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Asking for Reasons as a Weapon: Epistemic Justification and the Loss of Knowledge

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Biography

Ian Werkheiser is a doctoral student in the Department of Philosophy at Michigan State University, with specializations in both Environmental Philosophy & Ethics and Animal Studies. His research areas include environmental philosophy, social and political philosophy, and epistemology (particularly social epistemology). His dissertation will focus on the capabilities approach and food sovereignty. It will argue that community epistemic capacity is a necessary requirement of meaningful political participation, particularly in issues around food and environmental justice. Ian is currently involved in several collaborative projects. He works with Dr. Paul Thompson on the Sustainable Michigan Endowed Project, a foundation dedicated to increasing research into sustainability in the state of Michigan. Over the summer he was a co-PI on an NSF-supported Long-Term Ecological Research project, "Recognizing Value Pluralism among Ecosystem Services Experts and Public Stakeholders." This year he is co-organizing the second annual Workshop on Food Justice at MSU, a workshop which brings together academics and activists.

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Abstract

In this paper, I will look at what role being able to provide justification plays in several prominent conceptions of epistemology, and argue that taking the ability to provide reasons as necessary for knowledge leads to a biasing toward false negatives. However, I will also argue that asking for reasons is a common practice among the general public, and one that is endorsed by “folk epistemology.” I will then discuss the fact that this asking for reasons is done neither constantly nor arbitrarily, but rather in a systematic way that produces ignorance by oppressing some knowledge and some knowers, in particular those from already marginalized groups. After looking at the implications of all this, I will ultimately argue that we must be very careful when we ask for reasons, and acknowledge it as the powerful weapon it is.

Keywords

Ignorance, Epistemic Violence, Epistemic Justice, Epistemic Silencing, Justification, Reason-giving, Contextualism, Social Epistemology, Externalism

I. Introduction

Asking people “How do you know that?” is a common response to hearing new information, and in fact, might be seen as a good epistemic habit before accepting what someone has to say. In this paper, however, I argue that this question is more problematic than it seems. Since, on the externalist view, having good reasons for belief is not a requirement for knowledge, and since even on many internalist views having good reasons *at the moment* is not a requirement for knowledge, demanding these reasons can illegitimately lead to a failure of knowledge uptake, and in extreme cases can get the original speaker to abandon knowledge she would otherwise have had. Given that there is reason to believe that this question is systematically asked more often of ideas that challenge the *status quo* and asked of people who come from marginalized groups, this asking for reasons is not only epistemically problematic, but is an example of epistemic injustice (Fricker 2007) and epistemic violence (Dotson 2011). In this way, this paper can be seen as contributing to the growing discourse on the production and maintenance of

ignorance (e.g., Tuana & Sullivan 2006; Alcoff 2007), in particular the “invested ignorance” that maintains unjust social relations (Townley 2011).

In this paper, I will look at what role being able to provide justification plays in several prominent conceptions of epistemology, and argue it is a form of over-determination of knowledge, but one which is often not recognized as such in ordinary discourse. I will then show how taking this over-determination as necessary for knowledge leads to a biasing toward false negatives, and that this is done neither constantly nor arbitrarily, but rather in a systematic way that oppresses some knowledge and some knowers. After looking at the implications of this, I will ultimately argue that we must be very careful when we use the weapon of asking for reasons.

II. Justification

There are many definitions of justification in epistemology, so let me begin by establishing the kind of justification I will be using here. For the purposes of this paper, I do not need too rigorous a definition of justification, but it cannot be merely any X that is added to true belief to make it knowledge. Rather, I am talking about the kinds of justification that might be called “good reasons” for our beliefs, such as Laurence Bonjour’s (1978) conception of justification in his (1978) article. He says there that “Cognitive doings are epistemically justified, on this conception, only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal [truth] – which means roughly that one accepts all and only beliefs which one has good reason to think are true” (113).¹ For those who subscribe to something like access internalism in their epistemology, meaning that we must have cognitive awareness of these reasons, it is clear what role justification (in this sense) plays: without good reasons for our beliefs, we would not have knowledge. I will use “justification” and “reasons” interchangeably in this paper.

In some strict versions of internalism, such as Bonjour’s, it is necessary to be able to produce these reasons on demand: “A person for whom a belief is inferentially justified need not have explicitly rehearsed the justificatory argument in question to others or even to himself. It is enough that the inference be available to him if the belief is called into question by others or by himself . . . and that the availability of the inference be, in the final analysis, his reason for holding the belief” (110). Other versions of internalism, which we might call lax internalism, do not require that one always be able to provide reasons at any moment in which one has knowledge. Instead they require only that, on

1. All page numbers for this article are taken from its occurrence in Sosa et al. (2008) *Epistemology: an Anthology*.

reflection (perhaps quite involved reflection), a subject will come to know her reasons for her belief, and thus be able to provide them. As Robert Audi says in his (2001) article, “The idea is largely that a person with a justified belief *has* a justification for it, in the sense of grounds one can adduce in giving a justification in an appropriate context, such as one in which a puzzled friend asks why one believes the proposition in question. *Giving* a justification (in the relevant sense) requires having the justifier(s) in consciousness, but being *able* to give it by citing the relevant grounds does not. . . . Grounds are a kind of resource: we can genuinely possess resources without having them in our hands at the time” (23).

If one is an externalist, however, what this kind of justification is “for” is not as clear. In externalism, reasons are not necessary for knowledge as long as people are using a reliable process to form belief, or there is a law-like relationship between their beliefs and the truth, or some other externalist conception of warrant. Nevertheless, it is the case that people often can and do provide reasons for how and why they know something (whether or not these are their actual reasons; something we will discuss in section IV), and asking for these reasons is something that non-philosophers at least sometimes do. In the next section, we will look at two representative examples of externalist accounts that offer an opinion on internally having reasons.

Ila. Reasons as Epistemically Uninteresting Phenomena

The first approach is to acknowledge that giving reasons is a thing that humans do, perhaps even something that is constitutive of our second nature as socialized animals (e.g., McDowell 1995). However, though it is a common human practice, in this account it is not one which is epistemically interesting, or one that epistemologists ought to concern themselves with. A good example of this is John Greco’s account. As Greco says in his (2005) on the purpose of epistemic evaluation,

We care about whether Mary is, in general, a responsible and reliable cognitive agent. We also care about whether, in this instance, Mary arrived at her belief in a reliable and responsible way. We also care, of course, about whether Mary’s belief is true. These are important considerations about Mary and about her belief – considerations that are important from the point of view of information-using, information-sharing beings such as ourselves. (267)

For Greco, these are all externalist questions of warrant, and not internalist questions of justification, because the subject will often not have access to these epistemic considerations.

As for justification, on the other hand, he asks “Why should we care that Mary is no more blameworthy for her belief at the moment than she was the moment before?” (267). Further, “Why would we be interested to know whether [a belief] *b* is licensed by norms of evidence that *S* accepts? Why would this be an important evaluation to make?” (268, emphasis in the original). Greco is not claiming that these are not things that people try to determine in a conversation, but only that from an epistemic point of view (one interested in truth conducivity) internal justification is not interesting (260).

IIb. Reasons Being Favorable to Truth

A relatively recent treatment of justification in a framework that also contains external considerations is Alston’s, in which he rejects the term “justification” in favor of “epistemic desiderata.” Nevertheless, his third category of desiderata maps on fairly well to what we have been calling “justification:”

6. *S* has some high-grade cognitive access to the evidence, and so on, for [a belief] *B*.
7. *S* has higher-level knowledge, or well-grounded belief, that *B* has a certain positive epistemic status and/or that such-and-such is responsible for that.
8. *S* can carry out a successful defense of the probability of truth for *B*.
(Alston 2005, 43)

For Alston, these desiderata are not directly truth-conducive, but unlike for Greco they are useful (or “interesting”) epistemically, because:

They contribute to *S*’s being in a position to arrange things in a way that is favorable to acquiring truth rather than false beliefs. . . . The basic point is that the more we know, or are able to know, about the epistemic status of various beliefs or kinds of beliefs, the better position we are in to encourage true beliefs and discourage false beliefs. . . . [These desiderata promote] the ability to distinguish between beliefs that are likely to be true and those that are not and to encourage the development of those that satisfy the former description. (44)

Thus, what we have been calling justification is on Alston's account neither necessary nor sufficient, but is a nice over-determiner for a true belief, in that it makes that belief more likely to be true and lets us be surer of it. For Alston, justification is also nice for someone to have often, because it encourages our ability to develop true beliefs.

Thus, in internalism, justification is always good and will ideally always be present, though on the lax account it does not always need to be immediately accessible, while in the dominant treatments of justification within externalism,² justification can be seen as either helpful or superfluous. In none of the accounts we have looked at has providing or asking for reasons been seen as dangerous for knowledge. I will argue in the next section, however, that if justification is taken to be important or even necessary for knowledge, then it loses this benign character.

III. Asking For Reasons

As we saw in the previous section, justification may have a role to play in an external account of knowledge, or at the least can just be seen as a non-epistemic human activity, but it is neither necessary nor sufficient for knowledge. In internalist accounts, on the other hand, it is the *sine qua non* for turning true beliefs into knowledge, though not all accounts require it to be immediately available in all instances. When we look at how requiring justification plays out over the set of a person's total true beliefs, then, we see that for any account other than strict internalism, there will inevitably be fewer things that we can provide reasons for at the moment than the set of what we know. This means at least that we will miss instances of knowledge if we only count those beliefs that we can currently justify.

IIIa. False Negatives

Consider the following cases:

1. Some of our beliefs were made by reliable processes, but we no longer remember the processes, and so cannot provide good reasons to ourselves or others for these beliefs. An example of this might be someone who learned how to speak a language in school, and so used to know the explicit rules for conjugating into

2. Perhaps not surprisingly, the account that is more sympathetic to justification, Alston's, is billed as a compromise between externalism and internalism. If Greco is right and internalism believes that all aspects of knowledge other than truth are internal, and externalism believes that at least some elements are not, Alston's account would definitely be an externalist one. Whether it is an externalist account or an account with external elements is not relevant to our discussion here, however.

a particular tense, but now simply knows the correct conjugation for a particular word, but when they try to teach the language to others they realize that they cannot recall the rule that generates the conjugation.

2. Some of our beliefs are based on very reliable processes (such as perception), but we have no conscious access to the cues we are using and so again cannot provide good reasons. An example of this phenomenon would be facial recognition, a task we are very adept at performing, but one which we often cannot describe. Most of us at least are at a loss to explain how we recognize our mother from among similar-looking people.
3. Some of our beliefs are based on very reliable processes, but we do not have conscious access to what these processes are or how they work and so cannot say if they are reliable. We are consciously aware of the output of these processes, but cannot give reasons as to how we came to have them. An example of this might be the intuitions that come from experience, for example believing (correctly) that someone is being dishonest without being able to explain why.
4. Finally, some of our beliefs might be non-linguistic, and formed through (reliable) non-linguistic processes. As such we are not able to linguistically give any reasons for the belief, or even to adequately explain the belief. A good example of this might be a baseball player who knows where to position the bat in order to hit a ball, and can even show you how to do it (given enough time for embodied practice), but cannot explain exactly how she knows it, or what exactly she is doing.

In most externalist accounts, all of these would be counted as knowledge since they are based on reliable processes, and giving justification is not required. What about internalist accounts? Here the question is a bit more murky. 1 would definitely count as knowledge for what I have been calling lax internalism, if the speaker were able over time to reconstruct the rule. 2 counts as knowledge in many versions of internalism, because though we cannot explain all of the features we use to make visual judgments (or at least not without extensive research into our cognition), we can at least say that we are using perception and that the image appears “motherly” to us. 3 and 4 may well not count as knowledge for many versions of internalism, depending on how much awareness a given version required, and how extensively the person is allowed to study themselves and still have it count as “internal” access. Nevertheless, it is at least possible for some accounts of internalism that at least some of these examples count as knowledge. Leaving aside professional epistemology, it seems intuitive that at least some of the above examples or analogues of them would usually be called knowledge.

If one demands that the subject provide reasons, however, then presumably none of the above would count as knowledge. This would depend on how deep the requirement for reasons went, because the person in each case could give some sort of first-level explanation, such as “I figured it out a long time ago” in 1, or “I think he’s lying based on my years of experience talking to people” for 3. Nevertheless, if a questioner persisted in demanding more complete reasons from a semi-skeptical position, all four examples would fail fairly quickly.

Thus, asking for reasons as a test for knowledge biases us toward false negatives—many things that are in actual fact knowledge are not counted as such. This is particularly true if one subscribes to an externalist account, but even lax internalists such as Audi who do not require people always being able to immediately provide reasons will lose some things they would like to call knowledge.

If neither version of epistemology absolutely requires providing reasons, at least on demand, why worry about it? The answer is that this test of asking for reasons is very common in our society. Philosophical epistemology (other than strict internalism) may not require being able to give reasons for one’s beliefs in a given moment, but what we might call “folk epistemology”—the way we unreflectively think about knowledge in our culture—does. Asking people for reasons is seen as a very good idea in situations with high stakes, or when the person’s claim is very surprising, or when the person does not seem entirely trustworthy.

Or rather, we *sometimes* act as if we needed reasons to have knowledge. On the one hand, we often say that we know things which we cannot justify, as in the examples 1 through 4 above. On the other hand, asking how we know something, or why we think something, is a common occurrence in normal conversation, at least in some situations. Thus at times we seem to endorse a need for being able to give reasons, while, at other times, we clearly find it unnecessary. It is also clear that one of these is viewed by most people as a higher standard than the other, namely the limited class of justifiable beliefs. While we often say that we know something without being able to give reasons for it, we usually do not explicitly state that we have no reasons; to do so feels like admitting that we do not “really” know it at all, but merely believe it. Once the conversation brings up the need for reasons, our standard for knowledge changes. When this fact is combined with the “false negatives” idea above, the result is that *we can lose knowledge by having to provide our reasons for it*.

If this begins to sound like contextualism, that is because contextualists have given a good model for how standards of knowledge can change in different contexts. In the next section we will look at two prominent models of contextualism, and we will see

that while they do a good job of describing the dual intuitions we have about needing reasons, they overestimate our ability to switch back from a context which requires giving reasons to one that does not. As a result, they must be modified to deal with the force doubt can have.

IIIb. Contextualism

IIIb1. DeRose's Account

A good example of contextualism can be found in DeRose's (1995), in which he presents a contextualist solution to skepticism. He argues that

When it is asserted that some subject *S* knows (or does not know) some proposition *p*, the standards of knowledge (the standards for how good an epistemic position one must be in to count as knowing) tend to be raised, if need be, to such a level as to require *S*'s belief in that particular *p* to be sensitive for it to count as knowledge. (36)

When skeptics bring up their challenges, the standards of knowledge are raised infinitely high because the skeptical hypotheses are chosen so as to never be sensitive. Thus when we entertain these hypotheses, nothing can count as knowledge (36). This is seen as a useful account because it explains the intuitive appeal of the skeptical challenge, without threatening the truth of our ordinary claims, which are usually stated in contexts of lower standards for knowledge, for, as DeRose says, "the fact that the skeptic can install very high standards that we don't live up to has no tendency to show that we don't satisfy the more relaxed standards that are in place in more ordinary circumstances and debates" (37).

IIIb2. Lewis's Account

Like DeRose, David Lewis also attempts to address skepticism by presenting a contextualist rule for when we can ascribe knowledge, in his (1996) article. His definition of knowledge ascription is that "Subject *S* knows proposition *p* iff *p* holds in every possibility left uneliminated by *S*'s evidence; equivalently, iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-" (551). He later adds a clause *sotto voce* which he contends is always included in idiomatic (non-logical) uses of the word "every": "*S* knows that *p* iff *S*'s evidence eliminates every possibility in which not-*p*—Psst!—except for those possibilities that we are properly ignoring" (554). His response to the skeptical challenge lies in the way he cashes out "properly ignoring."

After giving many rules for when we are “properly” allowed to ignore possibilities, he includes a rule for when we *cannot* ignore a possibility, which he calls the “*Rule of Attention*” (559). In this rule, whatever possibilities are in our mind cannot be properly ignored (559). Lewis calls this “More a triviality than a rule” (559), but actually this “triviality” is his response to skepticism. This rule shows that when a skeptic presents scenarios like being a brain in a vat (which we would otherwise have ignored following one or more of his previous six rules), we can no longer ignore them, and so do not know things we did know before these possibilities were raised to our attention (559–560). As with DeRose’s account, Lewis’s version of contextualism allows him to explain the force of skeptical hypotheses without giving everything away to skepticism. We can still say that we know many everyday things, just not in a conversation that includes the possibility of the skeptical scenarios.

IIIb3. Contextualism and Asking for Reasons

Both of these accounts can be applied to the topic of this essay, though we will need to modify them slightly. When people ask for reasons, they are not precisely asserting that there is some p that the subject does or does not know, nor that there are possibilities that one was not previously considering in which the p is false. Nevertheless, they are still upping the stakes and changing what the requirements are for knowledge in the context of the conversation.

Recall that we know many things that we cannot (at least at the moment) explain with good reasons, but we also (in our folk epistemology) agree that we should be able to provide justification for any knowledge we actually have. Yet, even that strict version of folk epistemology does not require that we always *entertain* those reasons; that would be an impossibly high standard. So as long as our attention is not drawn to the question of whether we can provide good reasons for our knowledge, we still hold it. Once the question is asked, however, we evaluate our knowledge, and if we find that we cannot provide these reasons, then we no longer know it.

IIIb4. Switching Contexts

This kind of loss of knowledge is only a temporary problem in most versions of contextualism, but in actual conditions, changing back from a context of high epistemic standards to one with lower epistemic standards is not so easy.

For DeRose, “As soon as we find ourselves in more ordinary conversational contexts, it will not only be true for us to claim to know these very O ’s [typical knowledge claims such as “I have hands”] that the skeptic now denies we know, but it will also be wrong for

us to deny that we know these things" (5). Thus, we can move back and forth between standards of knowledge easily depending on our conversational context. For Lewis, it is slightly harder to change our context, because it is a possibility we are considering in our mind rather than just a conversation we're having. So, in order to properly ignore the possibility we must stop attending to it. One might think this would be difficult, as in the classically impossible order to not think of pink elephants, but Lewis does not seem to appreciate the difficulty. As he says, the possibility can be forgotten because if we pretend that we are ignoring it, we eventually will. He suggests that an aberrant possibility can be forgotten if we "Go off and play backgammon" (560).

It is perhaps not surprising that these responses would underplay the difficulty in switching back to a more credulous context, because they are trying to respond to the skeptical challenge to everyday knowledge, and we do, in fact, tend to be able to forget that we might be a brain in a vat and therefore know *nothing* almost immediately after our epistemological conversation (if we even did truly believe it in the moment rather than just pretending to entertain it). It is less easy to regain lost knowledge when there is a specific challenge to one piece of our knowledge.

Consider the following scenario: your baby is sick, but you know (from reliable processes) that she just has a mild cold and will be fine. When it is pointed out that many quite serious diseases look like the common cold at first, and in this context you are asked what reasons you have to justify your belief that it is merely a common cold, you must admit that (in this new context) you do *not* know that she is only mildly sick. Does this context switch back immediately after a game of Backgammon? It depends. Many factors go into how salient the possibility remains for you, such as your own psychology, the vividness with which the other diseases were described to you, the stakes of the situation (how serious were these other diseases represented to be? How quickly do they take a turn for the worse?), the authority of the person who spoke to you (even though the conversation is the same, we would probably remember this conversation more saliently if it had been with a doctor than with an ever-worried relative), how we are socialized to react to illness, and so on. Switching between contexts is a much more complicated process than contextualist accounts tend to take it to be, and it is inextricably social. (Though we are only discussing the difficulties in switching back to a more credulous context, switching to a doubtful context in the first place also has many complicated social elements such as our trust of the person raising the new possibility and so on.)

In our example of asking for reasons, this is particularly true. Recall that the dominant culture endorses the idea that we ought to be able to provide reasons for our beliefs in order to call them knowledge. Once we are made aware that we cannot provide reasons

in a given case, we may well think that we do not know something we previously would have said we did. Once that conversation is over however, we continue to be unaware of our reasons. If our conviction is particularly strong, we may keep searching about for reasons until we find ones good enough to satisfy us, or we may manage to forget that we do not have good reasons for something through inattention. However, it is at least equally possible that once we realize that we cannot provide reasons for our belief we will no longer believe it, and thus it will not be knowledge for internalists or externalists, despite it being true and our having a reliable process for believing it at our disposal.

Asking for reasons for knowledge can draw our attention to our lack of conscious justification, and cause us to no longer know a given proposition. Though similar to typical versions of contextualism, this loss is not just dependent on conversational context; it is sometimes impossible to regain this knowledge once lost. As we will see in the next section, asking for reasons, trying to answer, and trying to switch back to our naïve state are all inextricably social issues in our epistemology.

IV. Implications

There are many implications and complications not discussed in the above short treatment of asking for reasons. The first is that there is some knowledge which we will not abandon even if we are not able to provide reasons for how we come to know it. What knowledge we are recalcitrant about, and in what circumstances, is just as complicated as the issue of when we are able or unable to switch back to a credulous state, but it might be thought that this recalcitrance gives some comfort to those worried about losing knowledge from questions; if the subject has enough conviction, she will not lose her belief just by engaging in the conversation.

Unfortunately, however, the second implication is that even if the person maintains her knowledge despite not being able to provide reasons, asking her to provide them still has other effects. One of these is that her inability to provide reasons makes it very unlikely that what she's saying will be granted credence by other people that hear the exchange (because the dominant culture accepts asking for reasons as a good test of whether someone has knowledge), resulting in the failure of knowledge uptake by the audience. The other likely effect is that maintaining her belief in the face of being publicly unable to provide reasons will have some mental cost. She will know that she sounds like she is overly credulous, or stupid, or some similarly negative social label, and will also be aware that her hearers are unlikely to now believe what she says. She will also have to

battle her own internal doubts, which even if defeated may well weaken her resolve on an issue that she does, in fact, know.

Relatedly, a third implication is that asking for reasons privileges people who are able to come up with reasons over people who actually have a lot of knowledge. Some people will be able to provide reasons and thus maintain knowledge when others in the same situation would lose knowledge; this is not because of epistemic differences but differences in rhetorical ability. It is perhaps no great revelation to say that people who are able to sound convincing are more likely to have what they say taken up by an audience, and that people who are good at rationalizing things are more likely to be able to convince themselves of things as well. What is perhaps less often considered is that when we ask for someone's reasons, people who are better able to produce convincing-sounding reasons *whether or not they are the actual causes of their belief* will be able to maintain their knowledge, while people who are less able to do this will lose their knowledge. While not quite a Gettier case, it does seem to introduce an unwelcome element, in this case rhetorical skill rather than luck, to having knowledge.

Perhaps the most important implication comes from the fact that we neither ask for reasons every time we hear some new information, nor do we do it arbitrarily. Rather, we tend to ask someone how they know something when what we hear is surprising, or when we do not fully trust the speaker or her knowledge. It is perhaps worrisome that a tendency to ask for reasons for surprising information means that we often cause the speaker to lose knowledge if it does not conform to our worldview, but much more problematic is the tendency to demand reasons from people whom we do not trust. This means that people who are from marginalized groups in our society and who are therefore not trusted to know things will be epistemically oppressed by the increased demand to provide reasons, and their knowledge will in fact have less uptake in the community.

Even worse, if being asked to provide reasons can cause someone to lose the knowledge she previously held, and people from untrusted marginalized groups are asked to give reasons more often, it is possible that the epistemic oppression can extend to forcing that group to have less knowledge than the dominant group.³ This increased questioning is made even worse when we realize that the rhetorical skill discussed

3. Or at any rate this is one possible outcome. There are others. To pick just one example of an alternative, members of the epistemically oppressed group may put more faith in their ability to know things without having to have good reasons for their knowledge—a valuing of “intuition” can be a useful adaptive strategy to epistemic oppression.

earlier that allows one to better maintain and communicate knowledge is not just an individual idiosyncrasy but at least partly the result of socialization, and so people from dominant groups in society not only are questioned less but are better able to defend their knowledge, while people from epistemically oppressed, marginalized groups are both challenged more often and given fewer resources to protect and communicate their knowledge.

How might all this play out? Imagine a parent of a child with some special needs attempting to advocate what she thinks is best for her child to the child's school. If she is constantly doubted and asked to explain how she knows something she testifies to, particularly if the questioner pushes to require deep levels of justification ("How do you know X?" "Because Y." "And how do you know Y?" and so on), this can damage her ability to testify to others and may end up making her doubt herself as well. This is particularly true if she has been socialized to not be as good at that kind of verbal sparring as her interlocutor. All this would make her ability to succeed in this context even more impressive than it already would have been. Demanding she provide reasons for her beliefs is not only an epistemically worrying practice, but a justice issue as well.

V. What is to be Done?

Looking at the implications in section IV, one might wonder what we are supposed to do with this information. Surely we are not supposed to never ask anyone for their reasons again? This seems humanly impossible. Certainly internalists would say it is. As Bonjour says, "The most natural way to justify a belief is by producing a justificatory argument" (1978, 110). Yet, externalists too would be unwilling to give up on asking for reasons altogether. As John Greco says,

It has often been noted that knowledge is a social product with a practical value. We are social, highly interdependent, information-using, information-sharing beings. As such, it is essential to our form of life that we are able to identify good information and good sources of information. In this context, it is not surprising that we make evaluations concerning how beliefs are formed, their history in relation to other beliefs, why they are believed, etc. In other words, it is not surprising that we make evaluations concerning whether beliefs are reliably and responsibly formed. (2005, 266–267)

Presumably one of the best ways we have to make these evaluations is to ask people how they know something. How then to reconcile this with the damage that asking

for reasons can do? Unfortunately, I am unable to offer a perfect solution; it may be the case that some of the very things that make our body of knowledge robust are the *same things* that perpetuate epistemic violence and oppression. That being said, this potentially inevitable damage is no reason not to think about ways to avoid or at least minimize it.

One thing suggested by our discussion so far is that we should be very careful about asking for reasons if we want to avoid eliminating knowledge. Part of being careful means not biasing this demand for justifications toward people from marginalized and epistemically oppressed groups. Making a conscious effort to listen to under-heard voices is at least a good step. Another part of being careful pertains to how we ask for reasons. What strategy is best depends in part on whether one is an internalist or an externalist: lax internalists who truly believe that we ought to be able to have access to our justifications upon sufficient examination should at least make sure that the question does not demand reasons be given immediately or under other kinds of pressure. Externalists who believe that knowledge requires warrant rather than justification should be more careful still; they should ask questions that draw out reliable processes rather than insist on internal access. For an externalist, asking "Have you been right about this kind of thing before?" might be more useful than "How could you possibly know that?". Whether an internalist or an externalist however, another part of being careful is trying to hear the subject's reasons as charitably as possible to try to compensate for the rhetorical advantage some people have over others. As Dotson says in her (2011) article, "*We all need an audience willing and capable of hearing us.*" (239, emphasis in the original)

In the previous paragraph I recommended being careful *if* we want to avoid eliminating knowledge. There are times when this is not the case. One example would be when we have very good *practical* reasons for needing a bias toward false negatives over false positives. For instance, if a friend tells me that she is sure it is safe to jump from a great height into a pool of water below, I may have very good practical reasons for preferring a false negation of her correct belief than a false acceptance of an incorrect belief, and so may have good rational reasons to ask how she comes to know that it is safe. Another example more tied to the justice issues we have been looking at is when members of a marginalized group demand that members of the dominant group provide good reasons for claiming knowledge that supports this relationship of domination. This is both a case where the members of the marginalized group have good practical reason to favor false negatives over false positives, and it may be a case of people from an epistemically oppressed community turning the weapon of doubt against their oppressors. A final example might be as a way to equalize an epistemically imbalanced situation. A teacher might be required to be able to provide better reasons for the knowledge she shares

with her class than her students are, or a doctor might be required to be able to provide better reasons than her patients are, because these roles have so much more *prima facie* epistemic authority. These examples do not abrogate our responsibilities to be careful about asking for reasons, but it does at least provide some situations in which it may be the right thing to do.

Conclusion

In *Sister Outsider* (1984), there is a transcript of a conversation between Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde. Talking about understanding each other across racial lines despite their shared gender, they have an exchange which I will quote at some length as it is vitally connected to the points I have been making in this paper:

Audre: I've never forgotten the impatience in your voice that time on the telephone, when you said, 'It's not enough to say to me that you intuit it.' Do you remember? I will never forget that. Even at the same time that I understood what you meant, I felt a total wipeout of my modus, my way of perceiving and formulating.

Adrienne: Yes, but it's not a wipeout of your modus. Because I don't think my modus is unintuitive, right? And one of the crosses I've borne all my life is being told that I'm rational, logical, cool – I am not cool, and I'm not rational and logical in that icy sense. But there's a way in which, trying to translate from your experience to mine, I do need to hear chapter and verse from time to time. I'm afraid of it all slipping away into 'Ah, yes, I understand you.' . . . So if I ask for documentation, it's because I take seriously the spaces between us that difference has created, that racism has created. There are times when I simply cannot assume that I know what you know, unless you show me what you mean.

Audre: But I'm used to associating a request for documentation as a questioning of my perceptions, an attempt to devalue what I'm in the process of discovering.

Adrienne: It's not. Help me to perceive what you perceive. That's what I'm trying to say to you.

Audre: But documentation does not help one perceive. At best it only analyzes perception. At worst, it provides a screen by which to avoid concentrating on the core revelation, following it down to how it feels. Again, knowledge and understanding. They can function in concert, but they don't replace each other. But I'm not rejecting your need for documentation. (103–104)

This nicely expresses the tension between our desire to understand what someone is saying and the reasons for their belief on the one hand, and the damage this can do on the other. While presumably Rich was not here asking for reasons because she doubted Lorde so much as because she doubted that she *understood* Lorde, the effect was largely the same. That Adrienne Rich comes from a more dominant group in our society than Audre Lorde does is significant.

Particularly for epistemologists who do not believe that internal access to one's justifications is a requirement for knowledge, it is surprising that asking people how they know something is as widespread as it is, and even for lax internalists it is surprising if they demand reasons at the moment rather than after careful reflection. It is an indication that professional epistemologists accept many of the tenets of our folk epistemology. Asking people for their reasons is a common and perhaps even effective tool for ensuring the value of others' knowledge in our folk epistemological toolkit, but it is also a potent weapon, and we must not ignore this fact.

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