

***On the Individualistic Orientation of Social Epistemology:  
A Reply to Sanford Goldberg***  
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**The Role of the Individualism in Traditional and Social Epistemology**

Sandy Goldberg's paper is concerned with important issues of social epistemology. Often it is more difficult and important to formulate problems, which need to be discussed, than proposing their solution. The title of Goldberg's paper makes it clear that he deals with "the epistemic significance of other minds" — his point being that many people are engaged in the process of obtaining knowledge. The complexity of the problems that need to be solved, in this case, is not in doubt.

Goldberg's next claim is closely connected with the first. He argues that the main feature of traditional epistemology is its "individualistic orientation". Thus, the principal distinction between traditional and social epistemology is that the rationale of the former is based on the activity of an individual inquirer, and of the latter on the work of multiple epistemic subjects.

However, the point I will argue is that traditional (or classical) epistemology cannot be understood as individualistic. One must understand what "individual" means. To my mind a thing (or a person) is considered "individual" if it has specific features that distinguish it from other things. When discussing epistemology, we should remember that we are talking about the teaching of knowledge. In classical science, the knowledge obtained by a scientist must be reproduced in the world that exists independently of the person — of all his characteristics and of his research activity. Whatever they are, they remain beyond logic. Ideally, this independence must be absolute. That is why the classical rationale is indifferent to any individual features of a researcher, all scientists are equal, no matter what properties they have. There is only one subject of cognitive activity (Laplace's demon).

It is another thing in social epistemology. If we deal with a scientific community as an actor of scientific research, and if this community consists of many people, they must be different. In the previous case, we have only one person who does not constitute a community. As a result, each scientist obeys common norms a little differently, not like others. In traditional epistemology, these nuances are not taken into account and only such an approach is consistent with classical thinking. For comparison, one can recall the interpretation of scientific experiments. In classical science, the possibility of repeating the experiment is a key point. But to do so we have to neglect many circumstances that accompany each experiment and make it individual. If we do not do this, repetition will not be possible. And when we deal with scientific communities, we should have in mind that there are many scientific communities and they, too, are different from each other. Pluralism is present here as well with individualism.

Allow me to clarify one important (to my mind) point. In order to be a proponent of

social epistemology, it is not necessary to take into consideration first of all social phenomena, which are directly related to the human being as a social person. Any thing can be studied in different ways. We may consider a human being as a thing to be investigated by biology or physiology. Social characteristics are not important in this case. Traditional epistemologists think in the same way. The human being, with all its characteristics, including being social, is a thing for them. Knowledge obtained in science (the object of their investigation) is independent of a scientist and of all his features including those, which make him a social person. In the frame of social epistemology any thing, on the contrary, needs to be understood as created by a man, as a product of his work. The author's activities acquire significance for the social epistemologist. The result of science studies resembles the work of art, where the role of author always is important.

This turn to the subject of scientific activity was initiated largely by the revolution of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; first, by the creation of quantum mechanics. Max Born wrote that not any phenomenon in the world of atoms can be described without reference to the observer — to his way of activity, installation of devices and so on. The very observation changes the course of events. How can we speak in this case about the objectivity of the world? Heisenberg was of the same opinion. He said that the study of nature always presupposes the presence of a man and it is necessary to realize clearly, as Bohr expressed it, that we are not only spectators of the performance but, at the same time, actors of a drama. The result of scientific development is that the person is introduced in the philosophical interpretation of thinking, in its rationale.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century new trends in the philosophy appeared that were based on the idea that it is necessary to study the relations among people, such as dialogue, intersubjectivity, and communication. These approaches presuppose that there are many people (at least two) and they are different. In this way, individualism is inevitable. There are other persons from whom you may be different. Pluralism, then, becomes an element of social epistemology.

### **David Hume as a Founder of Classical Epistemology**

What does it mean when social epistemology is endowed with the quality of analytical? As I understood from Goldberg's paper, it means that it is necessary to invent a rationale as a basis for pursuing social epistemology. Goldberg does not deny that every human being has many features that make him different from others. It is difficult to deny this — it is an empirical fact. At the same time, it is also a fact that these different people communicate with one another in some way, assuming they have such a possibility. I completely agree with both of these statements, as well as with the necessity of a rationale for social epistemology. But my point is, as I have said above, that individuality is not a concept that defines the essence of traditional (or classical) epistemology and distinguishes it from the social epistemology.

Goldberg mentions Hume (2013, 26), and I would like to refer to some of his ideas that will make, I hope, my understanding of classical (traditional) epistemology more

persuasive. Hume is one of the founders of classical thinking (17<sup>th</sup> — beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Hume writes that what is considered is some general result that is most frequently observed in the course of experimentation and all the deviations from the general rule are discarded. If no two resembling phenomena could be found in nature, Hume continues, we would have never attained the idea of necessity and the causal connection between two objects. "Our idea, therefore," Hume states, "of necessity and causation arises entirely from the uniformity observable in the operations of nature, where similar objects are constantly conjoined together, and the mind is determined by custom to infer the one from the appearance of the other. These two circumstances form the whole of that necessity, which we ascribe to matter. Beyond the constant conjunction of similar objects, and the consequent inference from one to the other, we have no notion of any necessity or connection."<sup>1</sup>

Hume attempts to lay the foundation for the idea of the uniformity of human nature. He writes that "it is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions" of human beings belonging to all nations and ages and that human nature remains the same in all of its operations. "Mankind is so much the same," Hume believes, "in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature, by showing men in all varieties of circumstances and situations, and furnishing us with materials from which we may form our observations and become acquainted with the regular springs of human action and behavior."<sup>2</sup>

Naturally, Hume does not deny the fact that all humans are different and that their abilities to see, hear, feel and so on are not the same. These differences, however, have no part to play in the construction of his theory and he does not take them into account. This means that it is one and the same person that is involved in all cognitive activity scenarios — it is one person. And the world that is opposed to this person is also one world. Hume is convinced that "... this very table, which we see white, and which we feel hard, is believed to exist, independent of our perception, and to be something external to our mind, which perceives it. Our presence bestows not being on it: our absence does not annihilate it. It preserves its existence uniform and entire, independent of the situation of intelligent beings, who perceive or contemplate it."<sup>3</sup> Human beings can play the same role. Hume writes: "We ourselves are not only the beings, that reason, but also one of the objects, concerning which we reason."<sup>4</sup> Hume's empiricism is pre-determined by the mono-subject logic of the Modern Age.

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<sup>1</sup> *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "Of Liberty and Necessity, Part I", Section 8, 64, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm#section8>

<sup>2</sup> *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "Of Liberty and Necessity, Part I", Section 8, 65, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm#section8>

<sup>3</sup> *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, "Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy, Part I", Section 12, 118, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/9662/9662-h/9662-h.htm#section12>

<sup>4</sup> *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Introduction, SBN xvi, <http://www.davidhume.org/texts/thn.html>

Descartes, another founder of the classical philosophy understands in the same way the questions that are of interest to us. In his opinion, in order to obtain true knowledge, it is necessary and quite enough strictly to follow the rules of thinking, and it does not matter, if the man is clever or not. Each person can obtain a true result, his individual features do not play any role. And only one true understanding of this particular thing can exist.

### **My Disagreement with Goldberg**

For the construction of social epistemology's rationale it should be important to put in its foundation basic notions quite different from those that form the logical structure of traditional (classical) epistemology. I agree completely with Goldberg that first of all we need "the systematic study of the epistemic significance of other minds" (26). But I do not think that the proponents of social epistemology would do well to equip themselves "with the normative vocabulary of tradition epistemology, as well as a sense of how this vocabulary might be applied to the cases involving multiple epistemic subjects" (42-43). To my mind the terminology should be different, or at least it should be understood in a different way. Goldberg believes that "We do well to attend to the traditional epistemological orientation from which Analytical Social Epistemology (ASE) derives. For while the work in ASE arises in the first instance by calling into question the adequacy of the individualistic orientation of traditional epistemology, most of the work in this tradition does not call into question the very categories that traditional epistemology gave us — the categories of evidence, reasons, rationality, justification, warrant, and knowledge (among others)" (44-45).

I agree that all categories enumerated above and some others connected with them, first of all concept of truth, actually belong to traditional epistemology. But I am sure that they make it incompatible with any hint of individuality. If we transfer them as a foundation to ASE, we make it impossible to have in its frame any conditions for the existence of multiple epistemic subjects. We shall have only one subject of thinking and not any other minds. ASE is not derived deductively from classical epistemology. It emerges as if at an empty place, and it needs traditional epistemology as something different with which it is possible to communicate with another like mind. The foundation of ASE is formed by such concepts as individual, unique, pluralism, dialog, intersubjectivity, communication instead of generalization. Now we deal with such concepts as context, innovation instead of new scientific knowledge, technopark or innovation center instead of laboratory, sense instead of truth, and many others.

It does not mean that categories of traditional epistemology are not needed. They continue "to work" in the frame of classical type of thinking which is not ended, but is moved to the periphery. It is important to take into consideration that the notion of sociality has changed. The very border between science and society has shifted inside the knowledge. As a result any scientific problem is, simultaneously, a social problem and when we solve it, we change society. Fundamental science transforms in this direction.

## **On the Discussion Between Fuller and Goldberg**

We are witnessing a discussion between Fuller and Goldberg on the issues of social epistemology. I am closer to the position of Fuller, though I do not agree with him on many specific matters, about which I wrote in my previous post. I criticize him for his indecision in the rejection of some principles of traditional epistemology. Goldberg, on the contrary, relying on the ideas of Goldman, criticizes Fuller for not preserving useful notions (from his point of view) for ASE. To my mind inconsistencies, present in the position of Fuller, make him vulnerable to criticism, it is possible to criticize him from both sides.

Social epistemology, as a new understanding of the process of obtaining knowledge, is introduced in many spheres of social life; first of all, in science. To my mind, it would be useful for the development of social epistemology to have a philosophical and sociological understanding of some nonclassical types of science, including genetic engineering and biotechnology such as the investigations of the geneticist George Church. There are posts in *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* devoted to this area of knowledge. The other important spheres of life, new types of communication, requires interpretation in the framework of social epistemology. I have in mind internet communication, where personal roles have more significance, than in other kinds of human interaction (I am not speaking now about live communication). We can see this example in the discussions in this online journal. I think that the future is for this kind of communication, but it does not mean that other types of communication will disappear. Simply, they will become marginal.

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