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Social Epistemology: Five Answers

1. Why were you initially drawn to social epistemology?

This is the second time that I have the honor of contributing to this series: I also wrote an entry for the volume on epistemology (Kusch 2008). Since it seems desirable for both contributions to be intelligible on their own, a certain amount of overlap between my two sets of answers is unavoidable.

“Social epistemology” (=SE) can be understood broadly or narrowly. On the broad understanding, the expression covers all systematic reflection on the social nature or dimensions of cognitive achievements such as knowledge, true belief, justified belief, understanding, or wisdom. The sociology of knowledge, the social history of science, or the philosophy of the social sciences are amongst the key parts of SE thus construed. Many contributors to Pragmatism, Marxism, Critical Theory or Hermeneutics also qualify. On the narrow understanding, SE dates from the 1980s, is primarily a philosophical enterprise, and has its roots in Anglo-American epistemology, in feminist theory, as well as in the philosophy of science.

It is only against the background of the broad conception of SE that I am able to explain how I first got drawn into the field and why my preoccupation with it has not lessened. My interest in SE was first triggered by work in the so-called

“Continental Tradition” and by *historical* and *social-political* questions about *scientific* knowledge.

Although I am German by origin, for personal reasons I studied in Finnish universities (1981 to 1989), first in Jyväskylä, later in Helsinki and Oulu. The Jyväskylä department encouraged interest in German-speaking philosophy. Accordingly, the first authors who captured my philosophical imagination were Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas. I did not specifically focus on epistemological issues during my pre-PhD days, though I recall studying Hegel’s critique of the Kantian project of epistemology as first philosophy, Husserl’s heroic struggles with epistemological relativism, Heidegger’s criticism of Husserl’s foundationalism, or Habermas’ attempt to analyze (scientific) knowledge in terms of social interests.

I became fascinated with SE (broadly construed) only after the completion of my PhD thesis (on philosophy of language in Husserl and Heidegger, supervised by Jaakko Hintikka). In 1988 the University of Oulu was looking for a temporary replacement to teach history of ideas, and I got the job. The history students were not interested in “incomprehensible German philosophers starting with the letter ‘H’” (as my friend Calvin Normore once jokingly put it), and they asked me to lecture instead on new Anglo-American and French ideas in the history, philosophy and sociology of science. This demand led me to study the work of Michel Foucault, the French tradition of “*épistémologie*” (Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem), and the “Sociology of Scientific Knowledge” (especially David Bloor, Barry Barnes, Harry Collins, Simon Schaffer and Steve Shapin). I do not know whether the Oulu students got much out of my lectures on these authors, but I was hooked. The eventual results were books on Foucault’s historiography (1991) and on the sociology of knowledge (1995, 1998, 1999). And in 1992 I was hired by the famous Science Studies Unit of the University of Edinburgh.

For a while—between 1991 and 1996—I identified more with history and sociology than with any part of philosophy. Nevertheless I always thought, or hoped, that my primary audience would be philosophers. My social histories of the politics of classic controversies in the history of German-speaking philosophy of the early twentieth century—be it over naturalism, be it over the nature of thought—were meant to deepen and widen philosophers' own reflections concerning the determinants, structures and closure mechanisms of philosophical disputes. For me such issues were, and are, central to SE.

My interest in SE *narrowly conceived* emerged in 1997 when I took up a permanent position in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Cambridge. I was hired as a philosopher of science. In our first chat my new head of department, Peter Lipton, expressed the hope that I would "turn to more philosophical-epistemological work". This chat was the beginning of a ten-year-long philosophical conversation between us, much of which focused on SE, and especially on testimony. (It lasted until Peter's premature death in 2007.) A jointly edited volume on testimony in the sciences was the most tangible outcome (Kusch and Lipton 2002). I also learnt much from other Cambridge epistemologists (both widely and narrowly construed). I only had a few brief conversations with Edward Craig when I first arrived in Cambridge, but his book *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (1990) impressed me greatly. It took me a long time to develop the courage to push Craig's line of investigation further.

Almost equally important in stimulating my interest in SE (narrowly conceived) was Alvin Goldman's *Knowledge in a Social World* (1999). I still admire Goldman's ability to bring social-epistemological reflection to bear on a very wide range of topics, from education to philosophy of science, from law to testimony. I greatly appreciated Tony Coady's *Testimony* (1992) for the same reason. Coady's book shows why philosophical reflection on testimony matters, and matters well beyond the realm of social epistemology.

My work since the late nineties has tried to bridge the gap between the sociology of knowledge and SE (narrowly conceived). Many of these attempts have fallen between the two stools. Advocates of SE (narrowly conceived) think of the sociology of knowledge as a philosophically shallow form of epistemic relativism. And my friends in the sociology of knowledge tend to be equally dismissive of much of philosophical epistemology. Of course, I think that both assessments are flawed. Accordingly, I have sought to defend the coherence and the philosophical significance of the sociology of knowledge, including its relativism; and I have attempted to strengthen some of the "communitarian" ideas dear to sociologists of knowledge using the tools and techniques of analytic epistemology and SE.

2. What are your main contributions to the field of social epistemology?

For my work between 1991 and 2006 I can best identify these contributions by summarizing my book publications.

In my *Foucault's Strata and Fields: An Investigation into Archeological and Genealogical Science Studies* (1991), I tried to reconstruct and make plausible Foucault's historiography of science in general, and his ideas on the inseparability of scientific knowledge and social power in particular. In doing so, I related his work to sociological and anthropological science studies and to Anglo-American philosophy of science. Needless to say, much of this is now somewhat dated, but the defense of epistemological relativism that I put forward in Chapter 13 still seems right to me.

Psychologism (1995) and *Psychological Knowledge* (1999) are contributions to the "sociology of philosophical knowledge". These studies were triggered by the thought that the *history of philosophy* deserves to be written with the same kind of social-historical sensitivity which is now common in the *history of science*. Philosophers working on the history of their field usually refuse to pay much

attention to the psychological, social or political factors that influenced or shaped the thinking and debates of the great philosophers of the past. Maybe it is due to my early fascination with the German philosophical tradition from Hegel to Habermas that I find this restriction to arguments and arguments alone both unhistorical and *unphilosophical*. If philosophy had an “essence”, would not that essence have something to do with “reflection” and “self-awareness”? And must not this self-awareness include a serious appreciation of the historical contingency of the questions one asks and the vocabularies one employs? If philosophy is after conditions of possibility, surely the historical, social and political conditions of the possibility of philosophy itself must inevitably be a central philosophical concern (cf. Kusch 2000).

Psychologism is a sociological history of the dispute over the relationship between (experimental) psychology, epistemology and logic in German-speaking philosophy between, roughly, 1900 and 1930. I documented the wide variety of positions on this relationship, not least in order to bring out that Frege and Husserl were not lone heroic proponents of anti-psychologism. And I sought to explain the eventual (though temporary) defeat of psychologism and naturalism in social-political terms. This was meant to convince the reader that there was nothing inevitable about the (temporary) triumph of anti-psychologism, nothing inevitable about the institutional separation of psychology from the rest of philosophy, and nothing inevitable about the self-image of philosophy as based on non-empirical methods of inquiry.

The first half of *Psychological Knowledge* did something similar for the early-twentieth-century philosophical dispute in Germany over the nature of thought and the possibility of introspection (Wundt, Külpe, Müller were the key figures here). I argued that the distribution of positions was socially patterned: philosophers’ stance on the nature of thought varied, amongst other things, according to their party-political and their confessional commitments. The second

half of the book shifted from sociological history to "social philosophy of mind": I put forward an interpretation of folk psychology as a social institution.

The Shape of Actions: What Humans and Machines Can Do (1998) was joint work with the sociologist of scientific knowledge, Harry Collins. The book developed a social theory of the possibility of automation, with a special focus on scientific instruments. The core of our theory is a classification of actions and the various social conditions under which they can be mechanized. The theory we proposed is not a *(social) epistemology of instruments*—though perhaps a necessary prolegomenon to such epistemology.

Knowledge by Agreement: The Programme of Communitarian Epistemology (2002): When I first used the label "communitarian epistemology" I thought of it as the philosophical counterpart of the sociology of scientific knowledge, especially the relativistic "Strong Programme" advocated by Barnes and Bloor. Accordingly, *Knowledge by Agreement* tried to outline and defend—in what I hoped were recognizably philosophical ways—four epistemological theses of "Strong Programme" vintage: that our epistemic dependence upon testimony runs too deep for us to be able to produce a non-circular general justification for our trust in others' words; that testimony is a generative source of knowledge insofar as it is always in part performative; that "knower" is a social status; and that a communitarian reading of Wittgenstein supports a strong form of epistemic relativism.

There are some parts of *Knowledge by Agreement* that still seem right to me (especially Part III), but I now find the book a little too quick and programmatic for my taste. I took too much for granted, and I related to some of the sociologists' views too uncritically. I have addressed some of these shortcomings in my work of the last six years. For instance, my book *A Skeptical Guide to Meaning and Rules: Defending Kripke's Wittgenstein* (2006) defends the communitarian reading of Wittgenstein and its consequences at much greater length than anything offered in *Knowledge by Agreement*.

Over the past few years I have pursued two main social-epistemological projects that have not (yet) resulted in book-length publications. The first pushes further Edward Craig's and Bernard Williams' "state of nature epistemology". In my paper "Testimony and the Value of Knowledge" (2009c) I used their work to outline a "communitarian theory of epistemic value": at least *scientific* knowledge is valuable as a collective good. In "Knowledge and Certainties in the Epistemic State of Nature" (2011b) I conduct a critical dialogue between Craig's theory and Wittgenstein's claim—familiar from *On Certainty*—that common-sense certainties cannot be known. It turns out that Craig's distinction between different stages in the development of our concept of knowledge can illuminate and make plausible Wittgenstein's claim. But it can do so only if Craig's traditional commitment to a central "core" in our concept of knowledge is replaced with the idea of *knowledge* as a family-resemblance concept. And in "Naturalized Epistemology and the Genealogy of Knowledge (forthcoming) I defend and reinterpret Craig's project in response to criticism put forward by Hilary Kornblith in his recent paper "Why Should We Care about the Concept of Knowledge?" (2011). I seek to make plausible that Craig's project has affinities with naturalized epistemology, and that it helps us to understand unity and disunity in both concepts and natural kinds of knowledge.

My second current project is a book, tentatively entitled "Wittgenstein's Epistemological Investigations" (cf. Kusch 2009b, 2011a, 2011b, 2011d). Its chapters reconstruct and elaborate the various argumentative sketches of *On Certainty* by relating them to philosophical and scientific positions both of the early twentieth-century and of today. Social-epistemological themes are, unsurprisingly, paramount throughout. For instance, I argue that for Wittgenstein epistemological scepticism is committed to form of individualism, and that he inclines towards certain forms of epistemological relativism. (I have continued to evaluate arguments for and against epistemological relativism also in other places, cf. Kusch 2009a, 2010a, 2010b, 2011c).

3. What is the proper role of social epistemology in relation to other disciplines?

In answering this question I shall focus on mainstream analytical-philosophical forms of social epistemology, or SE narrowly understood. (After all, much of SE broadly construed is already part and parcel of other disciplines: anthropology, social psychology, or sociology.)

SE is obviously inseparable from epistemology itself. For instance, much of recent SE has focused on testimony. Testimony is one of the traditional "sources of knowledge", and closely intertwined with other sources such as perception, reasoning, or memory. Moreover, the same general theories of epistemic justification that have been debated concerning knowledge in general, have also been scrutinized with respect to testimony. Other disputes too—say over Timothy Williamson's "Knowledge First" thesis—have found their way from general epistemology to social epistemology.

But there is also room for dispute here: does SE build upon more traditional epistemology, or does it change its very foundations? Goldman inclines more towards the former option, I favor the latter. My main ground is that knowledge attributions are (usually) attributions of a social status. Or more generally, knowledge is a social rather than a natural kind. And that holds regardless of whether we are speaking of testimony or other sources of knowledge.

Like epistemology in general so also SE (narrowly construed) in particular has many essential links to other fields of philosophy: to the philosophy of mind (because of the concept of belief), to social ontology (because of the importance of groups), to feminism (because of the importance of political questions), or to the philosophy of science. No doubt there may be more such links that lie beyond my horizon.

Given the history of my interest in SE, it will hardly come as a surprise that I favor close interaction between SE and the sociology of (scientific) knowledge

(=SSK): after all, SSK is dedicated to the empirical investigation of social dimensions of knowledge. For such interaction to be possible and fruitful, social epistemologists have to get over certain stereotypes and misconceptions concerning SSK. (Cf. Kusch 2010b.)

One particularly fruitful area of collaboration between epistemologists and social scientists seems to me to be the already mentioned project of a genealogy of epistemic concepts and practices. Early chapters of genealogical narratives must inevitably be “imaginary” “just-so” stories. But other, later, chapters can be “real genealogies”, that is, genealogies based on the historical record. Historical record or not, both *imaginary and real* genealogies have much to learn from anthropology, developmental psychology, and the history and sociology of science. Intriguingly enough, some leading historians of science have formed a new subfield that seems ideally suited to function as a historical counterpart to Craig’s and Williams’ philosophical “genealogy”: the “historical epistemology” of Lorraine Daston, Peter Galison and Hans-Jörg Rheinberger. Historians of science following this programme seek to show that key epistemological concepts—like evidence, objectivity or proof—have a contingent history; that nothing about these concepts is or was inevitable or permanent.

4. What have been the most significant advances in social epistemology?

Some of the more significant advances in my view are the following:

(a) The emergence and development of SSK over the past thirty years. It has given us a new understanding of the social dimension of scientific and technological work on many levels. The work of Barry Barnes, David Bloor, Harry Collins, Donald MacKenzie, Simon Schaffer and Steve Shapin must be mentioned first and foremost here.

(b) The last twenty years have seen a dramatic increase in interest in the epistemology of testimony. Testimony has gone from being a neglected topic to being "where the action is". Many writers have contributed to this "revolution", but it seems fair to say that the studies by Jonathan Adler, Tyler Burge, Tony Coady, Paul Faulkner, Elizabeth and Miranda Fricker, Sandy Goldberg, John Hardwig, Jennifer Lackey, Richard Moran, Matthew Weiner, and Michael Welbourne, have been particularly and rightly influential.

(c) The emergence of peer disagreement as a central topic seems to be another major development within SE of the last few years. Philosophers were always aware of testimony as a phenomenon, even when they paid little attention to it. But the peer disagreement issue seems different. It did not even feature of a list of possible topics. The pioneers here were of course David Christensen, Adam Elga, Richard Feldman, and Thomas Kelly.

(d) Over the last decade many formal epistemologists have also turned their attention to social epistemology. Perhaps the most influential work has been on judgment aggregation (e.g. Christian List, Philip Pettit) and a Bayesian framework for testimony (Luc Bovens, Stephan Hartmann).

(e) I also consider the coming together of political philosophy and epistemology to be a major advance. Of course feminist epistemologists (and many "Continental philosophers") have always insisted that knowledge and social power are (often? always?) intertwined if not inseparable. But the message has only slowly reached the mainstream. The success of Miranda Fricker's work—even amongst mainstream epistemologists—is a sign that things are going in the right direction.

5. What are the most important open problems in social epistemology and what are the prospects for progress?

There are a number of fronts on which I would like to see—and contribute to—more progress.

(a) It has always struck me as odd that so much of twentieth-century epistemology and philosophy of science have—especially in the Anglophone world—lead separate lives. Surely social epistemology and philosophy of science would benefit from a much closer interaction. This would also lead to a closer engagement between SSK and SE. Issues on which these fields could come together include the role of testimony in the sciences, the analysis of controversy and disagreement, the study of forms of epistemic relativism and pluralism, the epistemology of instruments, or the division of cognitive labor. Some such work already exists, but so much more remains to be done.

(b) Another area to which the last sentence applies might be called "collective epistemology": the study of how groups can function as epistemic agents. This area brings together "social ontology" with social epistemology. We have as yet only a poor understanding of the what is involved in trusting groups or in constructing reliable epistemic group agents.

(c) I mentioned the need for political epistemology already in the last section. But I must do so again here since so many of its facets are still to be developed. I am thinking for example of the epistemology of democracy or expertise. This is one of the issues that Goldman identified as important back in the 1990s, and a field where social epistemology meets recent work in social studies of science (cf. the work of Harry Collins and Robert Evans).

(d) The "open problem" that I myself hope to focus on is a historical and philosophical study of epistemic relativism: I want to understand historically-

sociologically how epistemic relativism became—during the nineteenth century—a central topic of philosophical reflection; and I want to reply to the best of the anti-relativistic studies published by distinguished philosophers/epistemologists over the past two decades (I am thinking here especially of the books by Simon Blackburn, Paul Boghossian, Susan Haack, and Thomas Nagel).

Truth be told, I have no idea how good the chances for progress are in any of these areas. But we have got to try.

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