

***Eddies and Currents: A Reply to Sassower***  
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I am grateful for the [critical review](#) of my article “[Downstream of the Experts: Trust-building and the Case of MPA's](#)” recently written by Raphael Sassower. His detailed review, as well as the invitation by *Social Epistemology* to reply to the review, has afforded me the opportunity to carefully reexamine and reiterate some points in my own work that will, I hope, clarify the overall intentions of my argument, and the places where Sassower and I disagree. Sassower and I agree that the challenges facing communication between scientific and lay communities are real, serious and messy, to say the least. And Sassower seems to support my call to amend Grasswick's argument on the importance of knowledge-sharing in order to stress the need for this knowledge-sharing to be reciprocal. However, Sassower raises seven observations with regards to my arguments. Some of these observations are just that, observations. Some take the form of questions or suggestions. And some are critical of claims made in my paper. At the heart of many of Sassower's observations is a call for more homogenized democratic communities, and more transparency in access to data. Sassower seems to suggest that communities are (or should be) homogenized. That is, he argues that everyone in a community has an equal ability to become knowledgeable about the facts on their own. Everyone, then, begins from the same standpoint. He further suggests that, once we recognize communities as homogenized we no longer need to engage in investigations of trust. In effect, he seems to claim that, once everyone has access to the same data, everyone can draw their own conclusions, and no one need trust the expertise of others. I, by contrast, argue that communities are not, at present, homogenized. I argue that power imbalances do exist and that trust cannot be removed from the discussion.

Of Sassower's seven observations, I'm going to take up the second, fifth, sixth and seventh in detail below as they are the most obviously critical and serve to highlight our divergent approaches to the issues. The first and third observations seem to agree with me on the importance of the issues at hand, and the ways in which power-relations matter in investigating these exchanges. The fourth observation raises the issue of objectivity. I do not have the space here to answer Sassower's question — “Is there any such thing as objectivity?” (Sassower, 140) — here, but invite interested readers to [read my dissertation](#) to see my thoughts on the complicated question of what objectivity entails and how it functions in science and society (see: Fellows 2011). I will confine my replies here to the observations that appear to be more direct objections and critical responses to my paper.

**Second Observation**

In his second observation, Sassower raises a concern that Grasswick's and my approach to the expert/lay interaction is one that risks paternalism and instigates a hierarchy. Sassower points out that “when describing the so-called gap between the knowledge production and dissemination of experts and laypeople, there is always a danger that one

might be guilty subtly or subconsciously of a sort of paternalism against which ethicists warn us. What do 'they' need to know? What would be relevant to 'them' (Sassower, 139)?"

This is an important point to note, and is a concern that I share, which is part of my motivation in calling for knowledge-sharing to be reciprocal. My paper is an extension of Heidi Grasswick's work on the importance of knowledge-sharing. Grasswick, as I noted in my article, also acknowledges the difficulty scientists may have in answering the questions Sassower raises above.

[T]here is a reason to think that a scientific community will be less capable of performing these functions [sharing salient knowledge with those who need to know] well for marginalized communities, particularly once we understand that judgements of significance might differ according to social location (Grasswick, 389).

So, the same concerns that Sassower raises in his third observation are the very ones that prompt Grasswick to argue that members of marginalized communities must be included within the scientific community. As I put it in my article

Grasswick suggests that having an increased representation of marginalized groups in scientific communities might help foster greater trust, and greater trustworthiness, since it might aid with the attempt to filter and disseminate knowledge to those who most need to know (Fellows 2013, 6).

As I understand the ontology of communities, an individual can be a member of more than one community. Grasswick's hope appears to be that individuals who are members of both marginalized groups and the scientific community will be better situated to know what marginalized groups need to know, thus hopefully avoiding the paternalism that Sassower raises as a concern. I think this is a good suggestion. However, my own suggestion in my article builds on Grasswick's work by asking scientists to listen to members of marginalized groups as they share their own knowledge-claims, which will include claims about what is valuable to know, and what is vital to know. In making this suggestion I was further addressing the worry about paternalism. A lay community's claims about what is important for them, and what they know that they need to know should be considered whether or not a member of that lay community also happens to be a member of the scientific community they are in dialogue with. Thus I think that Grasswick, Sassower and myself are all aware of and concerned about the possibility of paternalism.

Sassower expands his second observation by suggesting that one way to deal with the problem of paternalism is to forgo the need for anyone to make a judgment about what another community needs to know. That is, he calls for a level playing field and a

democratization of knowledge. He suggests that participants in a dialogue should be able to choose freely from “a host of data available to experts and non-experts alike” (Sassower, 140). The suggestion, as I read it, seems to be that those conducting the experiments should simply make the data freely available and allow whoever needs or wants access to it to access it. This is much the way science is supposed to be conducted at present (though it often falls short of this ideal). Scientific findings are to be published in journals and magazines, on the web or in books, and individuals are to have free access to the data (though this 'free' access is often not free at all). This suggestion by Sassower seems to be intended instead of the role he sees Grasswick and myself advocating where scientists are the gatekeepers of knowledge, determining who needs to know and what they need to know, and hiding the rest of the data away from the laypublic.

However, as I read Grasswick, her suggestion that experts try to determine what non-experts need to know and ensure that they do know does not preclude experts from *also* simply making the data publicly available. As I quoted Grasswick in my article, she argues that “It is not just any and all knowledge we expect scientific communities to share with us as lay persons then, but rather significant knowledge” (Grasswick, 401). Grasswick claims her suggestion goes above and beyond merely making the data available for perusal. This is because scientific experts are just that, experts. Thus, making the data available may not help all members of the laypublic, as they likely do not know how to access the data, or how to interpret the data once accessed. Finally, I would add that in the age of increasing availability of data literally at our fingertips, it becomes harder and harder to sift through the multitude of knowledge-claims in order to make oneself aware of those claims that one needs to know. This is another reason why it is beneficial for scientists to make every effort to ensure that those who are likely to be impacted by their findings know about these findings. This does not entail being the gatekeepers of knowledge so much as it demands scientists be reporters of knowledge. Make all the data available, certainly. But make sure those who need to know are aware that the data exists, how to find it, and — in the likely event that they require the help — how to interpret it.

Finally, in driving home the need for a democratization of knowledge, Sassower asks “Can we not start with a leveling-scheme of all knowledge-claims (no matter their source)?” (140). He argues that a hierarchy is proposed in the ways in which Grasswick and I approach the question of knowledge-sharing, since it is in terms of experts and non-experts. I agree that Grasswick and I do approach these questions in a way that is hierarchical, not level. As I conduct research in social epistemology I begin from where we are, not from an ideal. And, where we are now, there *is* a hierarchy. The playing field is not level. However, it is important to note that this hierarchy is *not* static. Individual members of the lay public may not be scientific experts, but this does not mean that they fail to be experts entirely. This is why I argued that reciprocal knowledge-sharing is epistemically valuable (not just ethically valuable). Members of a given lay population likely have their own expertise. For example, as I noted in my article, fishers often know where the spawning grounds are, an invaluable piece of knowledge for scientists to have

in setting up marine protected areas (Fellows 2013, 11). So, no, we cannot start with some leveling-scheme of all knowledge-claims (though this is no reason not to aim for such a scheme as an ideal). But we can, and should, recognize context when considering knowledge-claims. A fisher may have expert knowledge on fish spawning grounds. A scientist may have expert knowledge on the effect increasing acidity in the ocean will have on a given population of fish. This means that, in different contexts when considering different questions, different experts will emerge. There is a hierarchy of expertise, but it is not static. Recognizing this will go a long way to acknowledging the epistemic value of knowledge-sharing, as well as the shifting hierarchies and power-relations that are in play in any scientific/lay interaction.

In sum, Sassower's second observation is one that is critical of the hierarchical and paternalistic risks he sees embedded in my and Grasswick's accounts of the scientific/lay interaction. I have argued that both Grasswick and myself are aware of the paternalistic risks in exploring this interaction, and that we have both taken steps to mitigate those risks (my own steps are an attempt to further strengthen and support Grasswick's initial suggestions). Sassower and I simply differ in our approach to social epistemology which leads us to differing conclusions regarding the hierarchical status of knowledge claims. Sassower, I think, prefers to approach the current situation from an ideal perspective. I work in the opposite direction. My goal is to map out the structure of real interactions in order to suggest how to work towards the ideal. I think we both agree that the democratization of knowledge would be a beneficial thing. However, I do not find this leveling-scheme realistic, given the increasing specialization of knowledge-practices I see today.

### **Fifth Observation**

In his fifth observation, Sassower begins his critical exploration of whether the expert/lay interaction is properly characterized in terms of *trust*. He argues that

one ought to separate the argument from the one who makes it. Hence, all questions of trust, if directed towards people or even communities of scientists or their institutional affiliations, are spurious (Sassower, 141).

He points to my first footnote as an indication that I would agree with this assessment of trust based on individual reputation as spurious. This being the case, Sassower argues that it seems that trust falls out of the equation and asks “[b]ut if trust is removed from the debate, around what pivot will the debate ensure? Data? That's refreshing” (Sassower, 141).

I want to take the opportunity here to explain why I do not agree with Sassower that trust in terms of individual reputation is spurious. Here is the footnote Sassower is referring to in this fifth observation:

While it is true that untrustworthy individuals can make truthful knowledge-claims, and trustworthy individuals can belong to untrustworthy institutions, the crux of Scheman's argument seems to be that, in the absence of any way to test the knowledge-claims themselves, it is rational and understandable to resort to a deliberation on whether the individual making the claims is trustworthy. Really, there seems to be no other option, and one would be wise to hesitate before trusting an individual or institution that has been deceptive or has disregarded one's interests in the past (Fellows 2013, 20 *ft*).

From this footnote, I hope it is clear that I do not agree that *all* assessments of the trustworthiness of an individual are spurious. Yes, philosophy has a tradition, as Sassower notes, of listing and naming fallacious arguments and argument structures. And yes, *ad hominem* has long been on that list. However, I do not believe that all arguments that call into question the ethos of a person as a good reason to doubt the individual's claim are arguments that commit this fallacy.

Naomi Scheman has, perhaps, been the strongest advocate for the legitimacy of the *ad hominem* in certain contexts. In her essay, "[Epistemology resuscitated: Objectivity as trustworthiness](#)" Scheman takes up the issue of a breakdown of trust between some scientific and marginalized lay communities. It is not, on Scheman's account, the fault of the distrusting member of the lay community for distrusting scientists. Instead, often marginalized lay communities are fully justified in their distrust of scientists when the workings of the scientific institutions are "demonstrably unjust" *even if the injustices do not affect the validity of the knowledge claims being made* (Scheman, 146-147). One might object that a scientific researcher's knowledge-claims should *not* be dismissed even if the history of research has shown it to be unjust. To dismiss them because of this history is to offer an invalid *ad hominem* attack. However, in an earlier paper, "Feminist Epistemology" Scheman examines Gettier cases and argues that

[T]he point of [Gettier-style] counter-examples is that my belief may have been a justified one in the sense that I was justified in holding it (I had what according to the relevant norms were good enough grounds for holding it,) but . . . looking at my epistemic state from some omniscient position — that belief was not in fact justified, in that my grounds for holding it were, *for reasons it was not my responsibility to be aware of*, inadequate or irrelevant or undermined (50-51 *emphasis added*).

So, one must ask the following: 'Is a member of the lay public responsible for learning the scientific practices that would allow them to judge the validity of scientific knowledge claims?' And the answer is surely 'no'. This is the point of specialized knowledge and expertise in the first place. Those of us who find ourselves in the lay position of a lay/expert interaction are often ill equipped to judge the scientific

knowledge-claims directly. Sassower suggests that it would be refreshing to replace issues of 'trust' with examinations of 'data'. Refreshing or not, this is simply unrealistic. Because data doesn't just give us evidence. It is interpretable, often in a number of ways. In addition, the ways it was collected can be scrutinized, questioned, or mistrusted. But all this questioning and scrutinizing and interpreting takes familiarity with the subject matter. It takes a type of expertise. And we may not all be in a position to judge the data in this way. In the absence of this expertise, I agree with Scheman that it is reasonable to judge present scientists based on past encounters with scientific institutions, in the same way that it is reasonable to judge another's testimony based on their past track record of reporting reliable knowledge-claims to us. Thus, I conclude that judging an individual's knowledge-claims based on one's past encounters with that individual can be rational when one has no other method of adjudicating the accuracy of the claims. Furthermore, since scientific experts rarely work alone, judging an individual scientist's knowledge-claims on the basis of the history of the institution the scientist is a member of can also be rational. Here is a fundamental disagreement between myself and Sassower. Again he calls for a democratization of knowledge, this time by calling for judgments to be based on the data alone. Again, I claim that this is currently unrealistic given the specialization of knowledge currently in place. Thus, I do think this issue is one that is properly characterized in terms of trust.

### **Sixth Observation**

Building on the points made from the fifth observation, Sassower goes on to argue in the sixth observation that the expert/lay interaction is not properly characterized in terms of trust, this time by relying on an analogous example: the philosophy professor/student interaction. Sassower argues that, when he is teaching his students “it's not necessarily a burden of earning the students' trust, but instead commanding their attention for a few hours, ensuring that what we say is understood if not accepted. . .” (Sassower, 141). Here, Sassower seems to suggest that the interaction is not properly characterized as one of trust because the student does not have to *believe* everything the teacher is telling them. The student doesn't have to *accept* what the instructor is saying, but does have to *understand* it.

While it may be true that the student is not being asked to accept the instructor's claims, the student is being asked to accept that the claims being made are, somehow, intelligible, and that the instructor does know what he is talking about and has designed the course with the aims of encouraging understanding in mind. That is, the student must trust the instructor in his role as an instructor. Annette Baier characterized trust in her 1986 paper the following way: “When I trust another, I depend on her good will toward me” (Baier, 234-235). In the context of a philosophy class, this means that the student must believe that the instructor is not trying to cause the student to fail, or to hold misinformation about certain philosophers and their theories. Without this belief in the instructor's good will, it will be hard for the student to learn. No, the student does not have to accept

everything the instructor says as true, but they do have to accept that the instructor is not intentionally misleading them in order to cause harm.

The same, I claim, is true of the expert/lay interaction. Members of the laypublic must trust that scientists bear them a good will. One way scientists have to demonstrate that they bear members of a given lay community a good will is to share salient knowledge-claims with them; that is, to make an effort to determine who needs to know and what they need to know (to return to Grasswick's suggestion). Another way to demonstrate that members of a scientific community bear the laypublic a good will is to listen to the knowledge-claims of members of the laypublic, particularly in contexts where the members themselves have a claim to expertise. These kind of actions can do a lot to erode a history of misinformation, and exploitation that make it justifiably difficult for some lay communities to trust the intentions (and as a result, the claims) of scientists. This, of course, is my suggested amendment to Grasswick's work: knowledge-sharing should be reciprocal. So, again, I argue that the issue is properly characterized as one of trust.

### **Seventh Observation**

Sasswoer's seventh and final observation is more of a suggestion than a criticism or an observation. He suggests that “[i]n this environment, disclosure of doubt might be the added medicine all parties must take daily. In this way, any expert or local advice would be more genuine, however tentative. It would start the dialogue rather than conclude it” (Sassower, 141).

I am sympathetic to this, and it is close to the suggestion I made in my 2011 dissertation that experts in particular (but more generally everyone in an epistemic dialogue) express humility towards their own knowledge claims, and acknowledge the areas in which they are not experts and are unsure of what to believe. Caution and humility — or doubt and tentative exploration — seem sensible to me. However, in calling for doubt, one must be aware of the risk inherent in the discourse of doubt, as highlighted by the Tobacco company's successful use of the term (see Michaels 2008). The risk is, and has historically been, that doubt can effectively be marshaled as a way to end the debate, not start it. Expressing doubt in a given scientific claim is often a way to request that scientists do more research, and thereby postpone policy discussion indefinitely. As cited in my article, ecologist [R.E. Johannes notes](#) that we will never have enough information to be certain regarding any policy, and waiting until we have enough information could do more harm than simply working with the information we have at present, however tentatively (Johannes 1998). In this context, doubt is not *always* a way to start conversations. So while I am sympathetic to this suggestion, I think that the dangers of doubt must be recognized and acknowledged, and if possible, mitigated.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, Sassower challenges the framing of the issue in terms of trust and calls for a democratization of knowledge and a homogenizing of the hierarchical structures of knowledge practices that he sees in Grasswick's and my work. In his closing remarks he drives these points home by arguing that the dichotomy between the expert and the laypublic is “fuzzy at best”. He argues that individuals are “neither scientists nor laypeople, but instead members of the same democratic community from which no one escapes” (Sassower, 142).

It is precisely as a recognition of the fuzzy boundaries between experts and the lay public that I think reciprocal knowledge-sharing makes epistemic sense. I do not, however, agree that we are “neither scientists nor laypeople.” Instead, I claim that an individual may be *both* a scientist, a layperson and a member of a democratic community (if indeed she does reside in a democratic context). The distinction between *neither* and *both* may seem small, but I think it is an important one. Sassower seems to aim to dissolve the boundaries between communities, homogenizing the population into a democratic one where everyone is on a level playing field and everyone's voice is equally heard. This is an ideal well worth aiming for. I am trying to understand our current context, in which the power relations are not so democratic, and — rightly or wrongly — some voices carry more weight than others. Some voices are also more informed than others. And there is no clean connection between the informed voices and the voices that are heard. The intersections of the communities to which an individual belongs are important to recognize. An individual can be an expert in one context, and a layperson in another. This does not render her *nether* an expert nor a layperson. It renders her *both*. Not both simultaneously, but both nonetheless. As she moves from context to context, she also moves in a complex web of power relations and a hierarchical structure of knowledge-claims. There are situations in which she will be able to evaluate the data directly, and situations in which she will have to rely on the good will of the knower interpreting the data for her. Trust is a part of this equation. As long as knowledge is specialized, as long as there are experts in a given field, there will be those of us who rely on them. We are not on level ground, and swimming upstream is not always easily done. We are swirling in a complex interaction with other knowers where eddies and currents of power-relations pull us one way or the other. In any given context some of us are producers of knowledge, and the rest are downstream.

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