An Epistemological Perspective on the Mesopotamian Wisdom Tradition

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Abstract   There are two major strands in the Mesopotamian wisdom tradition. A popular one (proverbs and folk stories) reflects what we may call a zero degree reflection on the human condition, whereas a scribal tradition hails from a more detached intellectual effort at defining this human condition especially in its moments of greater fragility. Both may be seen as a form of knowledge: reaching for a realistic assessment of what we know about ourselves. As such, it has an epistemic dimension, one that we can appreciate all the more if we compare it with myths on the one hand, which may be seen epistemologically as an idealization of nature, and epics on the other, which may be seen as an idealization of the human past. The paper develops in some detail this contrast between idealization and realism, with reference to specific texts that illuminate this shared, if differently oriented, epistemic effort.

Keywords   Wisdom. Mesopotamia. Epistemology. Myth. Epics.

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1　The Two Wisdom Traditions

1.1　Folk and School Traditions

There are two major types of ancient Syro-Mesopotamian texts that are accepted as belonging to what is generally labeled as 'wisdom': one that is popular and finds its expression in what we call proverbs and folk stories, and the other that is more intellectual and finds its expression in literary texts.

These two strands are quite disparate in form and content: proverbs and folk stories are short and center around a simple theme, deriving from everyday experience, while the literary texts are more complex in structure and broach topics dealing with psychological issues.

And yet both strands have much in common, which justifies their having been regularly subsumed under the category of wisdom. What they share is a special attention to the human condition, in ways that distinguish both from other texts.

1.2　The Epistemic Dimension

What unifies, then, the two traditions is the epistemic dimension. They both aim to articulate and communicate a certain type of knowledge, the knowledge of the world as experienced in real life, whether on a daily basis or through the lens of culture. It is a highly realistic knowledge, which eschews any real effort at idealization.

What distinguishes the two traditions from an epistemic point of view is the role of culture.

The folk tradition is direct and presupposes no special cultural baggage. Knowledge is intuitive and is expressed very succinctly, with terms that are never 'technical' but rather draw on the immediate confrontation with reality. What emerges as going beyond common speech is the sharp juxtaposition of words, which tend to put off balance the listener. And it is precisely and only a listener that the folk tradition has in mind.

The epistemic dimension of the scribal tradition, on the other hand, reflects a sophisticated view of reality, one that presupposes a pre-organized (precisely, 'cultured') vision, where reality is already filtered through the lens of pre-assigned categories. The person to whom the message is addressed is, in this case, primarily a reader – one wonders, in fact, whether wisdom texts were ever read aloud or recited to an audience that was unaware of the intricacies of scribal culture.

In what follows, I can only give a bird's eye view of this subject, based on an extensive research I am currently conducting on a

structural analysis of Mesopotamian literature, within the framework of a major Balzan Foundation research project.[1]

2 Idealization

2.1 An Alternative Epistemic Model

We can best appreciate the epistemic dimension of the wisdom tradition if we compare it to another model that also developed at a very early time, one that idealizes the world and projects it in a light that somehow transfigures it – the model of myths and epics.

In this idealized view of reality, images play a major role: they are (precisely) 'imagined', i.e. they are not a description of reality as it is seen, but they are presented as a visual image that can immediately be perceived as such: the sun as an image of justice or the depth of the water table as an image of wisdom.

We deal with myths or epics depending on whether one looks at the world of nature or the world of humans.

2.2 Myths and Epics

I will only give a panoramic view of some well-known myths and epics, only evoking what I see as the central theme of each of these texts, without any consideration for chronology.

As for myths, we may see, with regard to the world of nature,

- the myth of *Dilmun* and that of *Enlil and Ninlil* as dealing with the shapes of the elemental forms of nature, water in the first case, and wind between heaven and earth in the second;
- the *Enūma elīš* as dealing with the nature of the world and the gods;
- the myth of *Anzu* as dealing with the nature of destiny;[2]
- *Nergal and Ereshkigal* as dealing with the relationship between our world and the netherworld.

With regard to the human world we may consider:

- *Namma and Ninmah* as dealing with the shape of humans;
- the *Eridu genesis* as dealing with the arrival of civilization;
- *Atram-hasīs* as dealing with the dynamics of organization;
- *Adapa* as dealing with the very nature of religion;
- *Etana* as dealing the expansion and the transmission of power;

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[1] Buccellati forthcoming b.

[2] Buccellati 2023.

- *Martu* as dealing with the nature of ethnic relationships;
- *Inanna and Dumuzi* as dealing with the question of feminine eros.

Epics serve in a similar way to present an idealized vision of history, as we see

- in *Lugalbanda* as dealing with the nature of kingship;
- in the *First Gilgamesh* as dealing with the nature of civilization;
- in *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta* as dealing with the dynamics of political expansion;
- in *Bilgames and Agga* as dealing with the civilized use of armed conflict;
- in *Bilgames and Huwawa* as dealing with the appropriation of distant resources.

The central point I am making is that each of these texts seeks to present a conceptual vision of various aspects of life, giving expression to this vision with narratives that articulate and communicate knowledge. It is in this respect that myths and epics serve as real epistemic systems, conveying a given understanding of reality.

Myths and epics are idealized views of reality but they do not aim to construct an argument which is to be analyzed and discussed. They represent an intuition and a vision, presented as such. But in each case, this vision has a powerful effect in shaping the view that humans could share about these basic elements of the real world around them.

2.3 Imaging the Ideal

This representational aspect of myths and epics is also apparent in the fact that, in contrast with wisdom texts, they lend themselves readily to being the object of various types of figurative renderings. We have representations not only of divine or heroic figures in a static pose, but also of events presented in a dynamic way that depicts events otherwise narrated in myths and epics. They are epistemic in the sense that they convey what is presented as 'known', i.e. as the idealized conception of elements of nature or actors in the human scene, as perceived in their identity and in their activities.

I will give here only two examples, taken from our excavations at Urkesh. The first **[fig. 1]** is the impression of a seal that refers to the myth of Kumarbi, of whom a Hurrian text says that he resides in Urkesh but walks in the mountains.[3]

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3   Buccellati, Kelly-Buccellati 1997, 93.

Figure 1   Seal impression from Urkesh (AKc21) showing a deity, presumably Kumarbi, walking on the mountains

Figure 2
Upper right portion
of a stone plaque from Urkesh (A7.36)
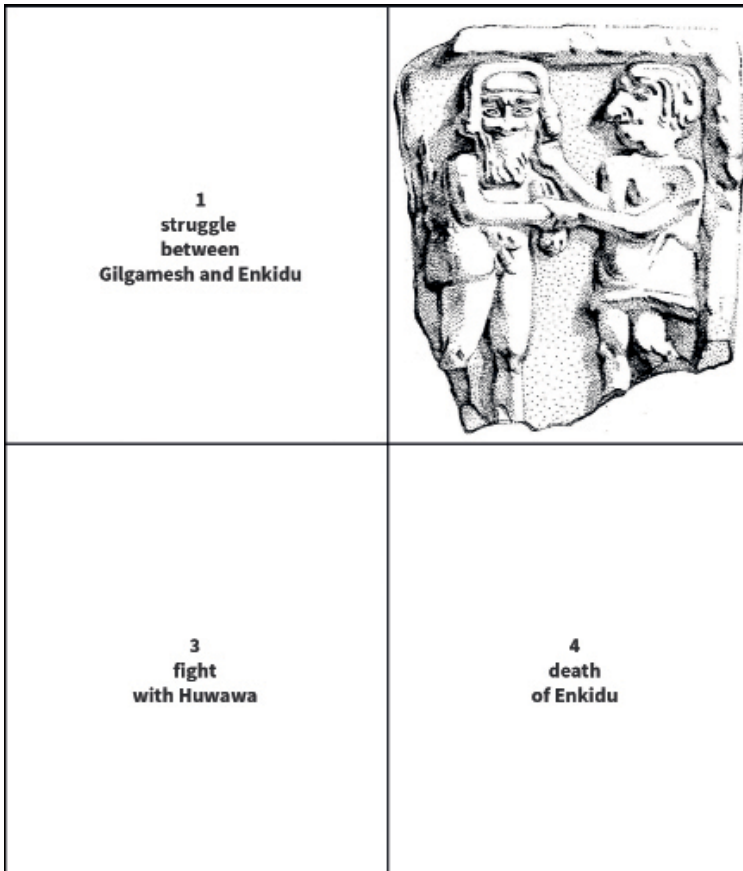interpreted as showing Gilgamesh
and Enkidu

1 struggle between Gilgamesh and Enkidu	
3 fight with Huwawa	4 death of Enkidu

Figure 3   Reconstruction of the whole plaque of which A7.36 would have been a part

The second **[fig. 2]** is a stone stela representing Gilgamesh and Enkidu as they embrace, presumably part of a larger composition **[fig. 3]** that included three other episodes from the same epic text.[4]

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4   Kelly-Buccellati 2006.

3   Counter-Idealization

3.1   Realism

The epistemic dimension of myths and epics is defined by this twinning of textual and figurative aspects in rendering an idealized world. A certain ideal view of nature and history is articulated and communicated in an ideal form, so that water and wind, for instance, are not described in terms of their physical attributes, but rather in terms of an alternative, imagined identity.

The epistemic dimension of the wisdom tradition, by way of contrast, does not make a transfer of the referent (the wind in the myth or a hero in the epic text) onto a different plane, but rather focuses on any given particular aspect of reality in and of itself. The referent is known, i.e. seen and presented as it is, not through a fantastic transposition onto an ideal world.

This happens in two different ways. (1) The folk tradition may be described as a zero degree reflection on the human condition: the style is very direct and incisive, often humorous; it does not argue or belabor a point; it is often elusive to the point of being obscure, with the strong effect of a puzzle to be resolved. It is also earlier in date: it is attested in the earliest texts and sinks its roots into the pre-urban and pre-scribal, past.

(2) The (later) scribal tradition brings to a higher level this reflection on the human condition, developing arguments at length and delving into the psychological dimension. It has a rather rarefied public in mind, in some cases it seems to be exclusively addressed to the scribes, as an intellectual exercise that requires a cultured view of reality.

3.2   The Folk Tradition

We may look at a few proverbs that show the way in which a simple reflection about themes that are central to everyday life can take shape.

1.   The indiscriminate and contradictory nature of fate as it is inevitably encountered in everyday occasions:[5]

I am in front of fate:
(now) it speaks like a just man, (now) it speaks like an evil man

You went – so what? You were sitting down – so what?

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[5]   Alster 1997, 3, l. 176.

You stood up – so what? You came back – so what?[6]

The original Akkadian is so lapidary that it is worth quoting:

Tallik – mīnu? Tūšib – mīnu?
Tazziz – mīnu? Tatūram – mīnu?

2. The inexorable inefficiency of the 'Palace' – i.e. the bureaucracy, a theme that is among the most popular (and sounds so modern…):

In the Palace the ignorant are a multitude[7]

The one who does not create a problem, he is welcome!
The one who is strong, leaves,
The one who speaks well, enters the Palace.[8]

3. The power of the obvious comes across clearly in proverbs that describe, often humorously, very human, and even scurrilous, situations:

A dressmaker wears a dress unsuited for sitting down![9]

Has she become pregnant without having sex?
Has she gotten fat without eating?[10]

Something unheard of since immemorial time:
a young woman farted while laying with her husband![11]

4. There is no idealization here, no metaphors or descriptive flourishes. It is realism at its most naked and genuine. Even when there is a hint of a metaphor, it is very earthy:

An elephant was speaking to himself: "Among the wild animals there is no one like me!"
But a little bird answered: "In my measure, I, too, am like you!"[12]

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6 Lambert 1960, 278, ll. 7-8.
7 Alster 1997, 9 sec. A 9.
8 Alster 1997, 18, l. 8.
9 Alster 1997, 3, l. 124.
10 Lambert 1960, 241, ll. 40-2.
11 Lambert 1960, 260, ll. 5-10.
12 Alster 1997, 5, l. 1.

To which we can add a little note about later scribal intervention. The Akkadian translation lets the animals speak, more crassly, as follows:

"No one can shit like me"
"In my measure, I, too, can shit like you!"

using, as a neologism and hapax legomenon, a verbal form (*zū, zeāku*) derived from the primary noun *zu*.

3.3 The Scribal Tradition

This amusing philological footnote sheds an interesting light on the mindset of the scribes. There must have been among them some pure philologists, but others could also show a humor that reveals a live confrontation with a text. And with a great flare for realism. Let us now look at this particular shade of realism.

One may at first suggest that the second wisdom, that of the scribes, also engages in a form of idealization, namely, the idealization of human experience. In a sense this is true, but in a sense that is very different from that of myth and epic. In myths and epics, the idealization process means putting on a pedestal the object being idealized, with declamation to a public, often with musical accompaniment, and, as we have seen, with representational images. None of this happens with the wisdom texts: the author/*agens* speaks to himself and remains at the center of the expressive effort.

There is, of course, 'expression', i.e. an 'externalization of a discovered interiority'. But it remains private, in such a way that some texts, like the *Theodicy*, could only be read to be fully appreciated (witness the acrosticon resulting from the first cuneiform sign of each stanza, not the first syllable), and thus would have remained accessible to only a limited scribal audience. If there is an expected audience, it is a friendly interlocutor, whom one expects to listen and to answer, which is not the case with myths and epics. The only 'staging' with wisdom texts is in fact that of the dialog, where the centrality of the 'I' is matched by the parallel centrality of a 'Thou' who has something to say in turn.

This projection of the 'I' entails a dimension of 'vulnerability': it is always in the shape of a confession. It is true that the re-writing of the first epic of Gilgamesh in a wisdom key[13] describes this sense of weakness and loneliness 'from without': but the author is very much the *agens*, as he projects his personal 'I' onto Gilgamesh, making him a mirror image of himself.

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[13] Buccellati 1972a.

And what emerges is a sense of 'complicity': we, the readers, or better: I, the reader, am called to be the interlocutor, the sole listener of the confession. And that is what gives these texts such a universal tone and sense of modernity.

4 The Poetics of Proverbs

4.1 From Realism to Idealization

By placing idealization in the first place and then speaking of the wisdom tradition as being a form of counter-idealization I meant to help focusing on the epistemic dimension of wisdom by contrasting it to that of myths and epics.

In chronological terms, however, the situation is in fact reversed. By virtue of their very simplicity, proverbs sink their roots in an ancient past, and the early attention paid them by the scribes may be seen as indicative of respect for this antiquity, in addition possibly to the everyday nature of the language which may have been appropriate for instruction.

I will now deal with the proverbs in some more detail, with the aim of showing how the particular formal property of proverbs may be seen, in its form, as a very distinctive articulation of knowledge that had a great impact on Sumerian and later literary traditions.

4.2 A Binary Structure

It is valid to speak of a 'poetics' of the proverbs. In spite of their great brevity, each of them is a full text, with a complete structural wholeness of its own.[14] A key aspect of this brevity is that of 'compactness': they are built on a binary system that entails a protasis and an apodosis, with a strong tensionality between the two, a tensionality that becomes especially evident if one emphasizes the caesura:[15]

> let the day go by – we'll still build the house.[15]

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[14] This is a major issue with which I am dealing in detail in Buccellati forthcoming b. A relevant concept is the one that considers the cognitive aspect, as outlined among others by Tsur 1977; 1992; Burns Cooper 1998; Andrews 2016. My approach builds on the notions of syntactic isotonism and counterpatterning as outlined in Buccellati 1990, section 3.

[15] Alster 1991-92, 113-14.

A whole series of parallel considerations are here implicitly included, but they could not be made explicit without reducing the expressive power of the text: "today I don't have to get to work, I can let time pass, and it will be more than enough if I tomorrow, with more comfort, will start the work of building the house…". The text includes implicitly these considerations and more, but it is the epigrammatic structure that gives the expression all its strength: there is no place for anything else precisely because the structure is complete.

This structure is made even more effective by the arrangement of the elements (noun-verb –noun/verb), which the original Sumerian makes particularly marked:

u₄ hé-zal – é ga-dú

It is a lapidary style, that emphasizes the binary relationship among component parts. Therein lies the element of tensionality I mentioned, which emerges also at the next level, the one we have when two proverbs are linked together:

destruction done,   destruction to come,

which tells us that there is no end in sight, but – it continues:[16]

destruction avoided,   slavery to come,

i.e. even if one avoids the destruction of the city, it only means that one can still be taken into slavery.

4.3   At the Origin of Syro-Mesopotamian Metrics

I see here the genesis of the Mesopotamian metrical system. As recorded, these proverbs date to the middle of the third millennium, but they certainly go back to much earlier, very likely to prehistoric times. And they prefigure neatly the structure of Sumerian and then of Akkadian versification. The binary system, where there is a close correlation between one semicolon and the next in a verse, or two verses in a distich, is all here, and so is the syntactic dimension of the correlation, which I have called a syntactic isotonic structure.[17]

Let us look for example at the beginning of the *Enūma elīš*:

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16   Alster 1997, text 2, l. 1.
17   Buccellati 1990.

Enūma elīš	*lā nabū šamāmu*
šapliš ammatum	*šuma lā zakrat…*
When on high	the heavens were unnamed
down below the earth	was uncalled by name…

What is known as parallelism echoes fully the binary system of the proverbs, and dominates the entire prosodic system of Mesopotamian poetry.

What is remarkable about the earliest Sumerian proverbs is that they are likely to record the original voice and not only the idea. This original voice may well go back to protohistoric, and even earlier, times, since proverbs are well known for maintaining a live presence in illiterate as well as literate cultures over long periods of time. If so, we would have an important witness of the earliest form not only of Sumerian as a language, but also the earliest evidence for poetic form. Myths, too, may well sink their roots in this earliest past, but not necessarily in terms of the voice with which they came to be written, while epics are clearly later as they are tied to heroic figures of the historical periods.

4.4 A Sample Thematic Construct

The clustering of proverbs as we have seen with the 'destruction' theme yields what I call a thematic construct, i.e. a short collection of proverbs that are centered around the same theme. Some of these contain several proverbs, and in some cases there develops a real narrative. I have interpreted the *Dialog of Pessimism* as being a very elaborate, late example of this trend.[18] But we have other examples in the proverb collections, and I will so interpret here one that, to my knowledge, has gone unrecognized.[19] It is a little jewel, another example of the hidden creative bent of scribes. This thematic construct blends together a number of proverbs creating a wonderful little dialog that deals with the courtship theme, in the form of a dialog between a woman and a man (here I give the woman's voice in italics). She starts very directly:

I have a fiery eye,   my figure is like an angel's,   my thighs are a delight: who wants to be my seductive spouse?

18   Buccellati 1972b.
19   Lambert 1960, 227 II 7-34.

and the man answers taking some distance, and stressing (male chauvinism!) a husband's prerogative:

> My heart is wisdom,   my loins are full of energy,
> my liver can dominate,   my lips express sweetness:
> who wants to be my preferred spouse?

The difference between feminine seductiveness and masculine assertiveness is emphasized in the next distich

> *Who is poor? Who is rich?*   *For whom must I reserve my vagina?*
> Of the one you love   you must bear the yoke!

The woman now taunts the man:

> *If you make an effort,*   *your god is yours,*
> *if you don't,*   *your god is not yours.*

and the man responds in kind:

> Let me lie with you!   Let the god eat his ration!

The conclusion sums up well the whole spicy situation:

> *Prepare yourself!*   *Your god is your help!*
> *Unsheathe your sword!*   *Your god is your help!*
> And you lay down,   that I may get down to business over you!

Without it being overtly marked, we clearly have here a higher level structure that emerges out of what must originally have been single, disconnected proverbs. It is not only the flow of the narrative, but also the division into what would otherwise be called stanzas. It is what the *Dialog of Pessimism* achieves by means of the narrative frame with master and slave, or the *Theodicy* with the graphic markers. Here, there is no such frame, but the flow is transparent, truly a little (if hidden) literary jewel. It is a compact whole, held together by the tensionality at all levels, that of the 'verse' and that of the four 'stanzas'.

I   *I have a fiery eye,   my figure is like an angel's,   my thighs are a delight:*
who wants to be my seductive spouse?

My heart is wisdom,   my loins are full of energy,
my liver can dominate,   my lips express sweetness:
who wants to be my preferred spouse?

II   *Who is poor? Who is rich?   For whom must I reserve my vagina?*
Of the one you love   you must bear the yoke!

III   *If you make an effort,   your god is yours,*
If you don't,   your god is not yours,
Let me lie with you!   Let the god eat his ration!

IV   *Prepare yourself!   Your god is your help!*
Unsheathe your sword!   Your god id your help!
And you lay down,   that I may get down to business
over you!

5   A Double Epistemic Turn

5.1   Tensionality: Metrics as an Epistemic System

The element of tensionality which characterizes the structure of the proverbs, each in itself and then through the higher level composition in the form of stanzas, may be seen as an indicator of the epistemic dimension of the proverbs. If by 'epistemics' we understand the articulation and presentation of knowledge, then the tight linkage between the constitutive elements of a text may in turn be seen as defining the correlation between seemingly unrelated elements of reality.

The metrical structure provides the formal underlying framework that regulates the dynamics of this correlation. It is more than a simple arrangement of words on the surface, designed for aesthetic purposes, a merely verbal adornment. Rather, the metrical format provides a powerful tool in structuring the thought that is being conveyed.

This isotonic 'metrical' structure is based on the formal binary relationship among constitutive elements. In "destruction done / destruction to come", syntax and semantics create a strong bond among the two components, and give new power to the logical construct, to the knowledge of the connection between a disaster that has happened and one that is still to come.

5.2 The Structuring of Expression

This powerful structuring of thought through a highly channeled expressive format constitutes a major epistemic turn. It can be seen in fact, I have suggested, as being at the origin of the Syro-Mesopotamian metrical system, and in turn this helps us in seeing a deeper value of this system – precisely, an 'epistemic' value.

Poetry articulates and conveys knowledge, and it does so within the strictures of a format that is not compulsory (the way morphology and syntax are), but is freely crafted and chosen by the poet. The strictures of the metrical system make the message not only more pleasant and memorable, but also more incisive and convincing. It is no minor feat if indeed we have here the beginning of poetry as metrically channeled discourse. And that such a feat may be brought back to a folk tradition, to the 'first' wisdom, is very significant: it shows that the roots of this early epistemic effort sink deep into human nature and that 'poetry' is innate.

5.3 The Rethinking of Tradition

The scribal structuring of proverbs into cogent thematic constructs, of which the little *Courtship* 'poem' or the *Dialog of Pessimism*, as I have interpreted them, are a prime example, leads to a second major 'triumph' of Mesopotamian wisdom, namely the reconfiguring of received texts into new wholes that acquire a very different tonality from the original one. The linking together of distinct proverbs to form a narrative is indicative of this second epistemic turn, this one attributable to the scribes of the later generations, the intellectuals of the second wisdom.

It was a turn that took many shapes, all indicative of a profound confrontation not only with the substantive issues that face humans and call for reflection, but also with the earlier literary 'canon'. This was an essential part of the school, and, clearly, it was not seen as just a repository of dead wood; rather it was confronted as a living reservoir of experience which had to be re-absorbed and metabolized into a wholly new construct – a major epistemic turn indeed.

It is the case with epics – as we see with the *Second Gilgamesh*, which re-writes the glorious idealization of heroic deeds into a heartfelt reflection on the perennial human effort to go beyond all limits.

It is the case with myths – as we see with *Erra*, which presents us with a sustained reflection on the very nature of evil, here hypostatized as a deified entity.

It is the case with hymns – as with *Ludlul*, which introduces the very existential motif of an anxious search for what the absolute may be when our ordinary means of control all seem to fail.[20]

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20   On all three cases see Buccellati forthcoming b.

This re-thinking of what we would call the 'canon' is not only literature at its best. It is also, in keeping with the line of inquiry we have followed here, a prime example of the epistemic dimension of wisdom: it reshapes knowledge according to different parameters, different concerns, different sensitivities.

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