

Knowledge as a Public Commodity **Patrick J. Reider, University of Pittsburgh at Greensburg**

I

I agree with Thomas Basbøll that ‘social epistemology’ is an approach to philosophy, rather than a specific doctrine.¹ Nonetheless, there ought to be some commonality that warrants the shared label “social epistemologist.” What then binds social epistemologists as a distinct grouping or class of thinkers? Broadly construed, they are a group of individuals whose primary focus is the relation between knowledge and society. I similarly differentiate social epistemologists according to the manner in which they choose to study this relation and the content they believe to be most relevant to it.

I take a two-pronged approach to social epistemology, which I argue stems from mutually entailing concepts: 1) an operational, moral, and political *meta*-assessment of knowledge and 2) the social influences that enable one to be an epistemic agent. In this entry, I will outline my interest in the former.² In my contribution to *A Collective Vision for Social Epistemology*, I will consider the latter in relation to the former by appealing to some insights from the analytic tradition that have yet to be taken to their logical conclusions.

II

Knowledge is largely directed by the questions we, not merely as individuals, ask, but far more importantly, the questions a given society is willing to invest its resources to discover. Whether someone is involved in material science or philosophy, one typically needs a monetary supplement, provided by a willing individual or group, to engage in her craft.³ One also needs a social network upon which the materials of one’s craft are rendered accessible. It matters not if someone requires an education, laboratory, or library, as in each case, significant time, labor, and money are allocated to their productive management and maintenance.

Since things like schools, laboratories, and libraries are ‘managed,’ and they involve significant resources to ensure their maintenance and daily operation, they are necessarily tasked with certain goals, .i.e., one cannot sustain and successfully manage an expensive and complex system without some well-defined goals. Such goals coordinate many participants and direct the consumption of a wide-range of resources (e.g., money, labor, intellectual, etc.). Such wide-ranging investments of resources and participation ensure that there are disparate collections of individuals with distinct interests and backgrounds,

¹ See http://socialepistemologydotcom.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/basboll_cvblog.pdf

² In outlining my views on the social and ethical dimensions of knowledge, one will see the influences of Marx, Popper, and Fuller. I am, however, neither a Fullerian nor a Marxist. Similarly, my interest in Popper concerns his conception of an open society. I do not adhere to the specifics of his political or scientific views. I will therefore simply present my views as they naturally occur to me, without taking credit for their creation or ascribing them to others as their official views.

³ See Elisabeth Simbürger’ account of social epistemology as being “concrete and material”: http://socialepistemologydotcom.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/simbuerger_cvblog.pdf

who all hope to wrangle some perceived good from their involvement in knowledge production.

If it is the case that the questions being asked and the supporting allotment of resources that enable their resolution are managed (i.e., goal directed), it is also the case that the culture in which these spheres of interest operate are subject to norms that shape one's perception of an acceptable answer. Put differently, people tend to refrain from investing significant resources into projects with no accepted criterion of return: if I do X, I can expect certain benefits or privileges for others or myself. This requires some generally accepted criterion for epistemic achievement, which shapes one's (or the groups') expectation of what is required to obtain rewards for contributing or investing in it.⁴

When knowledge production and acquisition have no clear sense of benefit (material, spiritual, physical, ethical, etc.) or privilege, the degree to which a community is willing to invest in it diminishes. This implies that, without some notion as to what others will require as evidence of epistemic success, one is unlikely to invest time or money in its acquisition and production. On these grounds, one can make a case that knowledge production and acquisition undergo the same social-economic forces as supply and demand of material goods.

If the above is true, the perceived good of knowledge acquisition and production cannot be a pure expression of a solitary individual but, to varying extent, reflects diverse individuals with cooperating values. Even if I am a purely selfish being, my pursuit of knowledge acquisition and production will likely benefit me, as it concerns opportunities or privileges others are willing to confer on me for my participation in the epistemic process. The management of resources that make knowledge acquisition possible (as it concerns the material acts that enable it) is also directed by a similar *telos* (i.e., the purpose which directs its application), in that knowledge is a commodity with social value, which has a certain role to play in the economy (in both the literal and metaphorical sense) of the society that maintains its proliferation.

III

The concrete roles individuals and collectives play in shaping the questions asked in a country, along with the allotment of the resources required to enable their resolution, ought to be clarified and studied, because knowledge acquisition and production are public commodities and community based recourses. Here, the persistent struggle between individualists and egalitarians spills over into the various modes of knowledge production. Should private individuals, corporations, representatives of the people, or populist opinions shape and direct the course of knowledge production? These are issues that ought to equally concern the libertarian and socialist, the capitalist and anti-capitalist.

If the above claims are true, Schmitt's suggestion that one should distinguish 'sociology of knowledge' (as an empirical investigation of knowledge) from 'social epistemology'

⁴ Eric Kerr's vision statement offers an intriguing overview of the concept of a corporation: http://socialepistemologydotcom.files.wordpress.com/2013/08/kerr_cvblog2.pdf

(as a conceptual and normative investigation of knowledge) is incorrect (*Socializing Epistemology* 1994, 1). I believe that sociology of knowledge can inform social epistemology in a manner that is akin to a chemical ‘solution’ (as opposed to ‘mixture’). Though it is true that they can be independently pursued, at their best, they converge.

IV

In this prelude to my contribution to *A Collective Vision for Social Epistemology*, I sought to quickly sketch the material factors of knowledge acquisition as embodied practices that must be facilitated and organized by the activities of a given community. Such reflection suggests that there can be no ‘pure’ epistemology, in that one cannot pursue and exercise knowledge in complete isolation from all other factors and considerations. This is not to say that epistemic claims are whimsical expressions of a particular culture or that all objects of knowledge are subjective fabrications. Rather, there are strong social influences that affect one’s access to knowledge, the manner in which knowledge is produced, what counts as knowledge (to other members of your community), and how it ought to be pursued.

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