


Chapter 1

Indigenous Gnoseology as a Theory of Knowledge Beyond Epistemology: Oral Traditions and the Ethics of Indigenous Knowing

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the gnoseological foundation of Indigenous oral traditions by challenging the dominance of Western epistemology as the only legitimate “theory of knowledge.” Drawing on the distinction between epistemology (E) and gnoseology (G)—as illustrated in the accompanying figure—this chapter argues that Indigenous oral traditions offer a rich, reciprocal, and embodied framework for knowing that extends far beyond abstract, propositional knowledge. This view often excludes relational, ethical, and spiritual forms of knowing embedded in oral practices. Indigenous gnoseology, by contrast, is inclusive of tacit knowledge (Polanyi), phronesis (Aristotle), techne, reciprocity, and the spiritual ecology of storytelling. Drawing on case studies from Indigenous traditions, the chapter proposes that gnoseology offers a more pluralistic, ethical, and decolonial framework for engaging with Indigenous knowledge traditions—one that recognizes oral traditions. It concludes by calling for the inclusion of Indigenous gnoseologies in mainstream curricula, research, and policy.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-3927-6.ch001

INTRODUCTION: WHY EPISTEMOLOGY IS NOT ENOUGH

“Epistemology is not wrong—it is simply insufficient.”

— Chowdhury et al. (2022).

In modern academic discourse, *epistemology*—commonly defined as the theory of knowledge—has long served as the gatekeeper of what is accepted as valid knowledge. Yet, this gatekeeping function has often been built upon a narrow foundation: the privileging of Western, rationalist, and empiricist traditions. While epistemology claims universality, it is largely structured around logocentrism, abstraction, and propositional logic, leaving out vast systems of knowing that are embodied, relational, spiritual, and narrative in form. This chapter begins with a simple yet radical assertion: *epistemology, as traditionally taught, cannot accommodate the full range of Indigenous oral knowledge systems*. It is not that epistemology is incorrect—it is that its scope is too limited to comprehend the holistic and lived realities embedded in Indigenous oral traditions. We propose that what is needed is not merely a critique of epistemology, but an ontological shift—a movement toward *gnoseology*, a broader and more pluralistic theory of knowing. Gnoseology, unlike conventional epistemology, recognizes that knowledge is not only a cognitive event but also an ethical, ecological, and communal process. Oral traditions—through stories, rituals, proverbs, songs, and embodied memory—serve as living archives of knowledge, passed through generations, where truth is not isolated but relational, and where knowing is inseparable from being and doing.

Theoretical Lens: From Epistemology to Gnoseology

To move from epistemology to gnoseology is not a matter of semantic substitution but a paradigmatic rupture. It demands a reconfiguration of how we conceptualize knowledge itself—not merely in content, but in form, ethics, and relation. While epistemology remains primarily concerned with the *justification* of belief and the *criteria* of truth, gnoseology encompasses a broader terrain.

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