Existence and Epistemic Trust
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The history of philosophy repeatedly demonstrates that it is possible to read an author differently, and maybe even better, than she reads herself. For example, in many ways, Edmund Husserl quite sensibly considered his phenomenological project primarily to be a matter of epistemology. Yet, Martin Heidegger goes a long way toward showing the ontological stakes of Husserl's epistemology such that phenomenology gets radically rethought not by *going counter to Husserl*, but, as Heidegger (1968) would put it in *What is Called Thinking?*, by *going to Husserl's encounter*.[1] While reading Benjamin W. McCraw's (2015) excellent essay "The Nature of Epistemic Trust," I was struck by the way that, like Heidegger's reading of Husserl, McCraw's account of epistemic trust (ET) productively opens onto issues far beyond where McCraw himself goes. In this short response to McCraw's essay, I will look to what I consider to be the existential stakes of McCraw's proposal regarding epistemic trust. Crucially, I do not take my thoughts here to be a direct critique of McCraw, but instead an attempt to think with him by taking seriously the importance of epistemic trust and its implications for subjectivity and social life more broadly.

Sociology or Social Epistemology?

Concerned primarily with addressing the fact that "accounts of the nature of ET are quite rare in general and especially rare in any analytical rigor" (2015, 414), McCraw begins his essay by considering the relevant accounts of trust (more broadly) on offer in the contemporary literature and then moves on to provide his own set of criteria for understanding what decidedly *epistemic* trust is and the work that it does in our noetic lives. McCraw's account is robust, nuanced, and sophisticated and I am inclined positively toward all of the specific criteria that he outlines as necessary requirements for epistemic trust.

In its ultimate version, McCraw proposes that H epistemically trusts S for some proposition, p, iff:

    (1) H believes that p;
    (2) H takes S to communicate that p;
    (3) H depends upon S's (perceived) communication for H's belief that p; and
    (4) H sees S as epistemically well-placed with respect to p (2015, 425).

All of these conditions are well motivated and I see no reason to take specific issue with them here. Nonetheless, in the attempt to begin to explore the existential dimensions that attend to the account he offers, let me highlight just one possible concern: the potentially odd realities that the contemporary political situation (in the U.S.) brings to bear on the notion of being epistemically well-placed. In particular, I am interested in what happens to the notion of epistemic trust when being epistemically well-placed is itself viewed with

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[1] For an elaboration of this Heideggerian distinction and a consideration of its possible implications for philosophical inquiry, see David Wood 2007, chapter 7.

suspicion such that a lack of experience or academic specialization counts in favor of one's having knowledge in the area relevant to such experience or training? It certainly seems strange to think that someone would be "trustworthy" precisely because she or he *lacks* the credibility provided by standard methods of identifying "experts."[2] Further, any conception of epistemic trust that depends on being epistemically well-placed might face substantive challenge if well-placement is potentially more a matter of reactionary politics than it is of the epistemic status of one's perspective, experience, or training.

Consider the following example. Currently, politicians are often taken by many as more "trustworthy" regarding the facts associated with climate change than are the academic experts working in climate science. In such a context, though, the notion of viewing such a politician as "epistemically well-placed" is quite problematic in relation to the importance component of "confidence" in cases of trusting. Importantly, McCraw effectively sidesteps such concerns by adding the modifier of "H sees S as" to his account, but to my mind, this is an instance where McCraw should not so easily stop short. Although he has stated clearly that his concern is only with the "nature" of epistemic trust, how that "nature" relates to the status of "good" instances of epistemic trust as opposed to problematic instances is an important concern if epistemic trust is to find traction in contemporary epistemology. Without such a consideration, it is tempting simply to read McCraw's account as more a matter of sociology than of social epistemology—i.e., of telling us simply what epistemic trust happens to be in our noetic communities, but not how our communities ought to function in relation to such trust and how best to cultivate it in ways that maximally promote truth. One essay cannot do everything, and I applaud McCraw's taking an important first step in thinking through the nature of epistemic trust. I do look forward, however, to future essays in which he might expand on the normative dimensions of the epistemological framework he has provided.

In the all too brief remarks to follow, then, I want to invite conversation along such lines by thinking about the existential dimensions that underlie epistemic trust such that McCraw's account might be more pressing on human social existence than might otherwise be realized given McCraw's own stated aims for his essay. In this way, hopefully we can read him differently, and perhaps even better, than he reads himself. I will highlight three possible areas where the existential stakes of epistemic trust are especially notable: *Justice, Finitude, and Sociality.*

Justification as a Matter of Justice

It is entirely understandable that McCraw shies away from getting embroiled in the ethics attendant to epistemic trust. However, his epistemic consideration serves to highlight the need for societies to cultivate a culture in which epistemic trust can be taken as a legitimate mode of justification, warrant, assertability, etc. Epistemology may be able to be abstracted from ethics at the level of professional discourse, but as a lived reality epistemology is always ultimately a moral concern. As Emmanuel Levinas at least

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[2] Scott F. Aikin and Robert B. Talisse (2014, chapter 3, and conclusion) offer a helpful consideration of the ways in which these political realities impact the possibilities for genuine argumentative contexts in democratic societies.

implicitly suggests in his complex authorship, *justification is already a matter of justice*. As an example of how epistemic trust encourages the idea of "justice-ification" (as it were), consider Judith Butler's (2005) notion of "giving an account of oneself." Drawing on Levinas, among others, Butler suggests that the very idea of justification emerges from the moral context of intersubjective life. The notion that one ought to give a defense of what one believes, and how one acts, emerges as a result of being in the world such that one's very existence is called to account in the face of needy and vulnerable others. For Butler, justifying one's own place in the world, one's actions, or one's beliefs, is necessary due to the fact that the world is always already shared. We are here *with others*. As Heidegger (2010, 111-26) and Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) both so vividly, and at least in Heidegger's case, very problematically, remind us, *Dasein* (literally "being-there") is always *Mitsein* ("being-with"). Accordingly, Butler's general framework provides a helpful way of understanding that trust is ultimately grounded in one's relation to the world as a context of shared meaning that calls oneself to task (both ethically and epistemically).

Finitude and Vulnerable Subjectivities

McCraw rightly highlights the essential reality of vulnerability and risk in all genuine relations of trust (2015, 416, 422). Trust is perhaps distinctive from many other modes of epistemic relation because of its *necessary* lack of certainty. Epistemic trust does require confidence, and even optimism, as McCraw notes, but such confidence can only occur in the frame of epistemic humility. To be confident in the sense appropriate to epistemic trust is to be well aware of the possibility of being harmed by the one in whom trust has been placed (as McCraw says, the epistemic risk is that we could be "misled, duped, or otherwise [led to believe] falsely" (2015, 422). All of this seems exactly right to me, but in a Kierkegaardian vein, I think that McCraw should push farther along such lines. Vulnerability and risk are about more than merely the recognition that one is opened to harm (whether epistemically or not). They are realizations about embodiment and finitude, *as such*.

Simply put, but generally stated, subjectivity itself is at stake in epistemic trust. To trust is to say something about one's own limits. McCraw notes this fact in relation to the awareness that trusting S for your belief that p requires admitting that S is in a better epistemic position in relation to p than you are. In other words, we might say that epistemic trust fosters the virtue of other-reliance as a result of appropriately understanding one's own epistemic limits. This social fact, though, cuts much more deeply when it confronts the fact of finitude. Crucially, epistemic limitation can arise for a variety of reasons, but at the most basic, the finitude of human embodiment is an inescapable reality to which we must attend when we consider appealing to others as the source of belief.

Many possible examples could be offered for working through the possible implications of turning our epistemic attention more directly to the finitude, fragility, and embodied realities of the human condition, but as just one particularly significant area, much more work needs done at the intersection of contemporary epistemology and philosophy of religion. For example, if some degree of perspectivalism is required in all epistemology,

whether due to fallenness, finitude, or mere embodiment, etc., then would the phenomenon of epistemic trust (especially the notion of attempting to depend on someone who is best epistemically placed to know the truth) invite some degree of theistic epistemic trust in God, say?[3] I do not mean to suggest that such implications are necessary, but reading McCraw alongside Kierkegaard's (Climacus's) suggestions regarding subjective truth, inwardness, and appropriation, certainly forestall any easy closure of such questions (Kierkegaard 1992, 189-251).

Sociality, Trust, and Faith

Underlying the idea of justice-ification, and also the relation between trust and finitude, is a conception of sociality as more fundamental than individuality. Rather than a liberal ontology that begins with discrete individuals (believers) who then form relationships and networks of belief, thus enabling trust to occur, I think that epistemic trust finds a better foundation in a social ontology whereby responsibility is constitutive of selfhood and social relationships give rise to individual identities, now narratively articulated internal to a particular community of discourse (whether historically as is the case for Simone de Beauvoir and Patricia Hill Collins, say, morally as in Levinas's case, or ideologically as suggested by Michel Foucault and Slavoj Žižek, among others, etc.).[4] As I see it, the very depth of sociality is expressed in the conditions of epistemic trust outlined by McCraw. So, even though McCraw doesn't fully pursue the possible connections, it is worth asking whether Keith Lehrer's (1997) notion of self-trust, for example, is only possible due to the reality of other-trust as already implicitly assumed (not just epistemically, but existentially. Indeed, consider McCraw's own example of the infant who trusts others prior to being able to engage in something like cognitive assent to the other as epistemically well-placed (2015, 419).[5]

Importantly, Jacques Derrida claims that "there is no society without faith, without trust in the other" (1997, 23) and Nicholas Wolterstorff (1983, 11-15) traces the link between faith and trust to the linguistic source of *pistis*. For Wolterstorff, Derrida, Buford, and perhaps McCraw as well, trusting is ultimately a matter of *living faithfully*, whether or not one understands that "faith" in a context of a determinate religion. Again, epistemology and philosophy of religion seem like important conversation partners here (but in ways that are not often enough explored in the debates in "religious epistemology," which far too often just assume such determinate religious commitments, rather than putting them in question in the name of faithful living—thus perhaps assuming a "trust" that works in some confessional contexts but might not in the context of professional philosophy).[6]

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[3] For considerations of what trust in God could even mean, and the consequences for epistemology of such trust, see Pawar 2009, and Godrey 2012.

[4] In Simmons 2011, I provide a more developed account of what such an "ontology of constitutive responsibility," might involve.

[5] See also Thomas O. Buford's (2009) account of the different priorities that attend different sorts of trust.

[6] Although I am a decided critic of much of his work, John D. Caputo has written frequently and substantively about the relation of faith and belief in such respects (e.g., see Caputo 2012). For a challenge to the specifics of Caputo's account, while nonetheless appreciating the importance of the questions being raised, see Simmons 2012.

Conclusion: Mashup Epistemology

Benjamin W. McCraw rightly admits that his essay has very modest aims. He simply seeks to articulate a possible set of necessary conditions according to which epistemic trust can be understood. In so doing, he has pushed the debates in the epistemology of testimony forward in important ways. However, by going to his encounter and inquiring into the existential stakes of epistemic trust, I have suggested that the significance of thinking well about epistemic trust far outstrips merely epistemological concerns. Nonetheless, such significance, itself, should be epistemically considered in order that epistemology not become either stagnant or abstracted from the lived situation in which belief, knowledge, trust, and truth-seeking all inescapably occur and are interrogated. Hopefully the future of epistemology is one that does not foreclose drawing on resources that lie outside of its own sub-disciplinary community or methodological tradition. Rather than seeking stylistic purity, then, we should seek truth while guided by the possible virtues of "mashup" engagements within epistemology and also among epistemology and other relevant philosophical discourses.[7] So, by reading Kierkegaard with McCraw, Derrida with Wolterstorff, and Butler and Levinas with Lehrer, we might, ourselves, be better epistemically placed when it comes to thinking about what epistemic trust is, and also how *we should live* in light of it.

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[7] As an example of what such "mashup" work might look like in other subdisciplinary areas (especially philosophy of religion), see Simmons 2015.

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