I, Social Epistemologist
Thomas Basbøll, Philosophical Investigations
(This piece can be found on Thomas Basbøll's blog "Research as a Second Language".)

When I call myself a social epistemologist I mean that I am a particular kind of philosopher. It's not the name of a doctrine, mind you, like constructivism or realism, but an activity, like phenomenology. It's a way of doing philosophy. Some social epistemologists might prefer to call themselves "sociologists" or "anthropologists" or just "intellectuals". But for me it's a specifically philosophical business.

As I practice it, social epistemology was invented by Steve Fuller. (He didn't coin the phrase, but he made something very distinctive of it.) These past two weeks I've been talking about two of his most important precursors, Thomas Kuhn and Michel Foucault, and I've said that they indicate two further precursors, namely, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger. This morning I want suggest three still older precursors.

It all begins with Kant. Here we find the classical formulation of the problem: what are "the conditions of the possibility of the experience of objects", i.e., what makes human knowledge possible? In the mid-nineteenth century, two very different theologians took these questions up in very different ways: Bernard Bolzano and Søren Kierkegaard. Both were reacting to the overwhelming amount of knowledge that their age was producing. Bolzano proposed a system of rules by which all possible treatises could be written. Kierkegaard took a different approach: "what the world, confused simply by too much knowledge, needs is a Socrates."

Now, Socrates' philosophy famously reduces to the Delphic maxim "know thyself". The founders of the so-called "strong program" in the sociology of scientific knowledge, Barry Barnes and David Bloor, used to talk about "existential" conditions of knowledge, meaning basically "social" conditions. I normally interpret this sense of "existential" to suggest that there is a profound connection between *what we know* and *who we are.* We have to become certain kinds of people in order to know certain kinds of things; and our knowledge of things necessarily transforms who we are. When Kant defined "enlightenment" with the slogan "dare to know", he was saying we must have the courage to become whatever it is we have to be to know all the things science is telling us.

Foucault, in a sense, was telling us to consider the matter more carefully. Perhaps it is not simply cowardly to insist on not knowing things that would turn us into people we don't want to be. This, to my mind, is the core of the project of social epistemology. Already in his first book, *Social Epistemology,* from 1988, Steve explained the project as the two-fold task of helping to design institutions that made certain forms of knowledge possible, i.e., institutions that shaped certain kinds of scientists, on the one hand, and helping policy-makers understand what kinds of knowledge we should expect to emerge from real or proposed institutional interventions, on the other.

For my part, I have been focusing on the identity of the scientific *author,* helping people take control of what Foucault called their "author function", if you will. This is where the

project, having proceeded from Kant to Kierkegaard (and then Heidegger, Foucault and Fuller) loops back around (through Kuhn and Wittgenstein) to Bolzano. What are the rules by which, if not whole treatises, then at least journal articles, may be written, so as to support the growth of knowledge? And this, then, takes us back to Kant: how does writing offer us a moment of apperception? And finally back to Socrates: how does writing an article help us to know ourselves? How does it shape us? The important thing, however, is to keep in mind that "the self" is always a social entity. The question is not so much who I am as who *we* are. What is science asking us to become?