



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

A Dialogue on Intellectual Self-Trust: Replies to Congdon and Koskinen

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El Kassar, Nadja. 2021. "A Dialogue on Intellectual Self-Trust: Replies to Congdon and Koskinen." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 10 (6): 70-73. <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5Yc>.

Many thanks to Matthew Congdon (2021) and Inkeri Koskinen (2021) for their inspiring replies. They demonstrate the great potential of individual and collective intellectual self-trust and give me the opportunity to develop and clarify my remarks in the original article.

Congdon asks three questions about collective intellectual self-trust.

1. Is collective intellectual self-trust a ‘disposition’?
2. Is the collective the subject, the object, or subject-object of intellectual self-trust?
3. Is the ‘mutual awareness component’ sufficient for distinguishing collective intellectual self-trust?

All three questions are connected. Let me start with the third question.

Congdon’s example of a group of strangers waiting for a bus at a bus stop who become friends based on their shared knowledge of gardening is very helpful. His question is, when did “they [the group] cease to be a mere aggregate of individuals with individual intellectual self-trust and [became] a group with *collective* intellectual self-trust” (Congdon 2020, 52, emphasis in original, my additions)? His worry is that mutual awareness, one of the four components of collective intellectual self-trust, cannot explain this transition.

The general worry is justified, even though it is based on a misunderstanding of the object of the group’s mutual awareness. The group members are not mutually aware of their shared knowledge. They are mutually aware of their joint intellectual self-trust (El Kassar 2021, 204). Mere mutual awareness of shared knowledge is indeed not enough for collective intellectual self-trust. Congdon’s group of avid gardeners that has collective intellectual self-trust cannot just be constituted by individuals with individual intellectual self-trust and particular epistemic skills, they also need mutual awareness of their collective intellectual self-trust and, a new addition, mutual recognition.

In his reply Congdon emphasizes the role of recognition for groups and I agree that recognition is a crucial component of collective intellectual self-trust. I submit that we should add mutual recognition as another component of collective intellectual self-trust. The group members of a group with collective intellectual self-trust mutually recognize each other as members of the group. In total, there are five components of collective intellectual self-trust: behavioral component, affective component, cognitive component, mutual awareness, mutual recognition (see also my forthcoming article). I return to the role of other individuals for intellectual self-trust below.

### **On the Object of Collective Intellectual Self-Trust**

I turn to the second question, the question about the object of collective intellectual self-trust. “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?” (Congdon 2021, 51) As Congdon anticipates, I go with the subject-object suggestion. Collective intellectual self-trust has the collective as its object, but the collective is constituted by the individuals and their individual capacities. This means that my conception of collective intellectual self-trust is neither summative nor non-summative. There is no collective without the individuals, but that does not mean that the collective is merely an aggregate of the individuals. There is the collective over and above the individuals even though the collective capacities and the self-reflective stance are constituted by the individuals’ capacities.

And finally, the first question of what intellectual self-trust really is—a disposition or self-reflective stance. Congdon is right to note the ambiguity. I do mean that intellectual self-trust is a stance that the collective takes towards their epistemic deliverances, their capacities, etc. It is self-reflective only in a weak sense, in the sense that it comes with mutual awareness of (collective) intellectual self-trust and is about oneself (in the individual case) or the group (in the collective case). Self-reflexivity is also weak in the sense that it does not imply a critical attitude. Nor does self-reflexivity entail anything about the epistemic value of individual or collective intellectual self-trust. It’s merely a structural claim. Collective intellectual self-trust is a stance that is constituted by different dispositions, depending on the domain in which it applies.

### **Developing Intellectual Self-Trust**

Both Congdon and Koskinen have questions about the development of intellectual self-trust. Congdon is surprised by my claim that “we start off with intellectual self-trust” (El Kassar 2021, 201) because to him it seems that there could be no intellectual self-trust without “relations of loving care, patience, and education in nurturing a potential knower’s first entry moves into the space of reasons” (Congdon 2020, 53). He suggests that the claim may be right as a conceptual claim, but it cannot be right as a developmental claim.

I believe that the development of intellectual self-trust is partly an empirical issue that cannot be decided by philosophers only. Zagzebski makes the conceptual claim that there is pre-reflective intellectual self-trust prior to arriving at intellectual self-trust when responding to skeptic challenges (Zagzebski 2014). And Congdon is right that intellectual self-trust needs supportive relations to sustain it. But this does not obviously show that a child does not start off with some intellectual self-trust, or rudimentary intellectual self-trust. This might be true, even as an empirical claim.

One might think that an infant that tries to grasp a toy that lies in front of them on a table manifests some intellectual self-trust. They trust their perceptual capacities and demonstrates such trust behaviorally. They might not manifest the cognitive and the affective component in the same ways as an adult, but they may be in an early stage of intellectual self-trust. If the infant during their first experiences with grasping objects in front of them repeatedly experiences that the objects disappear when she tries to grasp them, their intellectual self-trust is most likely harmed. But still, one may insist, during the very first moves the infant has some intellectual self-trust to get going.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> One might suggest that if an infant manifests intellectual self-trust without any obvious accompanying beliefs, non-human animals can also have weak intellectual self-trust. But I think that these two claims are separate

Of course, my remarks are merely speculative, and I would need developmental psychologists to confirm or debunk these speculative claims, but Congdon would also need their empirical studies about these early stages in human lives. Congdon's observations about the importance of "loving care, patience and education" (Congdon 2020, 53) do not justify his claims about the very first stages in the development of intellectual self-trust.

### **Regarding Collectives**

As Koskinen's reply reveals, the development of intellectual self-trust is also an open question for collectives. We can ask this question for collectives that fight against epistemic injustice but also more generally for all collectives that have collective intellectual self-trust. Again, this is largely an empirical question. But we can observe which factors are indicators of collective intellectual self-trust. Shared needs and concerns, engaging in self-determination, joint actions, mutual recognition are certainly present in all groups that have built and are able to sustain collective intellectual self-trust. As Koskinen notes, we see this in a retrospective analysis (2021, 25) and we can use these insights for fostering collective intellectual self-trust (to some extent). We should also examine epistemically pernicious groups and epistemically valuable groups to get a better grasp of the factors involved. My hunch is that epistemically valuable and epistemically pernicious groups will share many of the factors, e.g., shared needs and concerns and mutual recognition, meaning that the epistemic value of collective intellectual self-trust or of groups with collective intellectual self-trust does not simply lie in the conditions of collective intellectual self-trust.

Congdon's important observations about "material manifestations" (2020, 48) of individual intellectual self-trust lead to another element that may be required in initiating—and sustaining—collective intellectual self-trust. Congdon notes that Lila's musings, observations, translations, political reflections that she collects in a metal box are "material manifestations of [her] persistent intellectual self-trust in the face of gender- and class-based oppressions that threaten to destroy it" (Congdon 2020, 48). Lila gives the metal box to her friend Lena on the day of her wedding because she wants to save the box and its contents from her husband. It is not much of a stretch to suggest that by saving the metal box from her husband she also attempts to save her intellectual self-trust. And we may add that she also succeeds in saving her intellectual self-trust: despite all the hardship and oppression, she continues to trust herself, e.g., she goes on to learn computer programming and becomes a successful computer expert.

Collective intellectual self-trust may also thrive on material manifestations. For example, the LoCI and Wittenberg Prison Writing Group may thrive on the epistemology of incarceration that they have written together and foster collective intellectual self-trust in this particular domain (2016). Such material manifestations don't have to be full written articles. And they can be somewhat immaterial, e.g., a newly developed term such as *sexual harassment*

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from one another. Non-human animals may be found to have rudimentary intellectual self-trust, but the fact that infants have rudimentary intellectual self-trust is not evidence for intellectual self-trust in non-human animals.

may initiate and sustain a collective's intellectual self-trust. The relevant 'material manifestation' of collective intellectual self-trust may also be a hashtag used on twitter<sup>2</sup>, e.g., #Sayhername. A Facebook group may be another material manifestation of collective intellectual self-trust, e.g., the Long Covid Facebook group, founded to get people with Long Covid symptoms into conversation. And a grassroots project such as MadCovid that supports people with mental health issues during the COVID19-pandemic may also count as a material manifestation.<sup>3</sup> These groups quite plausibly have different degrees of collective intellectual self-trust, but their self-trust is materially manifested.<sup>4</sup>

Note that this does not mean that the manifestations are all there is to collective intellectual self-trust, these manifestations are just one possible facet of intellectual self-trust. And, finally, let me emphasize that epistemically pernicious groups with collective intellectual self-trust may also have the very same kind of material manifestations as epistemically valuable groups. Analyses of intellectual movements such as the one conducted by Koskinen and Rolin (2019) would provide further evidence for a deeper understanding of collective intellectual self-trust and individual intellectual self-trust, both in their pernicious and valuable varieties. These insights may enable us to foster valuable collective intellectual self-trust and work against pernicious (collective) intellectual self-trust.

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles (2020).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ashton (2021) for a comparison of these two groups.

<sup>4</sup> Clearly, not all facebook groups and not all grassroots projects are manifestations of collective intellectual self-trust, but some may be such material manifestations.