

Social Epistemology as Public Philosophy
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I recently attended a philosophical conference where there was a session on public philosophy. Of the many valuable insights forwarded at that session, one that struck me and stuck with me was the idea of theorist or philosopher as “rearguard,” a view that can be found in Linda Martín Alcoff’s reading of Enrique Dussel, whose philosophy of liberation, she suggests, “invokes the idea of philosophers as analytical transcribers or rear-guard theorists, not inventors or originators so much as those who give philosophical articulation to the ideas embedded in the praxis and lived experience of the activist oppressed” (Alcoff 2012, 62).¹ Public philosophy, then, on this account, is best understood as the engagement in and contribution to activist groups on the part of philosophers, whose conceptual tools and analytical skills might serve the liberatory ends set out by others. The nature and shape of the community to which philosophers might be welcome or perhaps even invited, and the specific role any public philosopher might therefore take, will be determined not by the her, but by the group she engages with. That being said, I think worthwhile questions remain as to what sorts of community are more amenable to philosophical engagement, and perhaps there a few models that might be worth considering as possible “best practices.”²

If one were to endorse this view of public philosophy, then it seems there are consequences too for one’s view of social epistemology. When one expands one’s sense of the sites where knowledge is produced and exchanged (to borrow an economic vocabulary that has recently become popularized, to the detriment of epistemology, I think) to include not just traditional sites, but sites of resistance as well, then what one sees as the subject and practice of social epistemology is likewise expanded. That is, if one sees “the praxis and lived experience of the activist oppressed” as epistemically productive, then only attending to academic interdisciplinarity, or to knowledge mobilization as it is being promulgated in Canadian universities, overlooks entire swaths of valuable knowledge practices, norms, and indeed, knowledges themselves.

Insofar as the view I’m sketching sees knowledge as always already social, then it and I are clearly on Fuller’s side “against” the analytic social epistemologists who, according to Fuller, see knowledge as an individual possession and affair that only later becomes social. However, while my (preliminary) reading of Fuller tells me that he arrives at this position via naturalism, I arrive at it via my political commitments, and specifically, a feminist philosophy that I hope is becoming more attuned to those others feminist philosophy has tended to leave outside and behind. It is a view partly informed by the insights of feminist standpoint theories, and other theories related to and informed by them, which presume that research, science, and knowledge, will be better or worse depending on who constitutes an epistemic community. This “better” is an epistemic better — not just an ethical or political better, though it’s these “betters” too.

¹ This metaphor is, I hope, friendlier than Agassi’s view that “the philosopher [is] the scientist’s backseat driver” (see Fuller 2012, 272).

² I have in mind deliberative democracy of the Fishkin variety (see Fishkin 2009) or perhaps the participatory action research agenda outlined by Stephen Norrie in his contribution to the *Collective Vision* (see Norrie 2013), though I am much less familiar with this model.

Yet by suggesting that diverse communities are “epistemically better,” I don’t think I’m thereby committed to the analytic version of social epistemology that Fuller aims to distance himself from, and that I agree is problematic. This is because the contours of the social epistemology I trace here do not align with the contours of veritistic social epistemology as they’re traced by Goldman.³ In other words, it does not “have the distinctive *normative* purpose of evaluating or appraising such practices on the veritistic dimension, that is, in terms of their respective knowledge consequences” (Goldman 1999, 7) — at least, not unless “respective knowledge consequences” can be interpreted along pragmatist lines. As a pragmatist who finds the work of Richard Rorty compelling, I (very roughly speaking) reject the idea that truth can or ought to dictate our epistemic practices. Thus, to say that diverse communities are epistemically better is not to say that diverse communities are more likely to produce truth of the sort Goldman thinks science aims at. Instead, claiming that diverse communities are epistemically better can borrow from the pragmatist perspective on democracy offered by Elizabeth Anderson in her 2006 paper “The Epistemology of Democracy.” In that paper, she defends a Deweyan version of democracy, one that presents an “experimentalist account of the epistemic powers of democracy [which focuses on] the use of social intelligence to solve problems of practical interest” (Anderson 2006, 14). The epistemic defense of democracy — which I argue can be translated into a claim about the epistemic benefits of diversity — does not, therefore, need to be understood in simple terms as producing true propositions. Instead, the epistemic benefits of democracy can be understood in terms of its success in solving problems.

So what does it mean to study social epistemology? What does it mean to *do* social epistemology? It is to presume that knowledge is created in a community; it is to create knowledge in a community, with a community, and for a community.

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³ See Colin 2013 for an excellent overview of the differences between these two versions of social epistemology.

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