

Susann Wagenknecht's “Facing the Incompleteness of Epistemic Trust’ – A Critical Reply”

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Recent years have witnessed an emergence of a novel specialty in social epistemology: the social epistemology of research groups. Within this specialty there are two approaches to understanding the epistemic structure of scientific collaboration. Some philosophers suggest that scientific knowledge emerging in collaborations includes collective beliefs or acceptances (Andersen 2010; Bouvier 2004; Cheon 2013; Gilbert 2000; Rolin 2010; Staley [2007](#); Wray 2006, [2007](#)). Some others suggest that the epistemic structure of scientific collaboration is based on relations of trust among scientists (Andersen and Wagenknecht 2013; Fagan 2011, 2012; Frost-Arnold 2013; Hardwig 1991; Kusch 2002; de Ridder 2013; Thagard 2010; Wagenknecht 2013). In the former case, a research team is thought to arrive at a group view which is not fully reducible to individual views. In the latter case, each team member is thought to rely on testimonial knowledge which is based on her trusting other team members. These two models are not exclusive and competing accounts of the epistemic structure of scientific collaboration. They can be seen as two parallel models for understanding the special nature of scientific knowledge produced in collaborations. Sometimes scientific knowledge in collaborations takes the form of collective acceptance, sometimes it is an outcome of trust-based acceptance, and at other times it takes some other form.

In “Facing the Incompleteness of Epistemic Trust: Managing Dependence in Scientific Practice” ([2014](#)) Susann Wagenknecht makes an important contribution to the debate on the role of trust in scientific collaboration. On the basis of her empirical study of two research groups she revises John Hardwig’s influential account of epistemic trust in two ways. First, while Hardwig assumes that epistemic trust is “blind” in the sense that a testifier’s trustworthiness is taken for granted at least partially (1991, 693), Wagenknecht argues that epistemic trust among collaborating scientists is not blind (2014, 1). In the actual practice of science scientists seek some kind of empirical warrant to ground their trust in their collaborators (5). Second, while Hardwig assumes that in the absence of first-hand evidence trust can rationally ground belief in testimony (1991, 699), Wagenknecht argues that trust is not sufficient to “manage epistemic dependency” in research teams (2014, 2). She argues that trust is rarely a stand-alone reason to believe that *p*. Insofar as trust is a reason to believe that *p* it is accompanied by a range of other reasons such as some first-hand evidence to believe that *p*, considerations of coherence, and reasons to believe that scientific institutions and practices are reliable (4-5).

In this response paper I aim to do three things. First, I wish to clarify the claim that epistemic trust is incomplete and I suggest that there is one dimension to the incompleteness not mentioned by Wagenknecht. Second, I argue that *moral trust* can play an important role in managing epistemic dependency under conditions of incomplete epistemic trust. By moral trust I mean trust in the moral character of the testifier (see also Frost-Arnold 2013). Finally, I raise some questions for future research.

What Does It Mean To Say That Epistemic Trust Is Incomplete?

There are four claims implicit in the view that epistemic trust is incomplete. One claim is that epistemic trust is not blind in the sense that the trustworthiness of the testifier is taken for granted. As Wagenknecht explains, epistemic trust in collaborative scientific practice requires an empirical warrant even though the warrant can only be limited (Wagenknecht 2014, 5). Another claim implicit in the view that trust is incomplete is that trust does not always function as a default assumption in relations among collaborating scientists. “Trust is a delicate plant, and it grows slowly” (7). The second claim can be understood as a corollary to the first claim. If a scientist needs to have empirical evidence to support trust in a collaborator and the empirical evidence needed is typically first-hand personal experience of collaboration, then trust needs time to grow.

The third claim implicit in the view that trust is incomplete is that personal trust in the testifier is supplemented with strategies for indirect monitoring. Such strategies can include checking the coherence of testimony against background information or seeking for a second opinion on the subject matter of testimony. As Wagenknecht explains, monitoring enables scientists to work around personal trust (11). Scientists can also supplement personal trust with impersonal trust, that is, trust in institutions and practices such as gate keeping, peer review, and replication of experiments (11). Yet, Wagenknecht emphasizes that both personal and impersonal trust are incomplete (17).

The fourth claim implicit in the view that trust is incomplete is that trust is future-oriented. To trust someone means that one makes assumptions about future events and since one cannot have any empirical evidence of future events, trust is necessarily underdetermined by the evidence. In other words, one hopes that others will turn out to be worthy of the trust one has invested in them (10).

While I agree with Wagenknecht that trust is incomplete in the four ways outlined in this section, I would argue that there is yet another dimension to the incompleteness of epistemic trust. Trust is incomplete because it involves a moral dimension. I would argue also that it is the moral dimension that enables scientists to cope with the incompleteness of epistemic trust. Let me explain the argument in more detail.

The Default Assumption of Honesty

As Hardwig argues, trust in a testifier involves trust in the testifier’s moral and epistemic character (1991, 700). When a scientist trusts a testifier, she trusts that the testifier is honest in giving her testimony and competent in the relevant domain. Whereas honesty is a moral virtue, competence and some other virtues such as conscientiousness and capability of epistemic self-assessment are epistemic virtues (700). It is not difficult to see why the two dimensions are implicit in trustworthiness. The moral and epistemic virtues are meant to guard against different sources of error. The moral virtue of honesty

is meant to protect the integrity of scientific knowledge against a temptation to falsify or fabricate data (or in some other way to intentionally distort the research process). The epistemic virtues are meant to function as antidotes to incompetence, lack of experience, carelessness, or some other sources of error. Even an honest inquirer may stumble into the latter types of error when she does not have a realistic picture of her expertise and skills.

I would argue that there is an *asymmetry* between the epistemic and the moral dimensions of trustworthiness. While scientists may expect to have some empirical warrant to support their trust in the epistemic character of their collaborator, the moral character of the collaborator is to a large extent taken for granted. This is because evidence of moral character is *necessarily* incomplete. For example, when group leaders recruit scientists into their teams, they may seek evidence of the moral character of the candidate in letters of recommendation. Also, when scientists work in relatively small and stable teams, they are likely to trust the moral character of other team members because an extended experience of collaboration gives them a reason to do so. But even when there is evidence of good moral character, trust in the moral character of other team members is underdetermined by evidence. This is because the very notion of character refers to a disposition to behave in certain ways across a range of social situations. Consequently, trust in the moral character of other scientists is at least partly based on a principle of charity.

I would argue that moral trust is one way to manage epistemic dependency in research groups even if it is the case that the trust in the moral character of the collaborator is based on incomplete evidence. This is because honesty is often treated as a *default* assumption in scientific collaboration. To say that honesty is a default assumption means that the collaborator is assumed to be honest unless one has a reason to doubt it. Having made a mistake is not yet a reason to doubt a scientist's honesty since many mistakes are due to oversight, lack of know-how, or some other shortcoming in the scientist's epistemic character. One has a reason to doubt someone's honesty when there is evidence of *intentional* attempts to distort research process (or of gross negligence leading to such distortions). Honesty is treated as a default assumption, and rightly so, because it is a *moral* value judgment rather than an empirical judgment. It is a moral value judgment because it is accepted for a moral reason. The moral reason is the belief that it is morally wrong to doubt another group member's honesty when one does not have a reason to do so.

Questions for Future Research

In this response paper I have argued that trust in the moral character of the collaborator is different from trust in the collaborator's epistemic character. The right thing to do is to treat good moral character as a default assumption. This is not necessarily the case for the epistemic character of the collaborator. Scientists are right to look for some empirical evidence to support their trust in the competence of their collaborators. This conclusion is

consistent with Wagenknecht's findings. As she explains, scientists use many strategies to monitor the competence of their collaborators (2014, 21). For example, they are engaged in question-and-answer type of interactions and sometimes they witness the work of their collaborators in order to increase their understanding of others' expertise. Yet, trust plays a role in scientific collaborations because other group members do not know the details as well as the person who is in charge of running an experiment (11-13).

The claim that there is an asymmetry between the moral and the epistemic dimensions of trustworthiness gives rise to questions for future research. While it seems to make sense to distinguish among the moral and epistemic dimensions *analytically*, as Hardwig does, can we distinguish them also in the *actual practice of science*? Also, are the moral and the epistemic dimensions interconnected in ways which need to be revealed in future research?

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