

***Understanding the worldly character of knowledge and reason***  
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There is a tendency in my discipline of philosophy to think of knowledge as absolute and of reason as pure. I will explain what I mean with a story. A problem in philosophical epistemology caught my ear a couple of years ago, and I have since published a paper on it (“The Plural Nature of Reason,” *Cogency* 4, no. 2, Summer 2013). This is the problem of rational disagreement. How, goes the reasoning, can two or more people examine the same body of evidence regarding some problem, yet arrive at incompatibly different judgments, and still treat the other as an epistemic peer? In other words, how can they both be equally rational and intelligent while disagreeing?

I have many friends who work in academic disciplines outside philosophy. When I told them the nature of this problem, they were all equally astonished that philosophers could consider this vexing. Sociologists of all stripes, literary theorists, a couple of computer programmers, and a rogue anthropologist were all incredulous that this image of reason could exist. The only reason a disagreement over interpreting evidence would be taken as a sign of actual inferiority in intelligence by one, several, or all parties to a dispute is if you believe that every problem has a single correct answer or description. Against this stance is the attitude widespread in every other discipline of the human sciences that rationality is a multifaceted social phenomenon that can encompass as many diverging perspectives as there are personal and cultural histories of reasoners. Yet philosophy still expresses this tendency.

When I say ‘tendency,’ I do not mean to imply that every practitioner of the discipline in a university thinks this way about philosophical knowledge. Many of the philosophers with whom I have forged the best professional and personal relationships think in ways that are much more accepting of reason’s complexity. But the implications of the worldliness of knowledge face a resistance here that is uncommon elsewhere. The community of philosophers moves with a peculiar inertia.

My desire to break that inertia is why I have been so happy to have found the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (SERRC). It is a community that permits me avenues of inquiry that I would not normally have in the relative isolation of my home department alone (an isolation that risks growing in the period after PhD graduation but before steady employment). Yet on the surface, my presence here is curious.

I am currently in the final stages of revising my dissertation research into a manuscript for submission to a university press to publish as a book. That project is on environmental philosophy, re-examining several neglected ideas in environmentalist moral theory in the light of lessons from contemporary ecological and biological science, framed within an ethical perspective from the existentialist tradition. Its central question is why, in the light of our widespread destructive behaviour, humanity even deserves to continue existing anymore.

I am preparing two new research projects. Which of these I take up depends on my employment fortunes in the next year. If one direction works out, I will study a problem of the public perception of evolutionary biology: why the popular image of ‘evolutionary theory’ is as a monolithic set of

natural laws for the development of species on which no practitioners disagree without invalidating the entire enterprise, instead of the lively discourse that it actually is. If my university career takes another path, my major research project will examine several extreme revolutionary political theories in terms of how they conceive the relation of their present world to the imagined perfect future or the idealized past to be resurrected. Utopian time's dangers, you could call it. None of these three projects have much to do with social epistemology, per se.

Some explicit themes of my work are clear: examining the intersection of scientific knowledge or concepts derived from scientific inquiries with the social and political effects they can have in the world, and how social and political movements can incorporate or co-opt those sciences. But my methods of working through these problems in thought draw from the lessons of social epistemology, broadly conceived. So much discussion in SERRC focusses on philosophy of science, but the core principle I adopt for my work goes beyond even this scope: that knowledge and reasoning are social processes, with practices contingent on worldly situations and open to change based on novel empirical discoveries about the subject of one's inquiries and the structure of one's thinking.

My projects would be inconceivable to me if I believed in traditional conservative philosophy's conception of reason as absolute: a single kind of internally consistent thinking that is not affected by worldly concerns, an ideal process of thought and argumentation which would only be corrupted by allowing worldly matters to alter it. The worst ideas of Plato remain alive in the tradition of philosophy, to the discipline's detriment.

Not all philosophers believe this; I view the best of today's working university philosophers as understanding the worldly character of knowledge and reason. But too many philosophers still conceive of reason as absolute, a conception that holds philosophy as a professional practice back from productive engagement with so many disciplines outside its usual sphere. Philosophy can too often hold itself away from the world, and if the discipline is to progress, we must rejoin it.

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