



SERRC

Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

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

Is Science to be Understood as an Independent Value? A Reply to Mark Erickson

Ilya Kasavin, Russian Academy of Sciences, itkasavin@gmail.com

Kasavin, Ilya. 2020. "Is Science to be Understood as an Independent Value? A Reply to Mark Erickson" *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (4): 1-2.
<https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-4Vr>.

Mark Erickson's (2020) highly detailed and illuminating historical and systematic analysis of Weber's lecture confirms that the problems posed by Weber 100 years ago remain topical. Yet, as Erickson notes, "the really big, and really difficult, question that Weber addresses, both actively and passively in 'Science as a Vocation', is one that he could not answer and that perhaps we cannot answer today. That question is 'what *is* the value of science?'" (24).

This approach sounds highly provocative for those who seek to overcome Hume's guillotine. How, then, are we able to answer the question about values whatsoever? According to Wittgenstein, the sphere of values is mystical—sentences refer to facts not to values. So, we can hardly speak about values in a descriptive manner. In our case, "value of science" has neither a denotate—*Bedeutung*—nor a referent—*Sinn*. Or, if we assume the "value of science" does have a referent, then the question "how do we come to know this referent?" remains open. Any self-observation or reflexion would give us uncertain testimony. Appealing to any referent as a unity of personal mental data here produces unbearable Gettier-style discussions.

In my paper (Kasavin 2020), I responded to the question "what *is* the value of science" in the way that invites further clarification. I assume that the value of science is its special epistemological status. Yet, this value is not justified by the internal and autonomous priority of knowledge, but in science's ability to generate and transmit cognitive goals, norms and ideals to society. How do we observe or come to know about science's ability? Science, together with technology, demonstrates an ability to change politics, economy and culture in various ways. Political technologies become more deliberative, flexible and refined even in autocratic states. Intellectual technologies let underdeveloped states make great leaps. Science art, cyber-religions, computer-music, digital humanities are examples of evident cultural shifts. But these products and goods do not decisively prove that science "transmits cognitive goals, norms and ideals to society". Well, let us reverse the coin.

Vocation is a gift, which a person receives from her teachers and colleagues, from the scientific community in general not disregarding the whole system of scientific education and socialization provided by society. Hence, vocation nowadays is a *social* gift in contrast to the ages of non-professional science when it was purely a *cultural* gift. Even postmodern society, being highly impressed by the practical achievements of science and technology and by the gift of science, acknowledges its debt by providing conditions for enjoying a scientific vocation. Social funds for supporting science and education far exceed any commercial goals. Many countries endorse basic research without any real promise, science popularization, scientific education and even the applied research, (which will later become commercialized). Society (considered sociologically) understands the value of science, its *Sinn* outside an immediate practical profit. Moreover, scientific expert panels belong to the routine practice of business and politics. Society not only finances science but also *believes* in science, *shares its values*—objectivity and truth. All this is a clear sign of science being a particular cultural power, and of its ability to "transmit cognitive goals, norms and ideals to society".

Max Weber, addressing students in Munich in 1917, spoke about the necessity to demarcate scientific knowledge from values. We should understand this claim historically. The majority of Weber's audience were adherents of radical nationalist values and served later as a basis for the Nazi movement. Weber meant to demarcate those "false values" from science. In that sense he promoted the value of science, mainly of the social sciences, for the benefit of society. Revisiting Weber today instrumentally—e.g. engaging in the humanitarian expertise of technoscientific megaprojects—we are following his way.

References

- Erickson, Mark. 2020. "Afterword on Social Epistemology's Special Issue on 100 Years of Max Weber's 'Science as a Vocation'." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 9 (3): 18-24.
- Kasavin, Ilya T. 2020. "Science and Public Good: Max Weber's Ethical Implications." *Social Epistemology* 34 (2): 184-196.