

David Coady

What to Believe Now: Applying Epistemology to Contemporary Issues.

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Epistemology is without a doubt one of the most innovative and productive fields in the contemporary philosophical scene. When one speaks of ‘epistemology’, one has in mind, at the very least most of the time, normative epistemology. The reason is simply that applied epistemology has been much neglected as a subfield of research. David Coady’s book is intended to contribute to filling in this gap by applying epistemological theorizing to a number of real-world issues that are of present concern. In his view, “epistemology would benefit from an applied turn, analogous to the applied turn which ethics has undergone in recent decades” (ix). Although Coady touches on the application of epistemology to questions of social policy, he is primarily concerned with what *individuals* should believe and how they should pursue knowledge.

Besides a preface and a postscript, the book consists of seven chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion. In the Introduction, Coady claims that epistemology, and especially applied epistemology, should engage with any factors that are relevant to what one should believe, and hence not only with epistemic but also with pragmatic considerations. He also rejects the passive conception of belief since, as our ordinary ways of thinking and talking show, we have considerable control not only over our evidence-gathering activities but also over what we believe. Finally, Coady presents a common but key distinction on which he heavily relies in some of the ensuing chapters, namely, that between the value of truth acquisition and the value of error avoidance.

Chapter 2 examines our epistemic reliance on expert testimony. Coady understands expertise “as a matter of being well-informed about a subject, that is, having a significantly greater store of accurate information about it than most people (or most people in one’s community)” (28). In his view, what is central to the notion of expertise is not so much the avoidance of false beliefs as the acquisition of true ones. In the case of disagreement among experts, Coady defends the view that the layperson should “go by the numbers,” i.e., should take the side of the larger group of experts, even if they have not formed their opinions independently of one another. Against this view, one could argue that in the past it has often happened that experts belonging to the minority group held opinions that were later deemed correct, and that the possibility cannot be ruled out that the same will happen in the case of current expert disagreements. Let’s finally note that, with regard to moral expertise, Coady claims that there are no moral experts because “morality is too vast and amorphous a subject for anyone to be *significantly* better informed than *most* people about it” (54).

Chapter 3 defends a version of epistemic democracy according to which democracy tracks the truth better than any other realistic political system. Coady regards votes in democratic elections as “statements about who, all things considered, are the best candidates for certain jobs, where these jobs are defined as being principally (though not exclusively) concerned with the goal of promoting the common good” (72). But votes are also the resources that citizens use to exercise

their collective power. Coady sensibly claims that free and fair elections are not sufficient for democracy, which also requires that voters be reasonably well-informed about the available options and that elections be preceded by public deliberation and debate.

In the next three chapters, Coady defends his most provocative positions. In Chapter 4, he offers a defense of rumor, which he defines as a communication that has spread through a large number of informants (87) and that is unofficial, i.e., not endorsed by an institution with significant power to influence what is believed (96). Coady maintains that “in general the fact that a proposition is rumored to be true is evidence in favor of its being true” (87). The reason is that, as they spread, rumors can become more accurate because those who hear a rumor usually have some prior knowledge of its topic, often know the rumor-monger and hence how reliable he/she is, may receive an estimate of the plausibility of the rumor from the rumor-monger, may decide not to pass on the rumor because they deem it incredible or implausible, and may hear the rumor through more than one channel. Rumor’s bad reputation is to be explained by the bad propaganda from those institutions responsible for the dissemination of official information that want to retain or increase their influence. If officials were typically open and honest, belief in rumors would be less justified, but rumors would also be less common because they are “a response to insufficient or inaccurate official information” (106).

In Chapter 5 it is conspiracy theories that are defended. Coady understands a conspiracy as a secret plan on the part of a group of people that involves active deception and that may be morally suspect or illegal (114), and describes the sneering and condescending contemporary treatment of conspiracy theorists as a “witch hunt” (111). He convincingly argues that the many events that have been the result of conspiracies (e.g., coups, revolutions, terrorist attacks, kidnappings, assassinations) undermine the view that conspiracies are uncommon or have insignificant impact or tend to fail. So long as the label “conspiracy theorist” continues to be used pejoratively and the witch hunt goes on, Coady proposes to popularize the pejorative expression “coincidence theorist” to denote the person who irrationally dismisses evidence for the existence, significance, or success of conspiracies (127).

Chapter 6 defends bloggers and the blogosphere. Coady claims that, even though the blogosphere is undermining journalistic professionalism, it is not epistemically less reliable, but even more so, than conventional media. The speed of error-correction and the number of people involved in that process are much greater in the blogosphere than in the conventional media. It is in addition easy for blog readers to access the evidence supporting a given claim through hyperlinks. Also, appealing to the difference between the values of truth acquisition and falsehood avoidance, Coady points out that the fact that the blogosphere includes many more reports than the conventional media means that it reports not only falsehoods, but also truths (some of considerable value), that are filtered out by the conventional media. Finally, he criticizes the following conception of political journalism that is, according to him, endemic in the conventional media but not in the blogosphere: “political journalists should report what ‘the two sides’ of the political establishment are saying and leave it at that. It is not their role to investigate whether what they say is true” (148). Although I agree with Coady’s criticism of this conception, the claim made by some political journalists that they limit themselves to reporting on the different views on a given issue and let others (commentators, bloggers, readers) judge the truth of those views seems reasonable in the case of highly controversial and complex topics. I am not of course saying that those journalists should not investigate and communicate the facts, but only that, since the interpretation of the facts

is usually disputed, journalists should report even on those opinions they deem false and let people decide. Otherwise, one might wonder whether omitting such opinions would not amount to the same kind of filtering that Coady criticizes Alvin Goldman for recommending: “It is striking ... that the starting point of Goldman’s argument, the epistemic approach to democracy ... is so palpably inconsistent with his elitist conclusion about the public’s inability to sort through unfiltered information on its own. If people without the proper accreditation really cannot be relied on to distinguish truth from falsehood about political matters, why should we suppose that they can be relied on to identify and vote for the right candidate...? (144–5).

The Conclusion briefly addresses some issues not dealt with in the previous chapters: *Wikipedia*, torture, and institutional gullibility and political skepticism. As regards the problem of skepticism as discussed in epistemology, Coady remarks that “applied epistemology should be free to ignore this problem, and assume the correctness of the commonsense view that knowledge and justified belief are possible” (173). By contrast, skepticism “about the possibility of political knowledge is not a mere classroom exercise designed to hone the wits of aspiring philosophers, but a widespread condition with real-world consequences” (173). Coady’s view is a clear example of the phenomenon of insulation, so common in contemporary philosophy, which in the present case is the view that epistemological skepticism has no bearing on our ordinary beliefs and everyday actions. Setting aside whether or not such a discontinuity makes any sense, one may well take a skeptical approach to topics of concern to applied epistemology such as the epistemic reliance on expert testimony, disagreement among experts, and disagreement between epistemic peers. For instance, in the case of real-life peer and expert disputes about not only political but also moral, religious, and economic issues, it could be argued that the application of what in epistemology is known as “Agrippa’s Trilemma” shows that it is far from clear that there are definite and impartial ways of settling them; suspension of judgment might therefore be the attitude rationally required.

The Postscript mainly addresses a question of social policy, namely, government surveillance and privacy, which is of special topical interest particularly due to the Snowden affair. Coady defends the idea of an open society, i.e., a society in which citizens have the right to know what the government is doing but not *vice versa*. The reason for this asymmetry is not, according to him, the fact that people, but not governments, have a right to privacy. Rather, the reason for rejecting extensive and/or unregulated government surveillance is that we cannot assume that the government can be trusted to be well-intentioned, and hence that it will not use its power to gather information about its citizens to persecute its opponents and suppress dissent.

All in all, an intelligent, accessible, and provocative book that will encourage epistemologists to examine the real-world implications of their theories.

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