Epistemology for Non-Ideal Conditions

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Lately, I have noticed something that attracts my attention both in conversations with others and in my own inner reflections: When it comes to matters concerning Azerbaijan, I think only in questions. I could have taken this merely as my own intellectual or mental disposition if I had not observed the same tendency in others as well. Anyone who, in one way or another, has intellectual curiosity, initiative, or the desire to speak or express an opinion about our society tends to circulate within a broadly negative epistemic stance. That is, we only identify problems; we speak about what we are incapable of doing, what we do not know, what we have no way out of, or what we have been deprived of. We think about Azerbaijan mostly in terms of questions. Answers, in other words, knowledge, do not emerge. Or if they do, our answers are not really knowledge, but rather some other kind of mental product (presumptions, hypothetical claims, and so on).

For me, this creates the feeling of being in a state of aporia constantly, which is disturbing. Another unsettling aspect is that I used to attribute this tendency to others: first to people of the past (for example, the intellectuals of the Enlightenment period), and later to those of the present, my interlocutors and peers (the intellectuals of today, participants in debates and discussions, and so on). But now, I also observe it within myself. So, what exactly is the problem here, and why does it concern me?

First of all, because a few years ago, in my article titled "Enlightenment, Reason, and Pseudo-Enlightenment," I criticized our intellectual history for misunderstanding and incompletely implementing the idea of Enlightenment. I saw this incompleteness in the reduction of reason to mere problem

identification, without ever moving to the stage of problem-solving:

In our context, the history of Enlightenment, both in terms of its expressive forms (genres) and its content, represents the history of the denial form of sapere aude—that is, only the first stage. Most Enlightenment projects in Azerbaijan belong to the field of literature and drama, but there are no new ideas or analyses in the philosophical domain. We have focused primarily on the first (negative) stage of sapere aude, while showing indifference toward the second (creative) stage.

Now, I find that same incompleteness I once criticized as a social phenomenon manifesting within myself—as part of my own intellectual behavior and mental condition.

Another context for this concern lies in the country's increasing authoritarianism in recent years, which has restricted access to information in every possible form and imposed both official and unofficial bans on the production of knowledge. As an ordinary researcher today, one no longer has the freedom to conduct research, carry out surveys, or publicly disseminate findings on any topic without surveillance, censorship, or bureaucratic obstacles. Added to this is the fact that I am physically distant from the country—a fate that, in recent years, has befallen most independent researchers. In other words, as researchers, we can no longer produce comprehensive knowledge about our society, whether we are inside or outside the country.

Yet, on the other hand, it is also clear that censorship, restrictions, and manipulations of information cannot completely extinguish human reason. Humans are conscious beings. In one way or another, they are condemned to reflect on their surroundings and to generate knowledge. To fully extinguish human reason, one must either destroy or physically damage the person, or eliminate all sources of stimuli and information in their environment. The latter is practically impossible, for that would mean creating a vacuum of stimuli.

However, since we are embodied beings, we are never in a vacuum of stimuli: at the very least, we are exposed to the stimuli of our own bodies and their reflections, and we are thus condemned to the kind of knowledge that arises from them. Put differently, even under the most brutal conditions of repression, we still exhibit epistemic behavior—that is, we still somehow know something.

Trying to analyze this situation within the standard academic frameworks of epistemology can be quite confusing and even frustrating. Situations of this kind cannot easily be placed within the focus of existing academic epistemology. It feels as though epistemology is only capable of investigating epistemic successes. The types of situations described above do not count as epistemic success—and thus, they do not even appear on epistemology's radar.

Last semester, during one of his lectures in Berlin, the American philosopher Tommie Shelby said that Western philosophers, in constructing systems of ethics and morality, have developed theories meant for ideal moral conditions—conditions that never actually exist in the lives of those who live under persistent immorality, such as injustice. The starting point of these moral theories—an ideal moral state—never arrives in their lives. Therefore, people who live under constant immorality need a different kind of moral theory, and Shelby's theory of the "ethics of the oppressed" aims to offer such an alternative.

Shelby's idea was not entirely clear to me because moral theories themselves arise as responses to immorality. In ideal moral conditions, there would be no need for moral philosophy at all. But that is not the point here. The aspect of Western moral philosophy that Shelby criticizes – the tradition of taking ideal-typical conditions and hypothetical situations as the starting point for theory – can be easily projected onto Western academic epistemology as well. Standard academic epistemology, particularly in the style of Western

universities, generally studies knowledge within ideal-typical, epistemically well-structured conditions. Situations that fall outside this framework are declared exceptions, anomalies, and so on, and are consequently treated as epistemic rudiments or marginal phenomena. For this reason, epistemology has long studied primarily scientific knowledge as its epistemic object. Yet scientific knowledge is a relatively late and specialized form of knowledge in human intellectual history—one that only a small minority of people engage in. Even in societies with developed scientific institutions, scientific knowledge remains the occupation of a minority. The knowledge of people outside of science, their ways and mechanisms of acquiring it, has thus largely remained outside the domain of epistemological inquiry.

The more intriguing epistemic reality, however, lies in societies where the natural process of knowing is manipulated, where epistemic conditions are interfered with, where access to information is blocked, and where research bans, censorship, and manipulations of public opinion prevail – in other words, in non-ideal epistemic environments. Ordinary human life in the world is by no means characterized by ideal, hypothetically flawless epistemic conditions; quite the contrary. Therefore, standard academic epistemologies, those built upon ideal or hypothetical scenarios, are of little use when it comes to studying the epistemic behavior of societies that do not enjoy such ideal epistemic conditions. What is needed instead are theories that take this reality as it is and reflect upon it.

If we look again, from this perspective, at the issue discussed earlier – our inability to think about our own society beyond the diagnostic level of problems and questions, or the incompleteness of reflection that I criticized in my earlier essay – a different picture and new lines of inquiry emerge.

For instance, it would be interesting to investigate why this

pattern of epistemic behavior (thinking only reactively rather than actively, identifying only problems rather than producing solutions, focusing only on questions instead of answers, and so on) is so long-lasting and stable. What function, or dysfunction, does this behavioral pattern serve? Can such a persistent phenomenon even be called a dysfunction at all?

All of our behaviors, whether individual or collective, can only be meaningfully understood within a certain functional context. That is, our behaviors, including epistemic behavior, directly or indirectly serve some function. Sometimes, however, our behaviors begin to work against that function, in a sense sabotaging it. This is when we speak of dysfunctional behavior. For example, the behavior of eating is fundamentally tied to the function of survival. If we were to stop eating, or radically alter it (say, by consuming cleaning agents instead of fruits, vegetables, or water), we would be sabotaging our survival function, and would eventually die. In principle, dysfunctional behaviors should lead to the destruction of the system (for instance, the body). But sometimes we see that dysfunctional behavior persists while the system continues to live. For example, one can train the organism to survive on minimal food intake. Or what initially appears to be dysfunctional can be subordinated to the same function – for instance, therapeutic fasting. In other words, dysfunctional behaviors can acquire new functionality.

Our epistemic behaviors, namely our patterns of acting in the pursuit of knowledge, also serve certain functions. These can be categorized by degree. For example, without knowledge, one cannot learn a profession or find employment. On a collective level, a society cannot improve its welfare or maintain strength relative to other societies. But at its most fundamental level, knowledge still serves our survival, whether as individuals or as groups. If a dysfunctional epistemic behavior (in our case, the refusal of active reflection, incomplete thinking) persists, then we must examine its dysfunctionality more closely. Does this

dysfunction entail a danger of *death* – or has it acquired some indirect functionality? If so, what function does the present state serve?