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How Can We Collectivize a Set of Visions about Social Epistemology?

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Introduction

In preparing to make this, rather belated, contribution to the Collective Vision series, I took the chance, which I thoroughly enjoyed, to read all the contributions that had been lodged so far.

I learned a lot and hope that some members of the collective will learn something from this contribution.

Nevertheless, there was a striking feature of the contributions, taken as a collection, that points towards a difficult challenge for any project that aims to embody in its own processes some of the key teachings of social epistemology.

I mean, in particular, that there was, to my eye at least, very little engagement on the part (obviously this is time-asymmetrical) of the later contributors with what earlier contributors had provided.

Of course, there is an upside to this. Or, should I say, there is a potential downside to a series of contributions which *do* "build on each other" that has been avoided. This is that the agenda for the whole sequence might be artificially set by early contributors, whose ideas, however worthy, only partly define a space of possible points of discussion. We all end up talking about a few points, of interest to early contributors, and leave other points unacknowledged. (There is relevant literature about this in social choice theory and in the theory of innovation and indeed our colleague Maria Navarro refers, in her contribution of 14 October 2013, to "a herding effect" which can "produce sub-optimal … outcomes".)

So, while we, collectively, have avoided having the agenda (too-narrowly) defined by early-movers, and while that is an especially good thing given the diversity of issues which are genuinely alive in relation to social epistemology, we haven't, again as far as I can see, taken much advantage of the opportunities for engagement with one another that this collection of visions has afforded, something which is, I think, crucial if we are trying, through our contributions, to exemplify the virtues particularly associated with, indeed vital for, a genuinely social epistemology.

Engaging the Collective

I want to try to show, as an illustration of such engagement, how the collection of visions looks to me, now, preoccupied, as I currently am, with issues about how the disciplines work. (See my paper "Disciplinarity and the Growth of Knowledge" (2012) for a quick and dirty first attempt to sketch some issues.) It's possible, though I don't want to force this point too quickly, that some of the difficulties about securing engagement are related to disciplinary and other analogous differences. I will return to that possibility later.

Certainly, there are latent possibilities for engagement, at least on my readings. Here's an example.

In a relatively recent (12 May) contribution, Patrick Reider refers to people's tendency "to refrain from investing significant resources into projects with no accepted criterion of return". Reider takes this to provide a basis for some of the fundamental propositions of (a form of) social epistemology, and quite properly so; criteria of return-on-investment are defined within group or anyway collective settings and distributions of returns according to those criteria are a matter for the community or collective whose criteria they are. Nevertheless, the idea of an *accepted* criterion of return sits in some tension with the idea of Mel Orozco (9 June) that "the emergence of this new interdisciplinary project [i.e. social epistemology], in any existing version, was not friendly to existing approaches to knowledge" and hence to the criteria of "return" that they imply, a point also made by Stephen Norrie (12 November 2013) in his acute analysis of the way in which critical theory "is completely incompatible with existing academic practice" (and its criteria of return), and by Inanna Hamati-Ataya (27 January) in her point about the inconceivability "[o]utside the SE community" of its "premises … constitutive theoretical traditions and the empirical literature it draws on and produces". It is also, I think, alluded to by Elisabeth Simbürger (10 March) in her reference to "the labour relations of academic knowledge production".

On the other hand, as Orozco also points out, the separateness of social epistemology (from more established academic programs) might facilitate "its creative drive and quest for a vision", an idea related, I think, to Jonathan Matheson's (3 March) point about the importance, in avoiding "confirmation bias", in a group dynamics which not [like the one we are attempting here] only suffers, but honors, the participation of dissenting members, or, anyway, members with a diversity of interests and approaches. Certainly, as I tried to tease out in my book *Naturalizing Epistemology* (Palgrave 2009), there are various social-psychological mechanisms, mentioned as significant for social epistemology by Miika Vähämaa (19 May), that can inhibit creativity, especially when it runs counter to well-established orthodoxies, which social epistemology certainly does both in its more narrowly academic form and in its aspirational leanings towards "critical-theoretical" forms of engagement and influence on social policy.

This, of course, is a BIG tension, and not just in social epistemology.

The University and Social Epistemology

This tension—between the conditions of the production of knowledge in the contemporary academy and the facilitating conditions for a social epistemology that attends to new ideas and approaches that are unlikely to be rewarded through already-existing "criteria of return"—is one which it will take some courage to address. But it will also require, I submit, the development of institutional forms, perhaps sitting at an angle to what Norrie refers to as existing "trajectories of career advancement" that take up the challenge of providing both a sympathetic audience and one that is also capable of critical engagement in support of standards of excellence.

Let me take these points in order.

It is, as the remarks of Reider remind us, psychologically harder to pursue a path that hasn't already been well-trodden by others … to the extent, perhaps, that it has been "domesticated", stripped of its founding excitements and risks. For this we need recognition but can't reliably get it, in many cases, from our immediate colleagues in the offices down the corridor from us. So we need to support each other in our joint and risky venture.

Secondly, however, we need to make up as we go precisely the criteria that will enable us to distinguish between good and better and, indeed, not so good work within this emerging landscape of ideas and methods. If we want social epistemology to become more influential in any of the various ways that might be important, then we will have to develop and enforce our own standards of excellence. They may differ in various particulars from the standards current in some of our original disciplines, but in certain crucial respects they will need to remain recognizable from within those disciplines by those with, anyway, their own forms of courage and risk-taking, their own forms of openness to what is not conventionally pre-approved.

Here, I think, mark West's (14 April) contribution holds a lot of promise. What West outlines is an approach to changing ourselves and to risk-taking in aid of changing ourselves, and to mutual sympathy in support of changing ourselves, and nevertheless to demanding standards in relation to self-change that has proven to be successful in the extremely challenging circumstances associated with addiction. Translating West's account of Alcoholics Anonymous to our own current circumstances, the story might go something like this. Each of us has to acknowledge something about the inadequacies of our previous practice in relation to our deepest aspirations for understanding knowledge and/or for applying knowledge in aid of more effective democratic practices. Each of us has to be willing to take the risk of acknowledging the importance to a possible future practice of our openness to the kinds of ideas and methods reported in this Collective Vision statement and elsewhere in the social epistemology literature. Each of us needs to acknowledge that we need the support of others and are able and willing to lend it to others who are also in need. And each of us needs to honor the imperatives associated with this Collective. As Thomas Basbøll put it (24 March), "[w]e have to become certain kinds of people in order to know certain kinds of things", or, perhaps, we have to become different kinds of people in order to know things in different kinds of ways, in ways that are transparently collectively mediated.

I said, earlier, that some of the inhibitions or disincentives to the creation of new forms of and approaches to knowledge (and its use) might be related to our disciplinary situations. I want, in conclusion, to return to this point.

In Conclusion

I participated, a while ago, in a septennial review of a School of Tourism (Studies). The external reviewers were distinguished international figures in tourism studies. Nevertheless, they were concerned about the (so far only partial) disciplinarization of

tourism studies as such. Each of them had come to tourism as an object of inquiry from an already-established and topically broader field of enquiry—one from geography, one from anthropology, and one from economics. Each of these founding generation tourism studies academics had a background in an already-existing discipline and they were worried that the next generation would all have come from within the "field" of tourism studies, and thus would lack a full understanding of the methodological tools and theoretical and conceptual apparatus that a more established discipline can provide.

Of course, in establishing tourism studies as a "sort-of" discipline, these founders had had difficulties, in the unavoidably multi-disciplinary context of early tourism studies programs, in making themselves understood to one another, in developing criteria for the assessment of their work that could be "trusted" (sorry, Steve Fuller!) by a collective from a variety of different backgrounds, and so on. *But they did do this.* That's the take-home message. I think it may have been easier to do this because or to the extent that they were able to achieve a degree of institutional and institutionally-recognized autonomy—e.g. their own conferences, journals, eventually academic departments, and so on. Perhaps this suggests something about the conditions for the possible success of the social epistemology project, as Hamati-Ataya might put it.

Personally, I think that "brand" has something to do with the possible conditions of success. Some of the institutionally and even intellectually more successful attempts at collective and interdisciplinary new approaches to knowledge production have "brands" that work pretty readily to draw attention—e.g. Gender Studies, American Studies, Early Modern Studies. Because they refer to a topic that people from various disciplines might already have an interest in and competence to pursue, they recruit these people, alerting them to the possibility of fruitful collaboration around a shared interest. I am not sure, and I say this with the profoundest respect for much work that already flies under the banner of "social epistemology", that those two words are working as well as some of these other labels have. Unfortunately, I have nothing better to suggest. I will, however, keep thinking about that.

To summarize. The essential tension for us is to find and gradually institutionalise ways to recruit to, to recognize for, and to create some common standards for judging work in "social epistemology". We have made a start.

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