



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

La Nouvelle Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes: The Analytic and Critical Tendencies in Social Epistemology

Mark West, University of North Carolina; Miika Vähämaa, University of Helsinki

West, Mark and Miika Vähämaa. "La Nouvelle Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes: The Analytic and Critical Tendencies in Social Epistemology." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7, no. 2 (2018): 36-41.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-3TU> (provided by WordPress)

The newcomer to the domain of social epistemology who wishes to 'get up to speed,' so to speak, finds themselves in an interesting situation. An awareness that the epistemic venture is not conducted in a vacuum must surely occur to most philosophers who attempt to navigate the 'linguistic turn,' or who come to some sort of 'conceptual relativism' via Putnam or Goodman. A quick Internet search turn up *Social Epistemology*, then the SERRC, and then, one hopes, *The Future of Social Epistemology* (Collier, 2016).

Our newcomer might well wonder at this point just what is afoot. The domain is clearly active, with not only frequent articles but the occasional querelle on the pages of the SERRC. Additionally, there are articles which appear to be canonical. But the authors seem to have little consistency in their interests or approaches. Necro-waste, transhumanism, and a variety of vaguely futuristic concepts occupy one end of the domain, and 'freedom' as a goal is used in a manner consistent with European ordoliberal theorists.

A second cluster of scholars seems more concerned with analytic philosophy. The Gettier problem, and, sometimes, the use of empirical methods to examine questions of interest is dominant within this cluster of scholars; here, questions of freedom are construed within a Rawlsian 'veil-of-ignorance' model in which Kantian synthetic a priori are understood to be the desiderata. One might find some sympathy with our hypothetical scholar if she imagined our domain to have fallen into some sort of schizophrenic delirium.

The recent collection of articles entitled *Social Epistemology and Epistemic Agency: Decentralizing Epistemic Agency*, edited by Patrick J. Reider (2016), who at the time of writing was a visiting lecturer at the University of Pittsburgh (USA), might not exactly serve as a panacea for our imaginary scholar, nor for our domain. What this volume of essays does that is long overdue, however, is to go straight to the heart of the matter; it asks the champions of the two major standpoints within the domain of social epistemology to lay out their arguments, and then asks proponents of those views to discuss their understandings of those key articles.

As did his previous edited volume on Wilfred Sellars (2017), this book fills a heretofore- empty niche in the graduate student or professor's library of go-to books. It raises, without answering, an important question; has a nouvelle *querelle des anciens et des modernes* broken out, and if so, who are the anciens, and who the moderns? Are we social epistemologists, as representatives of a new domain of scholarly inquiry, bringing forward a new and liberatory expansion of the philosophical venture, or has our enterprise become contaminated with the schisms which are so evident in the quotidian world all around us?

Fundamental Insights

In highlighting this question, I contend that this volume indicates that the domain of social epistemology has arrived at an important crossroads. The beginning of social epistemology was the abandonment of the individualistic framework implicit in epistemology since its beginning, as Paul Faulkner suggests; as is ably discussed in a number of articles here, at the heart of the notion of social epistemology is the idea of broadening the concept of epistemic agency.

The question, though, is *how*, exactly, the concept of epistemic agency is to be broadened. Those scholars coming from the analytic tradition have seen progress within their domain stall in the wake of what Zagzebski suggests is the transformative breadth of the Gettier problem (1994); almost all the attempted solutions to the problem have, in some sense, involved multiple perspectives and hence, multiple agents through which epistemic agency is distributed. Similarly, science after the Manhattan project has increasingly involved massive group efforts, despite the popular fixation on 'heroic' figures like Marc Zuckerberg and Sergey Brin; and hence scholars studying STS as a group phenomenon have increasingly argued that many forms of knowledge upon which modern societies rely arose in group settings and are too complex for any single individual to hold.

At the same time, the epistemic domain can no longer remain the province of a privileged few. The general emancipatory movement within society has meant that the we can only hope that the broad body of scholars have come to understand that the critical understanding of the world includes all of us and our domains; we can no longer fail to look at our own house, so to speak. Who have we, as scholars, been denying agency? Whose epistemic needs and insights have been denied by those of us who have gained, in whatever manner, the ability to speak and be heard, and thus to have our understanding of what constitutes 'knowing' to be taken as correct?

There are three fundamental insights which distinguish those who think of themselves as social epistemologists, as Finn Collin suggests in this volume. The first is that epistemology involves both multihuman and non-human (or, as some have it, transhuman) entities in the creation of knowledge.

These entities may be social (as in business firms, which are fictive persons but which are factually social collaboratives of humans along with exosomatic repositories of information) or they may be machine intelligences which are now capable, or may soon be capable, of creating something which will, in some manner, be knowledge. We humans, either somatically or exosomatically augmented by machine and biological appurtenances, will soon enough come to a general understanding of the need for redefining knowledge in a manner that takes into account the ongoing blurring of the boundaries of what is human will become a necessity, whether we desire it or not.

A second insight is that epistemology is, or ought to be, normative, or critical. The goal of a given epistemic stance is to produce knowledge, and hence if a given epistemic stance fails to produce knowledge (it produces instead something *taken to be* knowledge but *which is not* knowledge) it is incumbent upon those that hold that stance to seek a better mode of knowledge production, and it is incumbent upon those who study such things to describe both faulty and correct epistemic stances for what they are.

Truth is a goal of epistemology (David, 2001) social epistemology seeks to counter the errors of standard analytic epistemology in which what is given primacy is the considered judgments of a small group of people, notably white male academics (Bishop & Trout, 2005).

Since - and this is the third insight presented in this volume - the naturalistic approach to epistemology seems to be the approach most applicable to the first two insights, it is unclear how the evaluation of how effective any given approach to knowledge generation might proceed at the social level except for being conducted through empirical means. As such, the social empiricists turn to the methods of the social sciences for the evaluations of epistemic methods. Here, we have a working definition of social epistemology - the notion that epistemic agency need not inhere in the individual, often inheres in groups, and may inhere in entities which are not strictly or are not in fact at all embodied humans. As a result, it may be needful to apply social research methods to the social collectives from which knowledge may arise.

As this superbly focused volume demonstrates, however, social epistemology, for all its knowledge of the dilemmas that befall disciplines as the move from their evolutionary origins to phases which are more ordinary, can still fall victim to the pathologies its practitioners decry.

Our subdiscipline has its own boundary objects (tell someone what an 'ordoliberal' and a 'transhuman' is, and they will know whether you adhere to the Fuller or Goldberg schools of thought). Our sub-discipline has analytic social epistemologists and critical social epistemologists who can be identified as members of Team Goldberg and Team Fuller. In this light, Reider's notion of setting this, the third book in the "Collective in Knowledge Societies" series as a querelle, is a very good choice indeed.

It is of no use to pretend that there are no differences between the different schools of social epistemologists; a few days online, or (for those of the 'old school' left among us, in the stacks) among us will demonstrate the truth of that assertion. The depth of the split between analytic and critical schools in social epistemology has been clear for some time. There are some, like Collin in this volume, who see the two camps as working from different perspectives, perhaps using different methodologies, but pursuing the same goals.

There are those, who, like Remedios and Dusek, see the critical tradition, and in particular Fuller's commitment to the liberatory possibilities of inclusive construals of epistemic agency, and the breadth of his conceptualization of entities which might create knowledge, as a powerful antidote for the forces afoot in Western Civilization in our time which seek to thwart the idea of broadening the notion of who and what might be human.

Others, however, who are perhaps less represented in this book, might hold that the analytic tradition, with the intellectual rigor of its methodology, can ask fundamental questions such as "is epistemic agency even a possibility?" (Engel, 2013) or "how do we propose to aggregate sets of judgments?" (List and Pettit, 2002).

The Gettier problem, such analytic social epistemologists might argue, holds whether knowing agents are singular or plural, and whether they consist of tissues or of silicon or of some hybrid thereof; and to wave one's hands and plow ahead on a critical program defined as liberatory neither makes it certain that all projects defined as ones which 'maximize

freedom' truly emancipatory, nor does it make the questions raised by the Gettier problem go away. Nor do the futuristic vistas opened to our imaginations by transhumanism and related ventures in experimentation in what makes humans human of necessity increase 'freedom;' the questions raised by Hans Jonas and those who follow in similar modes can be ignored, but does that mean they are not of concern?

Happily, the Reider volume does not shy away from Fricker's argument (1988) that when knowledge is a social good which enables coordinated actions through networks of trust (Shapin, 1994), it inevitably becomes an aspect of power relationships. These webs of trust have individuals as their subjects, individuals who themselves are constituted via social relationships, whose relationships are fundamentally understood and felt to be power relationships (Fricker, 1988, p. 67).

With politics, which itself is the study of power relations as a focus, it seems reasonable to argue that definitions of knowledge are a fundamental aspect of political relations -- and, in an era where politicians regularly differ not only on policy questions tout on matters of fact, there can be little doubt that epistemology has become politicized, as well as having entered the realm of the social.

And when the two schools of social epistemology concern themselves with conceptualizations of human flourishing which entail programmatic concerns involving normative conceptualizations of the best way to manage (or to not manage) the distribution of resources, our domain has indeed become politicized. To be clear, as Schram (1995, p. xxv) suggests, the social sciences have long since needed a reorientation away from institutional and policy needs and directives; the orientation of the new epistemic movements represented in this volume can only be seen as healthy. But at the same time, they are clearly oppositional, and how to -- or whether to -- seek some sort of rapprochement between them is a question left to the future.

Conclusion

There is an old Yiddish joke that tells of a pious man who was stranded for many years on a desert island. His rescuers were surprised, when he was found, to see that he had built an elaborate model of his village from conch shells. There was a post office, a town hall, a restaurant -- and two synagogues. Mystified, the rescuers approached the man. "The restaurants, the tennis courts, the town hall. This we understand. But two synagogues?" The man nodded. "One synagogue I pray in, every Sabbath. I'm observant. The other? In that other synagogue you wouldn't catch me dead."

In the world of philosophy, the same principle holds: two philosophers, two schools of thought. Whether this is the natural progression of the dialectic, an essential aspect of intellectual progress, or as the Yiddish jokes suggests, a vice of the human wish to make in-groups and out-groups, is a matter of debate. What we can say about the Reider volume is that it has taken the brave and humanistic approach to the dialectic in both its structure and in its overall cast; the editor asked for foundational articles from the flag-bearers of what we might call the analytic and the critical approaches to social epistemology, and then solicited thought-provoking responses to them.

The approach was not to synthesize, which would have been to bring a premature closure to the dialectic. As the querelles in the pages of the SERRC suggest, the analytic and critical schools of social epistemology only seldom engage each other on more than peripheral concerns, such as whether or not ordoliberalism is a beneficial approach to social justice.

While such a debate is important, it doesn't seem to approach the real heart of the matter -- which is a fundamental conceptualization of epistemic matters, and even more to the heart of things, of philosophical matters.

The question "what is knowledge" strikes at the heart of what we do, and can, know; and, by extension, the question of who we understand ourselves to be. As such, social epistemology offers a novel way of thinking about that question in that it seeks to distribute agency, and in so doing, enables the effort of multiple minds (not all of them strictly, or at some future date even remotely, human) to be brought to bear upon the question. As such, social epistemology can, and should, be understood to be a domain with a profound emancipatory which I think is the case for all those concerned.

As the Reider book suggests, we are of two minds about how to conceptualize our field, and speaking among ourselves is increasingly difficult. What a book like this, with well-written and articulate syntheses of both stances, and with sympathetic and lucid extrapolations of both does, is to make possible understanding of the position of the other side without the oppositional approach often taken in the pages of the SERRC.

Taken with the Collier (2015) volume, this book represents the best possible introduction a field in the process of growth—and perhaps, sadly, of fission. What we might keep in mind, as Riggio (2017, p. 66) eloquently argues, is that "an important purpose of philosophical writing for public service is to prevent important ideas from slipping into empty buzzwords."

We must avoid, as Latour (1999) argues, becoming so fond of our notions of the 'play of heuristics' that we lose sight of the real damages done to embodied people (Baker and Oreskes, 2017), thus losing Riggio's battle for public trust. This volume sets the chess pieces upon the board; it is left to us to play out the game. Let us speak openly of truth in ways that benefit the actual embodied humans we see about us, whose suffering is manifest. As Lobo (2017) points out, in our actually-existing world,

being a homo sapiens does not mean you are seen as, recognized as, a human being, a member of the community, and it is in this sense that a homo sapiens/human being can be said to both possess and be denied their human rights (p. 16).

The situation described above by Lobo is contrary to the "existence of universal human rights and the encouragement of cultural, ethnic and gender diversity throughout society," as Riggio (2017) puts the matter; as Wolfe (1989) argues, one of the confounding aspects of prosperity is that it creates an intelligentsia which has never known hunger and which can therefore promulgate anti-liberal social scientific viewpoints, and which hence come to be

viewed as irrelevant or ‘pie-in-the-sky’ by the populace. The battle for public trust that Riggio describes will be lost, or won, on the basis of how we choose to conduct the negotiations between the insights and arguments advanced by the analytic and critical social epistemologist, arguments clearly outlined by the authors presented in this important volume.

Contact details: west@unca.edu, miika.vahamaa@gmail.com

References

- Bishop, M., & Trout, J. D. (2005). The pathologies of standard analytic epistemology. *Nous*, 39(4), 696-714.
- Collier, J. H. (2015). *The Future of Social Epistemology: A Collective Vision*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- David, M. (2001). Truth as the epistemic goal. *Knowledge, truth, and duty: essays on epistemic justification, responsibility, and virtue*, ed. Matthias Steup. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 151-69.
- Engel, P. (2013). Is epistemic agency possible? *Philosophical Issues*, 23(1), 158-178.
- Fricker, (1998, January). Rational authority and social power: Towards a truly social epistemology. In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (pp. 159-177). Aristotelian Society.
- Goldberg, Sanford C. 2013. “‘Analytic Social Epistemology’ and the Epistemic Significance of Other Minds.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 2 (8): 26-48.
- Latour, B. (1999). *Pandora's hope: essays on the reality of science studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- List, Christian, and Philip Pettit. "Aggregating sets of judgments: An impossibility result." *Economics & Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (2002): 89-110.
- Lobo, Gregory J. “Back to Basics: Straw Men, Status Functions, and Human Rights.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6, no. 11 (2017): 6-19.
- Reider, P. J. (2016). *Social Epistemology and Epistemic Agency: Decentralizing Epistemic Agency*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield International
- Reider, P. J. (2016). *Wilfrid Sellars, Idealism, and Realism: Understanding Psychological Nominalism*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Schram, S. (1995). *Words of welfare: The poverty of social science and the social science of poverty*. U of Minnesota Press.
- Shapin, S. (1994). *A social history of truth: civility and science in seventeenth-century England*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Zagzebski, L. (1994). The inescapability of Gettier problems. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44(174), 65-73.