
Three Reasons for Knowing Other than Knowing Otherwise: A Reply to Alexis Shotwell

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In *Knowing Otherwise*, Alexis Shotwell correctly points out that propositional knowledge (i.e., knowledge in the form of claims that are either true-or false) does not exhaust all possible ways of understanding or meaning-making. Another way that meaning can be constructed or deciphered is through what Shotwell refers to as “implicit knowledge.” The main thrust of Shotwell’s argument is that everyone, from philosophers to social activists, should pay closer attention to this form of knowledge because this implicit form of knowledge enjoys a kind of primacy that propositional knowledge does not. As Shotwell writes:

The implicit is what provides the conditions for things to make sense to us. The implicit provides the framework through which it is possible to form propositions and also to evaluate them as true or false, and is thus instrumentally important. Implicit understanding is also non-instrumentally important. It not only helps provide the conditions for propositional work, it also occupies its own epistemic and political terrain, and in itself is vital to flourishing. That is, living well involves substantial implicit content, perhaps unspeakable but central to the felt experience of manifesting dignity, joy, and contingent freedoms. (x-xi)

While this epistemological insight is not in-itself new, what distinguishes Shotwell’s contribution from that of other similar projects is her insistence on a four-part division of *implicit knowledge*. According to Shotwell, *implicit knowledge* is divided into the following four categories: skill-based (i.e., practical knowledge), habitus (i.e., somatic or bodily knowing), potentially propositional (i.e., knowledge that could be, but is not yet in propositional form), and

affect (i.e., emotional knowledge). Respecting and understanding this division of implicit knowledge is important, Shotwell writes, because:

Even theorists who attend to one or the other of these forms of knowledge collapse many forms of implicit understanding into the sort they examine. Doing this preserves a binary relationship between propositional knowledge (knowledge proper, we might say) and everything else—which is then rendered extra-epistemic. (xiii)

With this in mind, the aim of Shotwell's book is twofold. In the first part of the book, Shotwell looks to delineate the differences, and also show the connections, between these four categories of implicit knowing. In the second part, Shotwell goes on to show how these forms of knowledge are crucial to both personal and political transformation, specifically looking at issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality (see ix).

Here I would like to point out yet another virtue of this book. Traditionally, within the philosophy of race literature, the issue of epistemology is has been relegated to a sort of third-class status. So, for example, it is very common for the *normative* question (e.g., what ought we to do about racism or about racial discourse?) to take center stage and for the *ontological* question (e.g., is race real and if so how?) to come in a close second. In these cases, the question of *epistemology* is reduced either to conceptual analysis (e.g., what are we attempting to denote when we deploy the term "race"?) or to concerns about methodology (e.g., how should we come to our understanding of the concept of "race"?). (see Glasgow 1-19). In her book, Shotwell makes the epistemological concern the central focus and in so doing shows how addressing epistemological concerns in a more expansive sense can provide us with alternative ways to approach and address *normative* and *ontological* questions about race.

While reading through this book I found myself constantly nodding my head in agreement with much of what Shotwell was writing. I appreciated both the political activist

perspective and also the effort made by the author to clarify, distinguish, and contrast many important concepts such as shame and guilt, or empathy and solidarity. Maybe most impressive of all was Shotwell's ability to take such a wide array of authors (most of which I have always admired) and place them into one coherent conversation. Here I have in mind thinkers such as Sandra Lee Bartky, Eli Clare, Antonio Gramsci, Audre Lorde, Herbert Marcuse, and many more. Given that I am largely sympathetic to the overall project of this book and I believe that it adds a nuanced approach to philosophy of race, my critique will be of the more general variety. What I am going to try to do is present what I took to be one of, if not the principle, political claims of Shotwell's book and raise three possible and interrelated objections to this claim. The first will be in the area of traditional epistemology, and the other two will deal with the descriptive and normative aspects of Shotwell's claim.

First let me state what I took to be the principle, if not at least the most provocative, claim in Shotwell's book (and this is an interpretation of what I take the claim to be and by no means a direct quote): *Propositional knowledge, by itself, is insufficient to generate social transformation. The type of knowledge necessary for enacting social transformation is implicit knowledge. Furthermore, traditional epistemology has either over-looked or not properly appreciated the role of implicit knowledge in social transformation, while at the same time giving propositional knowledge an undue primacy in this regard.*

If this is in fact one of the central claims of the book, then I wish to raise three possible objections to the claim. First, I think that Shotwell is right. Traditional epistemologists have historically either downplayed or, at the very least, have been suspicious about what we are here referring to as *implicit knowledge*. That said, it could be argued that there are some very good historical reasons for why traditional epistemologists might hold such an attitude, even if their

attitude turns out to be mistaken, and I am curious as to how Shotwell might go about allaying these fears.

As an example, let us take the work of Sir Francis Bacon. Bacon's work in epistemology arguably ushered in the modern period and the thrust of this work can be summarized in the famous saying attributed to him: knowledge is power. Bacon's claim to fame is that he initiated a revolutionary shift in epistemology by advocating a method of induction, now known as the scientific method, which he contrasted with deductive methods of reasoning (e.g., methods used by medieval Catholic philosophers to try and prove the existence of God). Bacon's revolutionary new method emphasized a shift in perspective, a move away from a passive observer to an active inquirer. This shift of perspective essentially called into question the primacy that dogmatic and unchallenged beliefs (e.g., the beliefs of the Medieval Catholic Church) held in epistemology.

In defending this new epistemological method, Bacon conceded that there were certain impediments to this method (and in fact to any other method of obtaining knowledge) that would always be with us. Bacon referred to these impediments as the idols of the tribe (i.e. culture), cave (i.e. individual prejudice), marketplace (i.e. language), and theatre (i.e. dogma). According to Bacon, these idols would always be in the background and could not always be articulated, but he warned that when pursuing inquires of knowledge we should remain vigilant against these idols and not let them distort our thinking (see Bacon).

While there are many things about Bacon's philosophy that I disagree with (and some things which I find outright repulsive), this warning against the idols of knowledge is something to which I have always been sympathetic. Returning to the matter at hand, one might worry that Shotwell has not given us sufficient reason for doubting that her account of *implicit knowledge* might not in the end turn out to be just another form of these idols—something that is ineffable,

but that nonetheless manages to prejudice our thinking and that we should be on guard against. If this is so, then maybe it is not so much that *implicit knowledge* has been over-looked by traditional epistemologists, as it is that traditional epistemologists, with some justification, have viewed appeals to *implicit knowledge* with suspicion—as being anti-progressive. If this is true, then it is not merely sufficient to show that people make use of *implicit knowledge* when engaging in epistemological concerns, but it will also be necessary to provide reasons as to why an appeal to *implicit knowledge* is a valid, and not a reactionary, epistemological move.

A second objection could be raised against the claim that propositional knowledge, by itself, is insufficient to generate social transformation, and that, instead, what is required for social transformation is a change in *implicit knowledge*. In defending this claim Shotwell notes that *implicit knowledge* largely determines our everyday worldly interactions, and therefore it would seem logical that social transformation must begin with a change in *implicit knowledge*.¹ Furthermore, Shotwell claims that *implicit knowledge* is largely immune to propositional arguments, and therefore we need to find other ways of affecting *implicit knowledge* such as deploying shame and sympathy.

Shotwell goes on to provide the reader with a wealth of examples of social transformation, ranging from STAR House to FIERCE and many more socially transformative movements and projects, which are said to follow this pattern: changes in *implicit knowledge* precede social transformation. Here, however, one could object that Shotwell might be presenting us with an inverted account of how social transformation actually transpires. In other words, the critique could be that Shotwell is providing us with an incorrect *descriptive* account. The critique is that instead of serving as a catalyst for social transformation, so instead of coming

prior, changes in *implicit knowledge* are actually a result of, or follow from, social transformations.

We can take the following as an example. In a PBS documentary entitled *MLK: A Call to Conscience*, Cornel West claims that when Martin Luther King was assassinated there were polls showing that 72% of all Americans and more than 50% of the Black community had an unfavorable view of Martin Luther King. West stresses this fact because he claims that today, living in a post-civil rights world, we tend to think that the values Martin Luther King stood for have always been a matter of common sense, a sort of *implicit knowledge* if you will, but in fact they were not. It could be argued that the reason we all now tend to forget just how unpopular Martin Luther King was at the time of his death is the same reason we all believe that given the opportunity we all would have been marching with Martin Luther King: our *implicit knowledge* has been changed as a result of the Civil Rights Movement.

In short, the point is that empirical evidence (i.e., the massive disapproval ratings of Martin Luther King on the day he died versus the massive approval ratings of him today) seems to suggest that social transformations are actually the catalyst for changes in *implicit knowledge*, and not the other way around. This is a potential problem for Shotwell's account because if this is true, then it would be the case that propositional knowledge is just as important, if not maybe more so, to effect social transformation as is *implicit knowledge*. In short, the objection here is that the real relationship between epistemology and social transformation is inverted in Shotwell's account. The real relationship is something closer to the following: propositional arguments (e.g., the arguments made in the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision) first lead to social transformation, which then have an impact on *implicit knowledge*.

This brings us to the third and final objection. Assuming for the moment that Shotwell's account is correct—that *implicit knowledge* really does ground our propositional knowledge and that it has served as the catalyst for social transformation—this account by itself is not sufficient to explain why it *ought* to be the case. In other words, regardless of how social transformations have actually transpired in the past, we might still want to ask whether social transformations preceded by changes in *implicit knowledge* are really the types of transformations we ought to favour. To better understand the force of this objection, let us first look at how things are currently setup.

Generally speaking, those who currently suffer the brunt of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination have legitimate complaints and demands for social justice. According to Shotwell's account, the problem here is that in order for these complaints and demands to get a hearing, they need to be articulated in a propositional form and many of these complaints and demands are largely ineffable. In other words, they cannot be articulated in a propositional format and therefore what is needed in order to obtain social justice is for *implicit knowledge* to be given a hearing and not be overruled by propositional knowledge.

Here is where the critique comes in. The problem, one might say, is not in the ineffability of these complaints and demands, but in the explanations and justifications offered by the oppressors (those who benefit or enjoy the privileges, mostly unearned, from said oppression). The problem is that the privileged are not held to the same standard as those without privilege. Historically speaking, the oppressed have had no problem providing well-articulated complaints and demands of their conditions—and in propositional form to boot! Yet these complaints and demands have been met largely with silence or not taken very seriously.

The question is what to do about this and the answer seems simple enough: hold everyone to the same standard. There are really two ways to accomplish this. The first is to validate the *implicit knowledge* of the oppressed in the same way that the *implicit knowledge* of privileged has been validated. This I take to be the option Shotwell favours. The alternative is not that we disregard implicit ways of knowing, but that none of these ways of knowing should be given priority over propositional forms, at least in matters of social justice. The argument here is not that too much of what counts as knowledge has been restricted to the propositional form, but that not enough has. Simply put, the objection is that giving priority to *implicit knowledge* could be counter-productive for liberatory aims and in fact has had dangerous consequences. For example, one could argue that it was the Bush administration's appeal to *implicit knowledge*, as opposed to propositional arguments, that led to the current War on Terror. Instead, maybe things would have turned out differently had priority in this case been given to propositional ways of knowing. Just to reiterate this last point, the oppressed have been very good at articulating their demands, the problem seems to be that their demands are foiled, not because there is something inherently oppressive about propositional knowledge, but because the *implicit knowledge* of the ruling class is given priority over propositional ways of knowing.

Notes

¹ Here, Shotwell makes excellent use of Susan Babbitt's *Impossible Dreams* as an example.

Works Cited

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