

An Eastern Paradigm of Evaluation

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I recently taught a module on the philosophies of evaluation as part of a pilot introductory course of a new diploma programme jointly sponsored by the United Nations (UN) Evaluation Group and the United Nations Staff College (Russon, 2007, November). In the session, I compared and contrasted the “rationalistic” paradigm with the “naturalistic” paradigm on the basis of ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

Afterwards, I suggested that there may be a “non-Western” paradigm (a name which was later criticized for being too Western-centric) that would be an alternative to the other paradigms. I shared my emerging thoughts regarding this alternative paradigm with the course participants.

I had been thinking intermittently about such a paradigm because the portfolio of evaluations that I manage for the International Labour Office’s International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour includes South East Asia. I have been somewhat concerned with the fit between evaluations that are conducted using “Western” paradigms and the beliefs and assumptions that underlie the cultures in the region.

When the introductory course evaluations were reviewed, I was rightly criticized for presenting a concept which had not been sufficiently well-developed. The purpose of this paper is to accept the challenge of the course participants and to develop my thinking about this topic. In order to do this, I will borrow from and try to extend the work of Guba and Lincoln.

In 1982, Guba and Lincoln co-authored an article titled, “*Epistemological and Methodological Bases of Naturalistic Inquiry*” that greatly influenced my thinking. (The article is over 20 years old; however I believe that it has withstood the test of time very well.) The authors compared and contrasted the rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms on five basic axioms.

The present article will compare and contrast an Eastern paradigm of evaluation to the rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms using the same five basic axioms that Guba and Lincoln used. Following the comparison, I try to offer some suggestions for methodological practices that one who subscribes to such a paradigm might follow.

Axiom 1: The Nature of Reality

Rationalistic version: There is a single, tangible reality fragmentable into independent variables and processes, any of which can be studied independently of the others; inquiry can converge onto this reality until, finally, it can be predicted and controlled.

Naturalistic version: There are multiple, intangible realities which can be studied only holistically; inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge (each inquiry raises more questions than it answers), so that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes, although some level of understanding (*verstehen*) can be achieved (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

As can be seen above, the rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms have important differences about the nature of reality. However, there is one important commonality, which is that, in one way or another, reality can be known.

In an Eastern paradigm of evaluation, reality would be conceived as being transcendent and largely beyond the reach of human minds. This is not to say that it cannot be understood at all. It can be observed and partly grasped in some very limited ways. However, it can never be grasped completely by any individual mind or encompassed in the finite meaning of any concept (Ong, 2005).

This corresponds to teachings of The Dalai Lama (2005) who wrote, "Reality, including our own existence, is so much more complex than objective scientific materialism allows."

The transcendent, and sometimes illusory, nature of reality is well-demonstrated by Chuang Tzu's classical anecdote (Watson, 1964):

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable

Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of things (p. 45).

Axiom 2: The Inquirer-Objective Relationship

Rationalistic version: The inquirer is able to maintain a discrete distance between him/herself and the object of inquiry.

Naturalistic version: The inquirer and the object interact to influence one another; this mutual interaction is especially present when the object of inquiry is another human being (respondent) (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

As can be seen above, the rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms have important differences about the relationship between the inquirer and the object of inquiry. However, there is one important commonality. They both view the inquirer and the object of inquiry as being differentiated (i.e., separate and distinct) entities. In addition, both the rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms can be thought of as being empirically-based. (Empiricism refers to knowing reality through the experience of the senses.)

In an Eastern paradigm, the inquirer and the object of inquiry would exist in a state of non-differentiation. "Non-differentiation refers to the perfect beginning before distinction, division, multiplicity and separateness emerged: everything was smoothly and harmoniously blended into one compact whole; everything was simultaneously 'together'" (Leblanc, 1985, pp. 141-142). Therefore, the seeming boundaries between the inquirer and the object of inquiry become porous and fluid (Gawler, December 12, 2007).

Furthermore, such a paradigm would not have an empirical orientation. Lao Tzu wrote (Muller, 2005):

The five colours blind our eyes.
The five tones deafen our ears.
The five flavours confuse our taste.
Racing and hunting madden our minds

An Eastern paradigm of evaluation would probably stress a deep understanding based on intuition and spirituality over logic and experience.

Lieh-tzū wrote (Graham, 1906):

My body is in accord with my mind, my mind with my energies, my energies with my spirit, my spirit with Nothing. Whenever the minutest existing thing or the faintest sound affects me, whether it is far away beyond the eight borderlands, or close at hand between my eyebrows and eyelashes, I am bound to know it. However, I do not know whether I perceived it with the seven holes in my head and my four limbs, or know it through my heart and belly and internal organs. It is simply self knowledge (pp. 77-78).

Axiom 3: The Nature of Truth Statements

Rationalistic version: The aim of inquiry is to develop a nomothetic [law-like] body of knowledge; this knowledge is best encapsulated in generalizations which are truth statements of enduring value that are context-free; the stuff of which generalizations are made is similarities among units.

Naturalistic version: The aim of inquiry is to develop an ideographic body of knowledge; this knowledge is best encapsulated in a series of working hypotheses that describe the individual case; differences are as inherently interesting as similarities (and at times more so than) (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

As can be seen above, the rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms have important differences about the nature of truth statements. Before discussing the nature of truth statements in an Eastern paradigm, one caveat should be

noted. Lao Tzu wrote, “The name that can be named is not the eternal name” (Muller, 2005, chapt. 1). Essentially, what this means is that any statement of truth can only be an approximation. We can never really know “the” truth, if there is such a thing.

This said, the nature of truth statements in an Eastern paradigm would be different from those of the other paradigms. Truth statements in Chinese Taoist and Japanese Zen literature often take the form of paradoxical anecdotes. (A paradox is a statement that is seemingly contradictory or opposed to common sense and yet is perhaps true.)

The purpose of these paradoxical anecdotes is to bring the reader to the awareness that there may be a truth beyond the pale of ordinary logic. This alternative truth would call into question conventional values as well as concepts such as time, space, reality, and causation (Watson, 1964).

Axiom 4: Attribution/Explanation of Action

Rationalistic version: Every action can be explained as the results (effect) of a real cause that precedes the effect temporally (or is at least simultaneous with it).

Naturalistic version: An action may be explainable in terms of multiple interacting factors, events, and processes that shape it and are part of it; inquirers can, at best, establish plausible inferences about the patterns and webs of such shaping in any given case (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

The rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms have important differences about the explanation of action. However, there is one important commonality. They both assert that there is some kind of link between action and results.

An Eastern paradigm of evaluation might have as a central tenet the concept of *wu-wei*

(unattached action). “The concept refers to a kind of intuitive cooperation with the natural order, which is perfect and harmonious when left to work without the interference of ignorant human action” (Ong, 2005, p. xviii).

Chuang-tzu wrote (Watson, 1964):

So I say, Heaven and earth do nothing and there is nothing that is not done. Among men, who can get hold of this inaction? (p. 113).

Therefore, according to this concept, the results of a project could arise of their own accord, and not necessarily as the result of any activities that may or may not have been taken by project management.

The above may sound heretical to those of us who have used logic models and logical frameworks for so many years. Yet, Margaret Wheatley (1999) wrote:

In New Science, the underlying currents are a movement toward holism, toward understanding the system as a system and giving primary value to the relationships that exist among seemingly discrete parts. . . . When we view systems from this perspective we enter an entirely new landscape of connections, of phenomena that cannot be reduced to simple cause and effect, and of the constant flux of dynamic processes (p. 8).

Axiom 5: The Role of Values in Inquiry

Rationalistic version: Inquiry is value-free, and can be guaranteed to be so by virtue of the objective methodology that is employed.

Naturalistic version: Inquiry is value-bound in at least five ways, captured in the corollaries which follow:

- *Corollary 1:* Inquires are influenced by inquirer values as expressed in the choice of a problem, and in the framing, bounding, and focussing of that problem.

- *Corollary 2:* Inquiry is influenced by the choice of paradigm which guides the investigation into the problem.
- *Corollary 3:* Inquiry is influenced by the choice of substantive theory utilized to guide the collection and analysis of data and in the interpretation of findings.
- *Corollary 4:* Inquiry is influenced by the values which are inherent to the context.
- *Corollary 5:* With respect to Corollaries 1 through 4 above, inquiry is either value-resonant (reinforcing or congruent) or value-dissonant (conflicting). Problem, paradigm, theory, and context must exhibit congruence (value-resonant) in order to produce meaningful results (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

The rationalistic and naturalistic paradigms have important differences about the role of values in inquiry. An Eastern paradigm would probably not claim to be either value-free or value-bound. An evaluator using an Eastern paradigm would seek to transcend values that serve as the basis of judgement (e.g., relevance, efficiency, effectiveness, sustainability and impact).

Instead of seeing the object of inquiry as being relevant or not, efficient or not, effective or not, an Eastern paradigm would assume that opposites exist without contradicting or competing against one another. Thus, it may be entirely possible for the object of inquiry to be relevant and irrelevant at the same time.

Chuang Tzu wrote (Watson, 1964):

Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability. Where there is recognition of right there must be recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He too recognizes a “this,” but a “this” which is also “that,” a “that” which is also “this.” His “that” has both a right and a wrong in it; his “this” too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact,

does he still have a “this” and “that”? Or does he in fact no longer have a “this” and “that”? A state in which “this” and “that” no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way” (p. 35).

Methodological Considerations

In the preceding sections, the case was made for considering an Eastern paradigm of evaluation. Many of the concepts that were presented run counter to the thinking of Western culture in general and Western notions of evaluation in particular. In this section, I will try to make some recommendations for practice.

Earlier, I asserted that reality was largely beyond the reach of human minds. Therefore, evaluators should seek tools that would help them approximate reality. Such tools would include metaphors, analogies, and models (Russon, 2007, December 27). Williams (2007, October 23) argues strongly for the use of systems models. Such tools can help us simplify our portrayal of reality to the point that it is possible for us to understand it in limited ways.

I also asserted that the Inquirer-Objective relationship is non-differentiated. In order to maximize the benefits of this type of relationship, the inquirer should attempt to be hyper-empathic. The sub-elements of empathy include immediacy, concreteness, and genuineness. In Zen terminology, that means to be in the moment and to be real.

The evaluator should also pay attention to her intuition.¹ Lieh-tzū wrote (Graham, 1960):

¹ Following the convention proposed by Ong (2005), the feminine pronoun is deliberately used to emphasize the priority of the feminine principle (*yin*) over the masculine principle (*yang*). *Yin* and *yang* have been considered since ancient times to be the two opposing forces or principles of the universe. *Yang* is often associated with formal language, laws, activity, and the desire to control and master nature. *Yin* on the other hand is creative, life-giving, yielding, intuitive, and compassionate. In much of Chinese philosophy, the *Tao* (the way) is characterized as having many qualities that can be thought of as *yin*. According to Lao Tzu, “The feminine always overcomes the masculine by softness.”

What such a man as Kao observes is the innermost native impulse behind the horse’s movements. He grasps the essence and forgets the dross, goes right inside it and forgets the outside. He looks for and sees what he needs to see. Ignores what he does not need to see. In the judgement of horses of a man like Kao, there is something more important than horses (pp. 77-78).

Truth statements that are paradoxical in nature would require the evaluator to question common sense assumptions about the way the world works. Evaluators would embrace ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the evaluation context. And, they would argue from the multiple sides of every issue.

Balance would be a central concept of an Eastern paradigm of evaluation. This concept is well expressed by the Tai Chi symbol. The *yin* and the *yang* are always changing and yet remain in perfect balance. This has implication for the way that an evaluation is reported. It would be important for an evaluation report to present a balanced view of the various perspectives of the object of inquiry (Ofir, 2008, February 5).

The evaluator who understands the concept of unattached action would reject linear thinking and embrace non-linear thinking and reciprocal relationships because of the implied causality. Instead of using logic models and logical frameworks, the evaluator might consider using causal loop diagrams and systems archetypes.

The evaluator who has transcended conventional values would no longer have criteria for making judgements. Therefore, she would probably try to avoid judging the object of inquiry as being relevant or irrelevant, efficient or inefficient, etc. She would recognise that such conceptual dichotomies can blind us to the deeper nature of the object of inquiry.

Lieh-tzū wrote (Graham, 1960):

From the point of view of the Tao, no thing is noble or base. From the point of view of things, each considers itself noble and others base. From the point of view of conventions, nobility and baseness do not depend on oneself. From

the point of view of degree, if you judge them arguing from positions where they are big (judge in relation to smaller things), all things are big, if you argue from positions where they are small, all things are small. If you know that heaven and earth may be treated as a tiny grain, and the tip of a hair as a hill or a mountain, estimates of degree will be graded.

From the point of view of their functions, if you judge them arguing from those which they have, all things have them, if you judge them arguing from those which they lack, all things lack them. If you know that East and West are opposites yet cannot do without each other, the allotment of functions will be decided.

From the point of view of tastes, if you judge them arguing from positions where they are right (judge in relation to people who approve them), all things are right, if you argue from positions where they are wrong, all things are wrong. If you know that the sage Yao and the tyrant Chieh each considered himself right and the other wrong, standards of taste will be seen in proportion (pp. 93-94).

Judgement is central to most Western notions of evaluation. If, evaluators who use an Eastern paradigm of evaluation no longer judge, what would they do? I would argue that their main aim would be to provide insights into the object of inquiry. I am experimenting with ways to apply some of the techniques of insight meditation into my evaluation work.

Insight meditation (Dee, 2000) as practiced in Buddhism is about making an analytical and contemplative study in order to see things as they truly are. The evaluator would mindfully observe every moment and event associated with the object of inquiry. She would avoid socially-conditioned interpretations of her observations. This can lead to new insights about aspects such as the timeframe in which the object of inquiry exists (*anicca*), the degree to which it is able to eliminate suffering (*dukkha*), and the insubstantial nature of existence (*anatta*).

Table 1
Eastern Paradigm of Evaluation Axioms Linked to Practice.

Axiom 1: The Nature of Reality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use metaphors, analogies, and models to approximate reality
Axiom 2: The Inquirer-Objective Relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practice hyper-empathy ▪ Pay attention to intuition ▪ Be in the moment and be real
Axiom 3: The Nature of Truth Statements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Embrace ambiguity and uncertainty ▪ Explore multiple sides of each issue
Axiom 4: Attribution/Explanation of Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Balanced reporting ▪ Use alternatives to logic models and logical frameworks
Axiom 5: The Role of Values in Inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Reserve judgements ▪ Avoid either/or in favour of both/and thinking ▪ Seek new insights into the object of inquiry

In conclusion, please consider this quote from The Dalai Lama (2005):

Science has been spectacular in exploring reality. It has not only revolutionised our knowledge but opened new avenues of knowing. It has begun to make inroads into the complex question of consciousness - the key characteristic that makes us sentient. The question is whether science can provide a

comprehensive understanding of the entire spectrum of reality and human existence. From the Buddhist perspective, a full human understanding must not only offer a coherent account of reality, our means of apprehending it and the place of consciousness but also include a clear awareness of how we should act. In the current paradigm of science, only knowledge derived through a strictly empirical method underpinned by observation, inference and experimental verification can be considered

valid. This method involves the use of quantification and measurement, repeatability and confirmation by others. Many aspects of reality as well as some key elements of human existence, such as the ability to distinguish between good and evil, spirituality, artistic creativity - some of the things we most value about human beings - inevitably fall outside the scope of the method. Scientific knowledge, as it stands today, is not complete. Recognising this fact, and clearly recognising the limits of scientific knowledge, I believe, is essential. Only by such recognition can we genuinely appreciate the need to integrate science within the totality of human knowledge. Otherwise our conception of the world, including our own existence, will be limited to the facts adduced by science, leading to a deeply reductionist, materialistic, even nihilistic world view.

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