Trusting Oneself Through Others: El Kassar on Intellectual Self-Trust

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In a pair of recent and illuminating articles, Nadja El Kassar develops a notion of *intellectual self-trust* and argues that it should play a central role in theorizing epistemic agency under oppression. Though the two articles focus on different theoretical issues (standpoint epistemology in 2020a and epistemic injustice in 2020b), they are companion pieces insofar as they together paint a portrait of a certain optimism in one's own epistemic powers, stressing its importance in the face of unjust conditions that seek to deny or diminish one's standing as a knower. She contrasts her approach with others that focus, negatively, on intellectual self-trust as something harmed or destroyed by unjust social conditions. El Kassar's aim, rather, is positive: to elaborate a conception of intellectual self-trust that reveals the constructive and resilient role it can play in overcoming those conditions.

I would like to begin my comments by highlighting some features of El Kassar's conception of intellectual self-trust that are important for understanding the broader role it can play in a critical social epistemology. Second, I raise some questions about her notion of *collective* intellectual self-trust. Finally, I raise a question about the social preconditions for intellectual self-trust. Raising these questions also allows me to draw a tentative connection with another recent strand in critical social epistemology—one inspired by Hegelian recognition theory.

1. El Kassar's Three-Component View of Intellectual Self-Trust

Building upon and critically modifying earlier discussions of the concept, El Kassar defends a view of intellectual self-trust as comprised of three components: (i) cognitive, (ii) affective, and (iii) behavioral (El Kassar 2020a, 16–7; El Kassar 2020b, 8).[1] Taking inspiration from El Kassar's own use of literary examples from Elena Ferrante's Neopolitan Quartet (El Kassar 2020a, 12–5), I would like to reconstruct El Kassar's three-component view by turning to another example from Ferrante, one involving Lila Cerullo.

At the beginning of the second volume, *The Story of a New Name*, we learn that Lila—who has just married at sixteen, who is forced by both her father and her family's destitution to give up the promise of continuing her education at middle school, and who has lived her entire life in precarity—keeps a secret metal box full of her writings (Ferante 2013, 15–8). She gives it to Elena for safekeeping for fear that her husband might read them. Opening the box, Elena discovers "evidence of a stubborn self-discipline in writing," including careful descriptions of trees, ponds, kitchens, streets, and neighbors, written in both Italian and dialect, along with Latin and Greek translation exercises, English prose descriptions of the neighborhood, commentaries on books she had read and films she had seen, formulations of political ideas, and accounts of the life of poverty that she and Elena share. This metal box and its contents, we could say, are the material manifestations of Lila's persistent intellectual self-trust in the face of gender- and class-based oppressions that threaten to destroy it. It is this sort of situation that El Kassar has in mind in developing her account. For hers is not a theory of intellectual self-trust in the abstract or under ideal circumstances, but what many

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[1] Especially Karen Jones (2012a). For more background on Jones' conception of intellectual self-trust, see the exchange between Jones and Nancy Daukas in the *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* (Daukas 2012 and Jones 2012b).

nowadays call a *non-ideal theory* (e.g., Mills 2005), one interested in the ways such self-trust can grow and persist even under the most inhospitable conditions.

We find each of El Kassar's three components at work in this example.

(i) First, the *cognitive component* specifies that an intellectually self-trusting epistemic agent must hold beliefs about the competence and proper functioning of their own epistemic powers, relativized to a particular domain of inquiry. Such beliefs need not be consciously before one's mind at all times or even most of the time, but must be in formulable upon reflection. So, as Lila applies herself to Latin and Greek translation exercises, she need not explicitly and constantly articulate beliefs like, "I have, in this case, properly applied the rules of declension," yet she should nevertheless be capable of formulating such beliefs in the face of criticism. The cognitive component is important because it captures a form of reflexivity that is essential to epistemic agency.

We cannot ascribe *self*-trust to a being without a reflexive cognitive capacity, even if we imagine that the being in question has a standing disposition always to rely upon its existing epistemic methods and mechanisms. For such a being, who permanently inhabits the "Sense-Certainty" chapter in Hegel's *Phenomenology* (Hegel 1977, §§90–110), the exercise of its epistemic mechanisms would issue immediately in belief, without the capacity to step back and subject those mechanisms to critical scrutiny. As Karen Jones puts it, "To be a *self*-truster or distruster there has to be a gap between the exercise of epistemic mechanisms and belief—a space that opens up the possibility of epistemic agency" (Jones 2012a, 239). Like Kant's notion of an "I think" that must be capable of accompanying all my representations (Kant 2007, Ak. B131–2), there is also a cognitively reflexive "I trust myself" that must be capable of accompanying any particular exercise of one's epistemic agency. El Kassar's "cognitive component" is a way of capturing this point.

(ii) Second, the *affective component* specifies that this self-related stance is not *merely* cognitive, at least if we assume a narrow notion of cognition that excludes emotional, passionate, and value-laden aspects.[2] An intellectually self-trusting agent enjoys "feelings of confidence" and "the attitude of optimism" towards their own cognitive capacities (El Kassar 2020a, 17; quoting Jones 2012a, 245 and 243), where these forms of affect are not mere addenda to one's beliefs but a proper part of intellectual self-trust itself.

The spectrum of emotions we might expect to accompany self-trust in one's own epistemic agency could be quite broad, including, e.g., feelings of *fierce determination* in the face of intellectual challenges, justified *anger* in the face of the unfair deflation of one's epistemic credentials, or *excitement* at their affirmation and exercise, as well as feelings of *pride, joy, self-esteem*, and *self-respect*. In this connection, the examples from Ferrante (both El Kassar's and my own) are particularly apt. For Lila's writings within the metal box radiate affect: the pleasure she felt in writing her story, *The Blue Fairy*, the suffering she felt when Maestra Oliviero ignored it, the fury she felt at seeing Elena go off to middle school as she was left

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2 One might worry that distinguishing the cognitive and affective dimensions of intellectual self-trust as two separate "components" begs the question in favor of non-cognitivist theories of affect and emotion, or a sharp distinction between cognitive and emotive content. I think, however, such a sharp distinction is neither intended nor necessary on El Kassar's account.

behind, and her excitement at learning to repair and design shoes (Ferrante 2013, 17). All of these passions might be credited as manifestations of Lila's conception of herself as a knower in the face of compounded instances of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice.

(iii) Third, the *behavioral component* specifies that an epistemic agent's self-trust is not merely "in the head" but also materially manifest in action. This might involve expressing one's beliefs via testimony or backing them up with reasons. It may also involve inaction, for example, refraining from seeking further confirming evidence when one is already confident about a particular belief (El Kassar 2020a, 17). These are all familiar forms of epistemic activity: asserting, justifying, weighing evidence, and deciding that inquiry has reached an appropriate resting point. Yet the behavioral component can take a broader range of forms as well, as evidenced by the activities we see in the example of Lila's secret writings. This is important for underscoring the role of intellectual self-trust in overcoming conditions of epistemic injustice. For if something like this metal box and its contents can qualify as a material manifestation of a person's intellectual self-trust, then similar—and similarly unpredictable—material manifestations of self-trust could, under the right conditions, performatively contradict the unjust denial or diminution of one's standing as a knower.

2. Collective Intellectual Self-Trust

While I have omitted many interesting details, we may view the threefold picture of cognitive, affective, and behavioral components as the theoretical core of El Kassar's picture of intellectual self-trust. However, we should immediately note the that the threefold account only captures what El Kassar distinguishes as *individual* intellectual self-trust. She also wishes to distinguish a *collective* form of intellectual self-trust that is, as she puts it, "a disposition of the collective itself" (2020b, 6). She provides the example of a writing group comprised of incarcerated persons and academics who developed over time a "shared heightened consciousness" (El Kassar 2020b, 7).

The collective variation of intellectual self-trust includes the three components just sketched and adds a fourth: **(iv)** the *mutual awareness component*, which specifies that the "members of the group must be mutually aware of the joint intellectual self-trust that the group members have in the group and the members" (2020b, 8). While I find the idea of collective intellectual self-trust promising, I have several questions about how El Kassar's picture hangs together.

2.1. Is Collective Intellectual Self-Trust a "Disposition"?

El Kassar's characterization of collective intellectual self-trust as a "disposition of the collective itself" (2020b, 6) seems to create a tension within her view. For elsewhere she writes that "Intellectual self-trust might itself be thought to be a disposition, but I think it is more plausible to conceive of intellectual self-trust as a self-reflective stance constituted by dispositions" (El Kassar 2020a, 15). The reasons for thinking that intellectual self-trust is not *merely* a disposition or set of dispositions are precisely those stated above for including the "cognitive component." *Simply* having a disposition immediately to trust one's own epistemic mechanisms means that there is no gap between the exercise of those mechanisms and

belief, a gap where reflexivity enters and makes possible genuine epistemic agency as opposed mere sense-certainty.

It may be that this is a just terminological issue, and that in her description of collective intellectual self-trust, she is using "disposition" as shorthand for "self-reflective stance constituted by dispositions." Even so, it is important to clarify this ambiguity. For when we raise the philosophical question of whether intellectual self-trust can be attributed not only to individuals but to collectives, we can only properly assess this claim if we know just *what* exactly we are attributing. Attributing to a collective a *disposition* is one thing, attributing to it a collective capacity for self-reflection is another. My impression is that it's the latter (or both) that El Kassar needs for her account of collective intellectual self-trust to work, but I was left wanting to hear more on this point.

2.2. Is the Collective the Subject, Object, or 'Subject-Object' of Intellectual Self-Trust?

Part of the challenge of distinguishing *individual* and *collective* intellectual self-trust is demonstrating that the latter cannot be reduced to the former, say, by picturing the collective variety as nothing more than an aggregate of instances of individual intellectual self-trust. This challenge is in the background of my next question, which concerns how the collective qua collective (as opposed to mere aggregate) figures in El Kassar's account. I'll give this question some structure by posing it as multiple-choice, though the options listed may not be exhaustive. Is the collective

(a) the subject doing the self-trusting;

(b) the object of self-trust; or

(c) both, making it what we could term the 'subject-object' of trust?

I suspect the answer should be the last option, both to account for the reflexive structure of self-trust, but also to meet the challenge of irreducibility to individual intellectual self-trust. However, El Kassar's discussion seems to go in different directions.

The passage I quoted earlier—"Collective intellectual self-trust is a disposition of the collective itself" (El Kassar 2020b, 6)—speaks in favor of the thesis that the *subject* doing the trusting is the collective qua collective, not merely an aggregate of individuals. We could interpret this as a fairly radical claim, since it attributes a disposition (or a "self-reflective stance constituted by dispositions") to a supra-individual subject, rather than to a particular knower or aggregate of knowers. We might then pair this with a corresponding radical claim that the *object* of collective intellectual self-trust is not just the epistemic capacities and contributions of each individual member of the relevant group, but of the group qua group, understood as supra-individual. But El Kassar seems to back off this more radical claim, writing that what is at stake is "not one group consciousness that has special intellectual capacities" but rather epistemic capacities that are "instantiated in the members of the group" (El Kassar 2020b, 9).

I am not sure whether El Kassar needs to be this cautious. Perhaps a defender of collective self-trust (intellectual or otherwise) should avoid positing a metaphysically extravagant

notion of a supra-individual collective mind that would be more appropriate for describing the "hive mind" of creatures like the Borg than the epistemic agency of our own life-form. Yet there may still be ways to attribute both the activity of self-trust and the trusted epistemic capacities to supra-individual entities, such as social practices and institutions, that avoid this sort of metaphysical extravagance. In any case, I was left uncertain of which direction El Kassar wishes to take this idea.

2.3. Is the "Mutual Awareness Component" Sufficient for Distinguishing Collective Intellectual Self-Trust?

As I mentioned above, El Kassar argues that the three-component view of intellectual self-trust must be supplemented by a fourth, which she calls the *mutual awareness component*. She spells out this component as follows: "The members of the group must be mutually aware of the joint intellectual self-trust that the group members have in the group and the members" (El Kassar 2020b, 8). This component is meant to contribute to the effort of meeting the irreducibility challenge.

To illustrate what is at issue here, picture a group of strangers waiting at a bus stop. Without further details, this is not a "group" or "collective" in any strong sense beyond the coincidental fact that they all happen to be waiting for the same bus. Next, imagine that, unbeknownst to them, they are all avid gardeners with a high degree of intellectual self-trust when it comes to tending plants. Even with this added fact, however, we still have only a mere aggregate of persons, each of whom possesses *individual* intellectual self-trust, not *collective* intellectual self-trust. Yet let's say our story unfolds such that, as they wait for the bus, they strike up a conversation which leads to a *mutual awareness* of one another's knowledge of gardening. We may go even further and imagine that this leads to a long friendship in which they regularly share discussions and knowledge about gardening. Perhaps they start a communal garden together and gain a heightened shared awareness of its denizens. At some elusive point in this story, they cease to be a mere aggregate of individuals with individual intellectual self-trust and become a group with *collective* intellectual self-trust.

My question is whether adding a *mutual awareness* component is sufficient to account for the transformation from individual to collective self-trust in this sort of example. My sense is that the moment of coming to mutual awareness of one another's epistemic capacities is more like a middle stage in this process. What's needed beyond mutual awareness is an ongoing and reciprocal activity of engaging in shared projects, conversations, and the development of a history as a group, such that the individuals are not merely *aware* of one another's intellectual capacities and their trust in them, but moreover, that they *recognize* one another's intellectual capacities and self-trust in this domain as, in a substantial way, *mutually interdependent*. That is, they recognize that their own trust in themselves in this domain is mediated by their trust in others, such that, without the bonds of other-regarding trust that have been developed as part of the group's history, their own self-trust would not have developed the way it did. I am using the term "recognize" in a normatively weighty sense that involves, not just cognitively registering this as a fact, but affirming this interdependence and engaging in concrete gestures that convey affirmation. My suggestion, then, is that the fourth component is not that of mutual awareness but of *mutual recognition*.

I take this to be less a criticism of El Kassar's view than a friendly amendment. For El Kassar does not claim that her list of four components constitute jointly sufficient conditions for collective intellectual self-trust. She also acknowledges that "much more is needed for group membership" than shared intellectual interests or shared aspects of identity (El Kassar 2020b, 8). In this respect, adding a *mutual recognition component* (or something similar) would amount to an attempt to add further determinacy to an already complex account. In any case, it seems that we need a notion with more normative weight than "mutual awareness" to capture El Kassar's own idea that what an epistemic collective shares is not just common epistemic capacities but an *ethos* (El Kassar 2020b, 7). Perhaps an ethos of *mutual epistemic recognition* might do (cf. Fricker 2018, 4).

3. The Social Origins of Intellectual Self-Trust

I just gestured towards the idea that self-trust is mediated by and dependent upon prior bonds of trust with others. I characterized *recognition* as involving, in part, a concrete affirmation of that dependency. These themes lie behind my final question.

Discussing the role of collective support in sustaining an individual's intellectual self-trust, El Kassar writes, "It is plausible that we start off with intellectual self-trust and then our environment—including 'trusted figures, whether parents, teachers, or peers'—either supports us in sustaining and developing our self-trust or it does not" (El Kassar 2020b, 5). The claim that we "start off" with a positive relation-to-self as epistemic agents, and "then," in a second step, encounter the mediating effects of our environment, strikes me as either false or misleading.[3] If "start off" means that this sort of positive self-relation is innate, appearing without social recognitive preconditions, either from birth or early childhood, then it is false. For this ignores the all-import role of relations of loving care, patience, and education in nurturing a potential knower's first entry moves into the space of reasons. If "start off" means that we are assuming as the paradigmatic epistemic agent an adult already at a mature stage of cognitive development, this is, at best, misleading. For it suggests that the prior stages of education, training, and socialization that go on in childhood are not a proper part of a philosophical conception of what epistemic agency is.

A more promising interpretation is that El Kassar is making a *conceptual claim*, namely, that some minimum degree of intellectual self-trust is a necessary condition for the possibility of epistemic agency as such. For a potential knower who completely lacked any confidence whatsoever in their own epistemic powers would not be able to engage in any of the most basic forms of epistemic agency at all, like judging, asserting, or inquiring. In that case, we should always say that X "starts off" with some degree of intellectual self-trust as long as we are assuming that X is an epistemic agent at all. This version of the claim, which is an *a priori* thesis about the necessary conditions of epistemic agency as such, sounds right to me. Once again, however, it risks being misleading without specifying further that this minimal condition is not a sheer given, but a developmental *result* that relies upon, among other things, existing social bonds of trust.

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[3] This is reasserted later by way of a contrast between individual and collective intellectual self-trust: "I don't think we can say that groups always start off with some collective intellectual self-trust as in the case of individual intellectual self-trust" (El Kassar 2020b, 8; see also El Kassar 2020a, 12 and 25n18).

Elsewhere El Kassar says things in support of the idea that our intellectual self-trust is not something there from the beginning, but is the result of prior socialization and bonds of recognition: "We come to such self-trust through communal support, but it is not identical with mere communal support" (El Kassar 2020a, 12); and "communal support is a necessary condition and causally contributory for developing adequate levels of intellectual self-trust" (2020a, 20). These more socially-developmental claims strike me as both more plausible and closer to El Kassar's considered view. Yet this leaves me unsure of how to interpret her claim, repeated in both of the articles I have been discussing, that we "start off" with intellectual self-trust and only later meet with the mediating effects of our social environment. As far as I can see, it would be wholly compatible with the rest of El Kassar's view to embrace the idea that intellectual self-trust is dependent upon, and shaped by, prior social support all the way down.

These last reflections lead me to think that El Kassar's notion of intellectual self-trust might fit well with another recent development in critical social epistemology, namely, the recognition-theoretical approaches to epistemic injustice.[4] One of the central themes of Hegelian recognition theory is the absolute dependence of individuals' "positive relation-to-self" upon the receipt of certain basic types of recognition from others (see, especially, Honneth 1995). The thought behind extending recognition theory to the domain of social epistemology is that epistemic agency involves certain positive relations-to-self that are developed and backed up by distinctively epistemic forms of recognition (extending from early childhood education to relations of mutual respect and esteem in adulthood). This could be a fruitful alliance for both sides.

On the one hand, El Kassar's notion of intellectual self-trust would be a helpful concept for those already invested in theorizing the sorts of positive relations-to-self involved in being an epistemic agent. It would complement existing notions, such as what Hilkje Hänel (2020) calls *self-recognition* in the context of her discussion of hermeneutical injustice, or the notions of *epistemic self-confidence*, *self-respect*, and *self-esteem* I have attempted to delineate elsewhere (Congdon 2017 and Congdon 2018). On the other hand, and as I have tried to indicate in this commentary, a notion of social recognition is already implicitly at work in El Kassar's account. Making that notion explicit might be a positive step towards clarifying the nature of both individual and collective intellectual self-trust. The idea of *mutual epistemic recognition* is the idea of an ethos that, one hopes, might pervade our everyday epistemic exchanges and nourish an intellectual self-confidence that is resourceful and resilient in all the ways El Kassar describes.

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[4] See McConkey 2004, Congdon 2017 and 2018, Giladi 2018, Hänel 2020, as well as the essays collected in Giladi and McMillan 2018.

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