection that you can change your beliefs in ways that make it more likely that they are true."<sup>32</sup>

My dialogical and dialectical conception of cultural philosophy, with respect to its foundation in moderate cognitive relativism, does not imply the extreme relativistic view of reality, reason, and truth. It is grounded in the view that there is a necessary social component of justification, and this is given credence by the plausibility of fallibilistic epistemology and the epistemic or evidential account of truth. The distinction between strong cognitive relativism and moderate cognitive relativism parallels and corresponds to the distinction between the logical and epistemic conceptions of truth, respectively.<sup>33</sup> The logical conception which accounts for the idea of truth specifies the logical conditions necessary and sufficient for a proposition to be true. The epistemic conception specifies evidential conditions for determining and knowing that a proposition is true; it states that in order for a person to know that a proposition is true, one must have strong and undefeated evidence that it is true or that it is more likely to be true than false. This epistemic view presupposes our natural cognitive abilities and their limitations, which make us fallible. It is in this epistemic sense of truth that Karl Popper construes truth as verisimilitude.<sup>34</sup> Strong cognitive relativism regarding what is true only makes claims about the logical or the metaphysical (that is, the real nature of reality)

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<sup>32</sup> Appiah, *In My Father's House*, 116.

<sup>33</sup> See Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 272-288.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Popper, "Truth and Approximation to Truth," in *Popper Selections*, David Miller, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

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with respect to the idea of truth, that is, a proposition is true if and only if it logically corresponds to a set of facts, in terms of the meta-physical or real nature of reality. If such logical conditions are the true conditions for the nature and idea of truth, then they would hold in every conceivable situation; thus, according to this logical conception, truth is not relative to a culture or conceptual scheme. According to the semantic or logical conception of truth, the statement 'Snow is white' is true if, and only if, snow is white.<sup>35</sup>

The logical conception of the nature and idea of truth in terms of what is true does not necessarily imply *how* we in fact know, *what* we know, what we *believe* to be true, and the *justification* for our belief about the nature of snow and the color white. Such implications exist only if we accept naive realism, the causal and representative theory of knowledge and perception: that what we perceive or what we know is caused by, and is, a direct, accurate representation of reality. Since the distinction between appearance and reality, and Kant's distinction between *phenomena* and *noumena*, makes sense, we may not accept the view that ignores or collapses such distinctions. This logical account has sometimes been given a corresponding construal to yield an epistemic account as follows: 'Snow is white' is true, if, and only if, we have sufficient evidence that justifiably points to the facts necessary for us to know that snow is white. This is seen as an epistemic view of truth because it specifies what we indeed know about the facts, given the evidence, as the necessary and sufficient conditions for truth. The distinctions among strong, moderate, and weak cognitive relativism parallel and correspond to the distinctions among what the *idea* of truth is, what we in fact *know* (in a fallibilistic sense) to be true given the evidence, and what we merely *believe* to be true, respectively. Since our logical conception of truth does not necessarily follow from how we in fact know, and vice versa—because what we in fact know, which may not represent the real nature of things, is dependent on our belief, evidence, defeaters, relevant alternatives, cultural context, and conceptual scheme—it follows that strong cognitive relativism has nothing to do with how and what we in fact know or justifiably believe to be true. To a large extent, cultural philosophy involves the critical and systematic examination of *how* people know, in terms of the reasoning

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<sup>35</sup> See Alfred Tarski's semantic theory of truth in "The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundation of Semantics," *Journal of Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 4 (1944), 341-375.

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*Strong cognitive relativism fails to account for how we in fact know.*

process by which they use their evidence to arrive at a doxastic attitude, and what they know or justifiably believe, in terms of when and whether their evidence is reasonable. What we in fact *know* about snow and white as a set of facts is dependent on our conceptual framework. It is on the basis of our conceptual scheme that we can determine whether the person who actually believes that the statement 'Snow is white' is true does so responsibly on the basis of his cognitive abilities, or whether he does so reasonably or justifiably on the basis of the evidence he has regarding the facts about snow and white. This is how we determine whether what we claim to know is true.

Anyone with a different conceptual scheme who has a different conception of the nature of the color white (for instance, a jaundiced person) or of snow (a person who believes that snow is another name for cheese) will be reasonably justified to believe that 'Snow is white' is false. Such a person will reason justifiably to this conclusion on the basis of her basic perceptual state, that is, what she sees, and not on the basis of the real nature of reality. Since the reasonableness or adequacy of one's justification does not entail the truth condition of one's beliefs, it is plausible for a person to rationally and justifiably believe a proposition that is in fact false. Such a person would be rational because the reasoning process that leads to the conclusion (the belief) about the probability of the truth of the proposition will be the same as that of the normal person who is not jaundiced, who believes that snow is the white stuff that falls from the sky during winter. Her belief is rational or justified on the basis of how she reasons from the evidence that is available to her. In short, if the *process* by which she arrives at her belief is rational, the belief itself is rational, and this whether or not it is objectively true. The basic issue concerning her rationality is not the objective truth of her beliefs in relation to the real nature of reality, which she may not in fact be capable of knowing because of her cognitive limitations. The real issue is the process by which she arrives at certain beliefs given certain prior beliefs as evidence. This is the sense in which rationality is fundamentally contingent on the validity of one's reasoning process and not on its soundness. Thus, I think William Beck is right in arguing that reason for professional philosophers "refers to the process of logical thought [of argumentation and justification] and not necessarily to the pursuit of truth."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> William S. Beck, *Modern Science and the Nature of Life* (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961), 58.

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If there were a culture in which every person was jaundiced, all of its members would obviously believe that the proposition ‘Snow is white’ was false, and they would have justifiable reasons for that belief. But suppose it is impossible for normal people to actually know that the statement ‘Snow is white’ is true, because we cannot objectively verify whether it corresponds to the fact(s) about the real nature of reality. We are unable to know because we are ‘jaundiced’ per our natural, human, and cultural categories of understanding. Or perhaps there is a cultural version of an evil genius toying with our cognitive mechanisms which makes us believe (perhaps ‘justifiably’) that there is such a correspondence when indeed there is not. Or suppose we are all brains in different cultural vats. Given this condition, we will have the correct *idea* of what truth is but will never *know* what is in fact true, since such knowledge will be dependent on our conceptual scheme, which has been culturally or naturally bedeviled. Perhaps one could argue that this argument renders my defense of cultural philosophy implausible, because it gives credence to the plausibility of someone’s claiming to know some obviously false beliefs.<sup>37</sup> The point of this argument, however, is that with a critical dialogue and an understanding of the evidential connections that people see—based on their cultural categories of understanding—their view could be diagnosed as an epistemic anomaly possibly amenable to rectification. Or we could learn something from them—about the anomaly in their reasoning process, if nothing else. Without the kind of critical dialogue I am advocating, we would not be able to arrive at a standard for perceptual accuracy. We would not be able to know that someone is perceptually ‘jaundiced,’ color blind, or subject to perceptual problems. Cultural philosophy, by contrast, enables us to extend this critical process of arriving at standards for determining perceptual anomalies to issues of global justification across cultures. This indeed is one of the principal motivations for cultural philosophy.

### *Justification, Social Context, and Cultural Philosophy*

This motivation is further strengthened by the plausibility of a contextual and intersubjective account of justification. If such an account is conceived as an epistemic foundation for cultural philosophy, it

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<sup>37</sup> Appiah, *In My Father’s House*, 117. He argues that his account of reasonableness, which is a subjective justificatory sense, shows “why the apparently obvious falsehoods of the beliefs of the Asante priest might be regarded as evidence of his unreasonableness.”

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would lead to critical dialogue across contexts and provide a broader contextual and intersubjective basis for acquiring evidence. My non-foundationalist account of justification can be applied to cultural philosophy in the following way: the intersubjective account of justification with respect to moderate cognitive relativism provides a plausible motivation for cultural philosophy, to the effect that it establishes that justification or rational acceptance of beliefs is contingent on socio-cultural contexts. And such socio-cultural contexts of evidence and justification can only be properly understood and critically analyzed by engaging in cultural philosophy *ex hypothesi*—the dialogical, systematic, and critical analysis of cultural beliefs, theories, and epistemic practices. However, cultural philosophy, with reference to its moderate cognitive relativism in relation to the social component of justification, does not deny universal human possession of cognitive abilities and rationality, or the ability to use these differently in different contexts to arrive at a semblance of a universal truth. I am only suggesting that this semblance of a universal truth (epistemic, not metaphysical or logical) as a standard has to be derived from a synthesis or integration based on a cross-cultural dialogue utilizing the universal cognitive abilities of men and women. Such a universal truth can only be arrived at by what Anyanwu calls a kind of tolerance, which is based on an acquaintance with, an enriched understanding and critical exploration, a synthesis or integration of the views of people in different cultures. “The philosophy of culture would hopefully enable us to tolerate the differences of cultural values [epistemic and otherwise] without minimizing the importance of those differences and the complementarity of such values.”<sup>38</sup> Such ‘critical tolerance’ would, I hope, help philosophers to recapture the human element of philosophy which is lost by the *strict* and parochial analytic and logical approach, on the basis of which cultural philosophy has been questioned by Bodunrin and Appiah, among others.<sup>39</sup>

The cultural view of reality that is entailed by cultural philosophy and moderate cognitive relativism only denies that there are absolute, infallible, and changeless true beliefs about and interpretations of reality. Every culture seems to see truth as an ideal, end, standard, or target that we are trying to reach. However, we require justification or evidence as the means or guide for getting at the truth. We also realize

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<sup>38</sup> Anyanwu, *op. cit.*, 501.

<sup>39</sup> P. O. Bodunrin, “The Question of African Philosophy,” *Philosophy* 56 (1981); Appiah, *Necessary Questions*, *op. cit.*

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that the evidence available to us at any particular time and within a given context may not be sufficient. We are willing to modify our beliefs if we discover that the evidence that we thought had a high probability of leading us to the truth is inadequate. In the face of more evidence or counter-evidence that initially was unavailable within our own particular culture, we are willing to modify our beliefs and interpretation of reality. This is the mark of a rational person. The ability to reason, i.e., to use the best available means to get to a desired end, is a universal cognitive (rational) ability that exists among all peoples, whatever their culture. This relational absolute nature of justified belief, conceived as an epistemic underpinning of cultural philosophy, is plausible because the rational ability of human beings is a cultural universal. Wiredu argues that

*Ability to reason is universal.*

being a human person implies having the capacity of reflective perception, abstraction, and inference. In their basic nature these mental capacities are the same for all humans, irrespective of whether they inhabit Europe, Asia, or Africa, just as in their basic nature the instinctive reactions of, say, the frogs of Europe are the same as those of the frogs of Africa.<sup>40</sup>

This universal capacity also involves the ability to conceptualize a problem, which is contingent upon a particular person's conception of reality, as well as the ability to adopt a plausible means to solve the problem. The same is true of the ability to realize that one could be wrong. If these abilities were not universal, certain cultures, those whose members did not possess such abilities, would be static.

It is a commonplace, however, that no culture is static; all cultures are always changing. It is reasonable to assume that the changes that occur in cultures, which result either from internal changes or the influence of another culture, can be traced to basic human rationality. This involves the ability to bring evidence to bear on one's doxastic attitude and the ability to modify or change one's attitude in the face of better evidence or counter-evidence. Perhaps, the greater need for such changes of belief as one's base of evidence expands also lends credence to the justification and significance of cultural philosophy in the dialogical form that could lead to global justification. However, the 'content' of one's rationality and the specific way in which it is used is contextual, social, and dependent on the basic beliefs one employs in one's reasoning. This contextual and social account of justification,

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<sup>40</sup> See Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 23.

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rationality is  
contextual.*

which is underlined by universal human rational ability, lends credence to the idea that cognitive relativism does not imply incomensurability. The universal existence of basic natural human mental capacities suggests that evidence, while shaped by culture, can nonetheless, by virtue of such mental capacities, be transferred, translated, and understood across cultures. Because there is no absolute knowledge and no absolutely justified beliefs—one can only be justified in relation to a set of available evidence—there is always something we can learn from another culture. We may allow our beliefs to be informed by possible relevant evidence and different plausible ways of seeing and doing things in other cultures.

Moderate cognitive relativism accepts the idea that there could be something like a universal practical reason underlying human cognitive abilities. However, how we use those abilities to process our background and meta-beliefs as premises or evidence in order to arrive at other beliefs as conclusions (in terms of practical reason or syllogism) is dependent on the culture and its particular conceptual scheme. This is so because the beliefs we bring to the reasoning process (as evidence, relevant alternatives, and defeaters, considered as premises) are shaped in part by our culture. It is along this line that many people have argued that social context, with respect to the beliefs by which we justify other beliefs, is an important aspect of knowledge—because of its effect on the necessary requirement of justification. According to W. Macneile Dixon, “There is no doubt that all reasoning is in a manner biased, and the bias is due to the nature, surroundings, and education of the thinker.”<sup>41</sup> This is the sense in which the *use* of reason and our cognitive abilities is ‘epistemically relative’ or relational to contexts and cultures. We must therefore see the basic epistemic issue that is raised by cultural philosophy to be the following: whether, given people’s background beliefs, meta-beliefs, assumptions, and justifications, there are reasonable grounds to expect their beliefs to have a high probability of being true. If we do not appreciate their background beliefs and meta-beliefs, we will not be able to understand their reasoning in terms of the relation between their evidence and beliefs.

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<sup>41</sup> W. Macneile Dixon, *The Human Situation* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1958), 13. Ian Hacking, “Language, Truth and Reason,” in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, eds., *Rationality and Relativism*, *op. cit.*, makes a similar point when he argues that there are different styles of reasoning, which are relative to culture and historical periods.

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However, the issue may be raised whether the background beliefs and meta-beliefs—regarding, for instance, the nature of things, truth, and justification—are true. But such questions cannot be resolved, as philosophical issues, in a simple way. Again, the pertinent issue should be whether the beliefs are warranted, reasonable, and justifiable, without insisting that such justification be logically connected to a truth condition. Many stances in philosophy involve theories about the nature of ‘things’ and the basis for justifiable belief in different conceptions of reality and nature. The arguments regarding these different theories concern not whether they are true, but whether they are justified or reasonable given certain assumptions and implications. Professor Bodunrin, one of my former teachers, used to tell his students that, if philosophical issues could be resolved simply as matters of fact (with respect to truth), then philosophy would cease to exist as a discipline. The issue of whether a proposition about a matter of fact is true is not resolved by the critical analysis and systematic argumentation in which philosophers engage. The history of philosophy will attest that many of the arguments in philosophy have to do with adequate and reasonable justifications for conceptions and views about things and reality. The issues that engage philosophers are whether, for instance, the correspondence theory of truth, the interactionist theory of mind and body, and the coherence theory of justification are reasonable, and which of the competing theories is more reasonable to hold. Philosophers provide arguments to show the plausibility of various theories by analyzing their assumptions and implications.

We cannot, for instance, determine whether the causal theory of knowledge, the utilitarian theory, idealism as a metaphysical theory, or the functionalist theory of mind and body are true in the same ordinary and empirical way in which people can find out whether “it is raining”—by going outside to verify the truth of the statement. The fundamental issues raised by such theories as those listed are not the truth of certain facts. Philosophers do not debate whether arguments about the belief in the existence of God, theories about the nature of the mind and its relationship with the body, theories about the nature of justification, or theories about the nature of truth are in fact true. Even if philosophical theories (if they were a set of observational propositions) had something to do with facts, inquiring about such facts would not be the domain of philosophy as an abstract and conceptual discipline, and philosophers would not be competent to engage in such empirical inquiry beyond the common sense of ordinary



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people. Very often arguments in philosophy are so technical that they are scarcely understood by ordinary people, which indicates that they are not *strictly* or *directly* about truths regarding matters of fact. As a result, it is not possible for ordinary people to determine the plausibility of philosophical arguments in the way they usually would do when they want to verify the truth of observational propositions about matters of fact. Perhaps if philosophical positions necessarily had to do with matters of fact and truth, then ordinary people would be able to verify their truth, since philosophers are not more competent in doing that than ordinary people. There is a sense in which the question of the truth of a proposition is inextricably tied to the verification of facts to which the proposition refers. But we cannot verify facts about the coherence theory of truth or philosophical theories in general, because the abstract and conceptual notion of truth does not address facts; and ordinary people cannot use these philosophical theories to organize and verify their experiences. It is along this line that Anyanwu argues that "Philosophy as an institutionalized activity seems to be speaking to professional philosophers, not to the people who experience the turmoil of life and who need certain schemes of thought to organize their lives."<sup>42</sup>

Cultural philosophy does raise metaphysical and epistemological issues (in the face of competing views) about the *real* nature of existing things and the justification for certain beliefs about such things. But philosophers do not have the tools and means of *actually* verifying the truth of such existence as empirical facts—if, indeed, they are verifiable at all. They can only 'verify' the truth of philosophical issues and theories in principle, and this means in terms of the reasonableness of the theories and the logical validity of the reasoning underlying them, including whether the theories cohere with our intuition and commonsense beliefs about the nature and explanation of things. It is in this sense that philosophical theories are motivated by our intuitions, or evaluated by determining the extent to which they cohere with our common sense and intuition. What we do as philosophers is to explore, in principle or conceptually, the truth about the kind of things that we conceive or believe to be capable of existing (logically or metaphysically), and to articulate a rational justification for holding beliefs about the existence of such things. If cultural philosophy implies strong cognitive relativism also implies that cultural philosophy

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<sup>42</sup> Anyanwu, *op. cit.*, 497.

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addresses the truth of beliefs about matters of fact and their verification, then the questions raised by cultural philosophy should be scientific or empirical, not philosophical or conceptual. Although philosophers try to ‘borrow’ from the rational and rigorous method of inquiry associated with science, the two disciplines are fundamentally different. Philosophy is fundamentally a conceptual discipline while science is fundamentally an empirical discipline. Since the questions raised by cultural philosophy are not scientific (i.e., empirical) but conceptual, it follows that cultural philosophy *qua* philosophy has nothing to do with the truth of beliefs about matters of fact. Rather, the issue raised by cultural philosophy is the process of reasoning by which people in different cultures use their epistemically basic states and available evidence to justify their beliefs. Thus, the question raised by my defense of the nature, task, and foundation of cultural philosophy—*qua* philosophy and not science—is not whether it is true, for instance, that the metaphysical entities about which people in certain cultures hold beliefs *do in fact exist*, but whether they exist in principle and whether people can justifiably believe in their existence.

*Philosophical theories are evaluated in terms of intuition.*

### ***Intersubjective Justification, Evidence, and Social Context***

The moderate variant of cognitive relativism that I propose as the foundation of cultural philosophy is consistent with a socially and contextually relational view of an *intersubjective rational epistemic justification*. This view of justification holds that one is justified in believing a proposition to be true if, and only if, one has a set of prima facie good reasons or acceptable evidence, given the acceptable beliefs that are commonplace in a social or epistemic community, such that there are *no known defeaters* in the community that would undermine the evidence. This notion of intersubjective justification, I think, is the most plausible account of epistemic justification, because it is consistent with the *relationally absolute* (contextual) nature of the notion of knowledge or justified belief, which Dretske describes as “an evidential state in which *all relevant alternatives* (to what is known) are eliminated. This makes knowledge or justified belief an absolute concept but the restriction to relevant alternatives makes it . . . [relative and relational] and applicable to this epistemically bumpy world we live in.”<sup>43</sup> According to this account, justification is dependent on relevant alternatives and evidence, whose appropriateness is considered in relation to

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<sup>43</sup> Fred Dretske, “The Pragmatic Nature of Knowledge,” 367.

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the cultural, social, pragmatic, and communal context of people in terms of the justified beliefs (evidence) they have. One way to improve on intersubjectively justified beliefs is to attempt to make such justification global, which would involve a critical dialogue on such beliefs among different people in different cultural contexts.

The notion of epistemic justification is usually understood, in a rationally objective context, to involve the ability of an individual to use his will to rationally, ideally, and objectively deliberate and find objective reasons for his beliefs that rational people would find generally and objectively acceptable. This assumes some fundamental standards or beliefs regarding what is rational in an objective universal sense that is contextually neutral. The intersubjective view of justification is more plausible than the objective and ideal notion of justification because, on the one hand, human beings are not ideal cognizers, who can be apprised of all possible true evidence. On the other hand, they cannot have an infinite set of true beliefs to be able to rule out every possible defeater or piece of counter-evidence. We cannot require that a person be able to justifiably believe *all* the logical implications of his beliefs, which may imply an infinite set of beliefs possessed by persons in other cultures but which is not available to him. It is simply impossible for human beings to have an infinite number of beliefs. Hence, the need to contextualize our beliefs and views, in an intersubjective sense, to the culture that shapes them, in order to make them manageable. Rationality, in the intersubjective epistemic sense of justification, seems to assert, on the one hand, the universal possession of the cognitive ability to reason from evidence to beliefs, and, on the other, a synthetic, practical, and contextual reasoning by which a connection is made between the available evidence and beliefs. Feldman and Conee's evidentialist notion of epistemic justification, which I think is contextual, is instructive here. According to them, "Doxastic attitude D toward a proposition p is epistemically justified for S at t if and only if having D toward p fits the evidence S has at t."<sup>44</sup> This thesis, which only attempts to state the necessary and sufficient conditions for epistemic justification, is consistent, they argue, with the notion that epistemic justification is not absolute. It allows for degrees of strength based on the preponderance of evidence that one has at any given

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<sup>44</sup> Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 48, (1985), 15. Emphasis is mine, to draw attention to justification as related to the time and context of evidence.

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time in the relevant epistemic context, which in my view is dependent on culture.

The ability to reason and make the appropriate evidential connection between one's doxastic attitude and one's evidence, which is embedded in the notion of rational epistemic justification, is usually understood in the modern and contemporary Western philosophical tradition (starting with Descartes) to involve essentially the ability of an individual to think for herself. This, in my view, involves making the requisite connection between one's culturally shaped evidence, relevant alternatives, and plausible defeaters, on the one hand, and one's doxastic attitude, on the other. We think for ourselves in a socio-cultural context; we cannot reason epistemically from evidence to belief in an objective sense that is contextually neutral. In Harman's view of justification, a person will be unjustified in holding a belief (doxastic attitude) only if there exists contrary evidence (a defeater) that it would either be possible for a person to obtain for herself or is possessed by other people in the relevant cultural, social, or epistemic group to which the person belongs.<sup>45</sup> This context also determines what are to count as 'relevant alternatives' or counter-evidence that must be ruled out as possible defeaters for one's evidence in order for one to know. Steven Lukes argues that the strength and relevance of one's evidence for one's belief is dependent on the general evidence that is available to people in a given context and culture or their perspective.<sup>46</sup> This view is consistent with fallibilistic epistemology, for it allows one to claim to know a proposition to be true if one has a preponderance of contextual and 'circumstantial' evidence that gives the proposition a high probability of being true. This view also coheres with our commonsense view that we know many things, given the evidence, relevant alternatives, and defeaters we have in a given time and context; but at the same time it allows us to admit that we could be shown to be wrong about what we claim to know, given better evidence or information and counter-evidence.

David Annis, among others, has argued that the foundationalist account of epistemic justification, which requires objective and absolute basic propositions as the foundation for beliefs, ignores the social and cultural component of justification, and that an adequate theory of justification must take this into account—thus his contextual account of

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<sup>45</sup> Gilbert Harman, *Thought*.

<sup>46</sup> Steven Lukes, "Relativism in Its Place," in Hollis and Lukes (eds.), *Rationality and Relativism*.

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justification.<sup>47</sup> A consideration of cultural context is necessary, because there are natural and socio-cultural limitations on human cognitive capacities which do not allow us to know in an objective and absolute sense. In every epistemic community, there are fundamental sets of 'cultural' background and metabeliefs that people must accept in order to belong to that community or be epistemic 'practitioners' in the community. Again, the relational nature of these fundamental beliefs does not imply that other beliefs and theories held by practitioners in different communities are incommensurable, nor does it imply differences in rational abilities. Various beliefs and metabeliefs are accepted as fundamental because they are significant in terms of how the beliefs fit or help people to organize their experiences, explain and predict phenomena, and cope with their environment. The world or reality of our existence is shaped by culture, so, in order philosophically to understand that reality in a global way, we have to understand the different cultures that shape it. And one person's background belief system or conceptual scheme is different from another's; hence what one person knows or reasonably believes as having a high probability of being true, given the evidence, will be different from another's, based upon a different set of evidence.

The important point about moderate cognitive relativism and the contextual account of justification, however, is the stricture they place on the process and content of one's cognition. That is, one must use one's cognitive abilities responsibly and reasonably in the context of culture to arrive at one's beliefs by depending on the most reliable and rigorous epistemic practices, critically exploring the best available evidence, considering relevant alternatives, and eliminating plausible defeaters. This kind of relativism stresses that one has an epistemic obligation to use one's cognitive ability properly, to adopt the *most reasonable* epistemic attitude of whether to believe, disbelieve, or suspend belief, given the evidence, relevant alternatives, and defeaters. This notion of epistemic obligation with respect to acquiring beliefs in a cultural context also presupposes the possession of universal cognitive abilities, which people can voluntarily use properly to acquire and justify beliefs. So, the standards for epistemic evaluation should consider the normal limits of human abilities: abilities which involve evaluating beliefs, discriminating between acceptable and unacceptable beliefs, and considering the grounds for acceptability or rejection. A determi-

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<sup>47</sup> David B. Annis, "A Contextual Theory of Epistemic Justification," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 15 (1978), 213-219.

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nation of when one should question beliefs or be skeptical is circumstantial, contextual, and culturally influenced. One should not try to achieve objective or absolute justification or truth by becoming a perpetual skeptic. It is in this spirit that Dretske argues:

knowledge depends not just on the evidential status of the knower vis-a-vis what is known, but on such factors as the general availability, and proximity, of (misleading) counter-evidence, on the sorts of things that are commonly taken for granted by others in the relevant community, on the interests and purposes of speaker (in claiming to know) and listeners (in being told that someone knows), and the importance or significance of what is known or someone knowing it.<sup>48</sup>

It is necessary to draw attention to the fact that the significance of what one claims to know and the general availability of some counter-evidence (defeaters) are part of the general context of culture which also shapes knowledge and the justification of beliefs.

We also have an epistemic obligation critically to explore whether there are other cultures that have a set of relevant evidence and reliable epistemic practices for generating justified beliefs that have a higher probability of being true than being false. Such critical examination means that we have to be tolerant of other cultural views because members of other cultures may reasonably hold a belief on the basis of evidence and basic epistemic states that are plausible and available to them but not to us. Moreover, we cannot argue that just because we have available to us some evidence or defeater that renders some other people's beliefs implausible that we are thus to judge those people irrational in holding their beliefs. We must realize that what we regard as a legitimate defeater that is not available to other people, on the basis of which we judge their belief to be unreasonable, may turn out to be a misleading defeater or not a defeater at all in light of further information or knowledge. If we understand a people's reasoning process in terms of the evidential relation that its members make in real-life situations between their views or beliefs and the basic epistemic states that constitute part of their evidence, our epistemic judgment may be different.<sup>49</sup>

*Epistemology obligates us to explore widest possible base of evidence.*

<sup>48</sup> Dretske, *op. cit.*, 367

<sup>49</sup> Examples of this point abound in the literature that emerged from Edmund Gettier's article "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *op. cit.* See, for instance, Fred Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. LXVII, No. 24, December 1970. He discusses the example of someone thinking he sees a zebra when there is counter-evidence that he does not have that what he sees as a zebra is a mule that has been carefully disguised to look like a zebra. Although this example appears convoluted, the underlying idea is relevant to the issue of the status of the evidence and

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The task of cultural philosophy is to apply philosophical views and methods to the cultural context of people who deal practically with the issues with which philosophers deal conceptually. The ordinary people who deal with these issues on a hands-on basis have to depend on their social and cultural contexts to provide justifications for their beliefs. This idea of a social context for justification seems to be expressed in Wiredu's point that a "fact about philosophy in a traditional society [and culture], particularly worthy of emphasis, is that it is alive in day-to-day existence. When philosophy becomes academic and highly technical it can easily lose this quality."<sup>50</sup> This point is evident in the problem with objective standards for knowledge identified by Gettier to which I alluded earlier: that such standards are not sensitive to human circumstances. The attempt to recapture this 'human quality' or socio-cultural element in the methodology of philosophy may account for the new trend in epistemology—naturalized epistemology—which seeks to understand the cognitive and socio-cultural conditions of human knowledge and how to bring this understanding to bear on the analysis of knowledge. Along this line, Anyanwu argues that there is a sense in which the philosophy of culture can teach us "not to forget the wholly relative character of the principles which philosophers may be tempted to set forth as absolute truth."<sup>51</sup> The attempt to understand this relative character of philosophical principles is an attempt to understand human nature. As Anyanwu argues, at bottom the first principles of philosophy are that human beings understand ourselves and our setting and learn how to bring this understanding to bear on our views and beliefs.

Indeed, according to Anyanwu, "self-understanding may be considered as the highest knowledge that cultural philosophy offers. It entails the knowledge of the knower and his circumstance."<sup>52</sup> As such, the epistemic basis for cultural philosophy requires that people in every culture make explicit their own views, beliefs, values, standards, evidence, reasoning, and assumptions by virtue of which they see the

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counter-evidence that one does not possess in relation to one's justification. This shows that another person can have evidence that is contrary to our perceptual evidence, but which we cannot epistemically access, that may undercut what we think is adequate justification.

<sup>50</sup> Kwasi Wiredu, *Philosophy and An African Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 16.

<sup>51</sup> Anyanwu, *op. cit.*, 499.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

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world and interpret or explain their experiences. Thus, one of the major points that Alvin Goldman makes in *Epistemology and Cognition* is the need to seek epistemic standards or principles that reflect human conditions (of which culture is a part) and therefore can serve as *practical* guides to belief formation.<sup>53</sup> The attempt to capture these human conditions is identified by Anyanwu as one of the tasks of cultural philosophy:

If we are to use beliefs, ideas, and thoughts to facilitate the development of man we have to know how different people in different cultures understand their world and pursue their goals. This knowledge may prepare the ground for the foundation of true world history, not in terms of nations or race, but in terms of man's relationship to God, man, nature, and the universe.<sup>54</sup>

In order to do this, one has to consider the practical and cultural conditions of people and the practical and cultural implications of their beliefs and belief-forming processes. This requires that we consider not only the limited cognitive capacities of people but also their cultural and spatial limitations. Hence we cannot expect people to have all the information available in cultures other than their own to use to shape their views.

### *Conclusion*

The conceptual and epistemological basis for the philosophy of culture which I articulate in the notions of evidentialism, the social context of justification, and moderate cognitive relativism, is dialectical, dialogical, and integrative. This is so because human activities, values, and goals derive from the complex natural, social, and cultural ways of doing things which over time become habitual. This is consistent with the attempt by naturalized epistemology (in consonance with postmodernism, evidentialism, and moderate cognitive relativism) to reject foundationalism and to understand and be tolerant of the different natural, cultural contexts, 'causal' ways, and 'language games' by which human beings acquire and justify beliefs on the basis of their culturally determined evidence. If, however, cultural beliefs and theories are studied dogmatically for their own sake and as an end, without critical analysis of the contextual basis for our evidence

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<sup>53</sup> Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986).

<sup>54</sup> Anyanwu, *op. cit.*, 496.



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*Cultural beliefs should be critically analyzed, not studied dogmatically.*

and cognitive abilities, such an approach may be criticized for its relativistic import. This is far from what I am suggesting. My defense of cultural philosophy is based on the idea that cultures should be studied critically and comparatively, to explore the heuristic value of the ideas and beliefs held within all cultures. This could broaden our overall knowledge and base of evidence and make philosophy global; for this approach involves a critical synthesis and integration of the ideas of all the world's cultures. This broad view of philosophy is alone worthy of being called universal. It is very different with the parochial Anglo-American analytic philosophical view, which Appiah, among others, has canonized as universal philosophy.