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## **EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE CONCEPT OF “EAST” AND “WEST” (WITH REFERENCE TO PRINCIPLES THAT FORM CULTURE)**

Saeed Haghir\*

S. Yahya Islami\*\*

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### **Abstract**

Do the words “East” and “West” mean more than just geographical orientations or areas? This seems to be a simple question, which cannot be answered easily.

The difficulty in answering such a question seems to be rooted in questions that deal with universal concepts. Defining such universal concepts, which seems quite simple, is very difficult indeed - perhaps even impossible in some cases. “East” and “West” are among such concepts, and of course are bonded to even more complex concepts such as “culture” and “civilization” in general.

This paper attempts to analyse the concept of “East” and “West” at an epistemological and a philosophical level, using an inductive and a descriptive methodology. It aims to describe how the concepts of “East” and “West” are in fact indicative of two different approaches to nature, before being descriptive of a particular geographical area or location.

**Keywords:** East, West, Culture, Civilisation, Epistemology, Nature, Art

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\*. Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, University of Tehran Email: saeed.haghir@ut.ac.ir

\*\* . Assistant Professor, School of Architecture, University of Tehran Email; y.islami@ut.ac.ir

## Introduction

Do the words “East” and “West” signify more than just a geographical area or a geographical orientation? This seems to be a simple question, which cannot be answered easily.

The difficulty in answering such a question stems from the complexity of questions that deal with universal concepts. Defining such universal concepts is very difficult indeed - perhaps even impossible in some cases. “East” and “West” are among such concepts, which are bonded to even more complex concepts such as “culture” and “civilization” in general.

What is “culture”? Why do we consider a culture “Eastern” and another “Western”? To what extent has geographical location influenced the categorization of cultures? Is there a hidden law that “Eastern Cultures” must evolve in the “East” and “Western Cultures” in the “West”? And more fundamental questions such as whether culture is a personal or a social concept? What is the relationship between culture and civilization? What constitutes these two concepts? Are the constituting elements in “Western” and “Eastern” cultures similar? What are the structural differences between these two types of culture? Is it possible to consider a third type of culture?

All such seemingly simple questions are in fact epistemological questions. Epistemology is the knowledge that can be described as the spirit of the times and the spirit that governs all of Man’s cultural

understanding. It can be something similar to a worldview, with a difference that the latter can be described as the careless process of producing an epistemology.

The noted French Epistemologist, Edgar Morin<sup>1</sup> believes that to answer such epistemological questions, one must look at Man’s “being” in nature. (Morin, 1981:42). To do this, one must go to the past a little, and perhaps even more than a little, to a world before human beings. (Reeves, 2005: 141)

This paper attempts to analyse the concepts of “East” and “West” from both epistemological and philosophical perspectives in order to construct the outlines of a theory. This theory will be based on new scientific findings and the discursive elaboration of the different issues involved.

## Nature, What We Think We Know

The world without human beings is an obscure image that only humans themselves can conjure up. According to Stephen Hawking’s Big Bang Theory, the material world as we know it, began from a single explosion some fourteen billion years ago, and it is still expanding (Hawking, 1989: 15). Hawking’s theory postulates that the universe before the Big Bang was heading towards complete destruction via an all-encompassing gravitational collapse. Yet, at the last moment, when the gravitational collapse was at the verge of becoming infinite, a

huge explosion began our universe from point zero.

But where does this expansion occur? In what space? Was there a pre-existing space in which our universe expanded like a raisin cake in an oven? (Reeves, 1375: 45) Does our universe have a border? What is beyond it?

Astrophysicists make us believe that everything that was created after the Big Bang in our universe, is in the same category as the original universe, which existed at point zero. If we consider the universe equal to all known existence, then we can conclude that existence does not grow in any space but rather it produces its own space (Reeves, 1375:47) and there is no way of knowing what is beyond it, even “absence”. This is because any conception of “absence” brings it back to the realm of “existence”. Therefore, “absence” in its philosophical and physical definition, is in fact a conceptual construct.

Perhaps one of the few ways of giving meaning to a phenomenon is through its opposite. Night gains meaning when in opposition to day and life gets its meaning in opposition to death. Yet, the universe has been created and shaped through a singular process and it is difficult to define its opposite, or other constructs, within this one giant construct that is existence. This is because “all of existence” is incomparable to “other existences” with identifiable characteristics. In other words, it is difficult to imagine any other

“existence”. Whatever exists is within this “existence” that we know of. And even if we claim of “other existences” we should perhaps be able to answer such questions: what exists between this existence and the others? Is there an “absence” between these “existences”?

It seems that this is a paradox without an answer and the best philosophical strategy is to accept the one known existence as all encompassing. Therefore, we can conclude that “existence” too is a “construct”, but a conceptual construct, which we call “primeval nature”.

Until the dawn of humanity, there was one dominant law governing all of nature. In other words, before Man, “everything” was in effect “one thing”. The “river”, the “river’s force” and the “rock” that resisted this force were not different, but rather they were all within “the law of existence” and in effect “the presence of existence”. Therefore, before Man, the general laws of existence are not differentiated – they are all the laws of existence. According to this point of view, before Man, there is only “inevitability” that is indefinable.

Thus, it seems that the creation of Man is a profound event, i.e. the creation of a being that can see nature as something that it is not. The creation of Man is therefore the creation of a being that can construct “secondaries” out of the “primary”. Thus, it seems that in the creation of Man, a great curtain or filter disconnects him from primeval nature, an act which is a

necessity rather than a choice. (Morin, 1981: 89)

These “secondaries” that are created by Man, work in opposition to each other and in the process give meaning to the world. In this way the vague, unknown universe before Man converts to the rational and the known universe after humanity. Once secondary natures and realities are formed, other existences and beings become recognisable. Mountains are distinguished from valleys and rivers and swamps assume their own unique meanings.

Although this argument is based on contemporary physics and philosophy, one can see the same conceptualization in the poems of Khayyam (11th century polymath, philosopher, astronomer and poet):

*The eternal secrets are not known by you, nor me,*

*And the answers to this riddle are not known by you, nor me,*

*The conversation between me and you is through a curtain,*

*Once the curtain falls, there will be no more you, nor me.<sup>2</sup>*

Human history shows that Man’s connection with the primeval nature has been severed, precisely because of his humanity, and there is no return imaginable. This is the same endowment that God proposed to all his creations,

and all expressed inability of carrying the burden, except for Man, who seemed to have paid for it through his disconnection with the primeval nature.

### **Culture: The Core of Humanity; Civilization: Expression of Humanity**

The production of various reflections of primeval nature by Man and the creation of secondary natures began the process of “becoming” and in this way the most fundamental human concept, i.e. “culture” was formed. In a simpler term, “culture” is the collective term for all the secondary creations that humanity has produced. Every human, because of his humanity, possesses a culture, which differentiates him from other beings.

Therefore, from a philosophical and a conceptual point of view, “culture” is in fact an individual phenomenon not a social one. This is because the production of secondaries occurs in every individual. Thus, the cognitive products of every human being, even if insignificant, are his culture. This production is something that apparently does not exist in other creatures. (Morin, 1986: 132-155)

In a particular theory, culture is made up of five basic elements.<sup>3</sup> It is as if the world around human beings manifests itself to them through five different windows. These five components are: religion, spirituality, philosophy, art and science. (Morin, 1990: 50) In this

epistemological perspective on culture, and according to this theory, one must pay attention to certain issues in order to gain a deeper understanding of this theory:

First, none of these five elements alone can replace “culture” or “epistemology”. In other words, “culture” is the combination of all five of these elements and “epistemology” is their governing spirit. Second, these five elements are independent of each other and should not be confused with each other. Instead, each is a by-product of each human’s unique approach to the world. However, it should be noted that these different elements are capable of monitoring each other. Third, in all human beings, all five cultural factors are present naturally, with a difference that in some they have developed and progressed and in others they merely exist in their primitive state. Therefore, human being’s evolution is dependent on his cultural evolution and the more one develops these factors, the more one’s humanity advances.

According to this theory, “civilization “is the scientific, religious, philosophical, spiritual and artistic expression of culture and its externalisation as collective consciousness. Therefore, civilization is a social subject matter, which is produced by the external manifestation of human culture. (Morin, 1982, 89-110).

### “East “And “West “From An Epistemological Point Of View

It seems that from the beginning of

Man’s creation, i.e. the time when he became disconnected from primeval nature and began to produce secondary natures, two different approaches have developed in relation to this process of creation.

In one type of approach, people are not happy about their separation from primeval nature. They believe that the rational and intellectual origin of human beings still belongs to primeval nature and therefore the ultimate truth lies therein. Thus, happiness and humanity’s ultimate goal is in rejoicing with the primeval nature. From an epistemological point of view, this approach is an “Eastern” approach to nature.

This approach is clearly evident in one of Molavi’s<sup>4</sup> most renowned poems:

*Listen to this Ney (the reed-flute) that is complaining*

*and narrating the story of separation.*

*Ever since they (the people) have plucked me from the reedland,*

*my laments have driven men and women to deep sorrow.*

*I want someone with a chest (heart) pierced by abandonment*

*so that I may tell him about the pain of my longing.*

*He who falls aloof from his origin seeks an opportunity to find it again.*

*I am mournful in all sorts of company and am sought by the happy as well as by the unhappy.*

*Everyone becomes friends with me according to his faculty of perception, and many do not seek my inner secret.*<sup>5</sup>

In opposition to this “Eastern” approach, there are others who firmly believe that the essence of humanity lies in secondary natures, while in the primeval nature, with the totality of existence, there is no difference between Man and other natural phenomena. Therefore, they not only consider reaching the primeval nature impossible, but also they do not find it appropriate, since they believe that it would negate the humanness of humanity. From an epistemological point of view, this is a “Western” approach to nature.

An issue that may arise in understanding this theory is that some may consider the “Eastern” approach a spiritual approach and the “Western” approach a scientific one. However, it must be noted that in this theory spirituality and science are each just one element of the five elements that make up human being’s culture. Therefore, considering them equal to the totality of culture or epistemology is an error that must be avoided. According to this theory, in an “Eastern” epistemology, as much as spirituality possesses an Eastern perspective, science, art, philosophy and religion also possess an Eastern point of view. Similarly, in a “Western” epistemology, as much as

science possesses a Western perspective, spirituality, art, philosophy and religion too possess this Western perspective.

Moreover, in the “West” there has been, and still is, a definition of culture according to spirituality and in the “East” there has been, and still is, a definition of culture according to science. Yet, although in both approaches, science is the result of the same reaction to nature, that is an empirical reaction (Morin, 1980, 168), nonetheless, this empirical reaction occurs from two very different perspectives. This is why we can witness two very different scientific productions in the “East” and the “West”. Thus, accordingly, even though spirituality is the result of the same confrontation of Man with nature, which considers all the components of nature the same (Morin, 1980, 383), nonetheless this confrontation occurs from two different approaches in “East” and “West”. This is why we are faced with two different spiritualities. The same logic applies to art, religion and philosophy.

In this model of thought, “East” and “West” have a clear epistemological definition and each approach is possible for all human beings, regardless of their geographical location or their place of birth or upbringing. Also, from a rational perspective, a third independent condition is not likely, unless that condition is a hybrid one.

## The Culture and Civilization of “East” and “West”

Based on what has been said before, it can be concluded that all people, whether “Eastern” or “Western” have a culture. But according to their interpretation of nature, they give expression to different civilizations.

In the proposed theory, it seems that when one engages in cultural creativity through an “Eastern” perspective, one is less inclined to create secondary images of the world. This is because every secondary construct takes us away from original reality, primeval nature and in effect from the ultimate truth. Thus, any cultural production must be geared towards reaching the ultimate truth and reconnection with primeval nature.

Inevitably, this interpretation of nature can direct the expression of civilization to the abstract or reduce it to the minimum. Thus, when we analyse the different formal typologies of art and civilization of the “East” we are faced with a reduced diversity. (Haghir, 2011) This is while, in the “Western” point of view the general consensus is towards creating the maximum amount of secondary constructs. This is because in this mode of thought, the very humanity of human beings lies in their production of secondary constructs. For a “Western” Man, there is no ultimate reality or truth, and even if it exists, it is unreachable, or, reaching it is not a desirable outcome. (Haghir 2011) For this reason, the “Western” Man devotes

much of his time to producing different manifestations of civilizational concepts.

Although studying the history of “East” and “West” suggests that these two types of approaches are usually correspondent with the their geographical names, this is not however a constant reality without exception. In the history of human civilization there are periods of “Eastern” thinking in the geographical “West” and “Western” thinking in the geographical “East”. The Middle Ages in Europe is one example where an “Eastern” devotion to divine originality is dominant in the “West”, while similarly, in the modern era, the dissemination of artificial imagery in some South East Asian countries have pushed this area of the geographical “East” towards a “Western” epistemological position.

## Conclusion

The aim of this theory is not to valueate these two different epistemologies, since each has resulted in its own expressions and civilizations that possess great human value. Rather, this theory attempts to draw attention to the essence of cultural production, which comprises of the five elements of religion, art, philosophy, science and spirituality, which exist in both the “Eastern” and “Western” epistemologies. Moreover, it seems that the essence of all human knowledge is inherent in his ability to create secondaries. But, this has had different manifestations.

It seems that the manifestation of diversity in the West and a unifying force in cultural production in the “East” has a direct relationship with the concept of happiness and the concept of Man’s place in nature. The “Eastern” Man sees his evolution in getting closer to the original truth and the essence of primeval nature, while the “Western” Man does not see an ultimate goal and therefore creates ideological constructs and surpasses them. These two approaches must be considered at an epistemological level; the level beyond which culture and its elements begin to take effect.

## Endnotes

1. The renowned French philosopher Edgar Morin was born July 18, 1921 in Paris. He is one of the most prominent theorists in the field of epistemology.
  2. Translated by the authors.
  3. Although this theory has its own critics, it is amongst Edgar Morin’s important arguments.
  4. Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Balkhī also known as Jalāl ad-Dīn Muhammad Rūmī or Mawlānā or Mawlawī (Molavi) was a 13th Century Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and Sufi mystic.
  5. Translated by Erkan Türkman. From “The Essence of Rumi’s Masnevi: Including His Life and Works” (Konya, Turkey: Misket Ltd., 1992).
- Ihil et opturibus diam, to con cor molor

sum est, sitisci conserum se ipient fuga. Ehenis eostio. Sum ratem aliqui aligenduciis et ut fuga. Nequos es diti destibusam eos et il mo

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