SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Social epistemology is a burgeoning branch of contemporary epistemology. Since the 1970s, philosophers have taken an ever-increasing interest in such topics as the epistemic value of testimony, the nature and function of expertise, the proper distribution of cognitive labor and resources among individuals in communities, and the status of group reasoning and knowledge. This trend emerged against the resistance of the widely shared view that social considerations are largely irrelevant to epistemological concerns. The trend was stimulated by diverse approaches to the study of knowledge, in such fields as library science, educational theory, the sociology of science, and economics, and within philosophy itself, in the decades preceding the 1980s. To name only a few influences within philosophy, W. V. Quine promoted a naturalistic approach to knowledge, and many who accepted the relevance of nature to epistemology found it sensible to accept the relevance of social factors as well. Thomas S. Kuhn suggested that social factors precipitate revolutionary conceptual and doctrinal changes in the history of science. And feminist epistemologists uncovered the importance of gender differences in knowledge – a species of social factor.

Contemporary social epistemology has in turn stimulated a look at past philosophy for earlier answers to questions social epistemologists are now asking. While the technical term “social epistemology” was introduced, as far as we know, only in the 1950s, efforts to explore the social conditions of belief, justification, and knowledge are a much older phenomenon. In his pioneering book, Testimony (1992), C. A. J. Coady sketched some early history of the treatment of testimony, commenting on the contributions of Augustine, Aquinas, Locke, Hume, Reid, Bradley, and Russell, among others. There has subsequently been some discussion of the treatment of testimony in the tradition of Aristotelian and Ciceroan Rhetoric and Topics and in a few historically important philosophers. Also under investigation are past views of the role of expertise and authority, the demand for autonomy of thought and free speech, and the division of cognitive labor, among other topics.

The present issue of Episteme seeks to deepen and broaden the inquiry into the antecedents of social epistemology in ancient, medieval, and early modern philosophy. Jörg Hardy writes about Plato’s conception of expertise. Robert Pasnau examines the social basis of the medieval treatment of the notion of scientia. Saul Traiger and Fred Wilson offer different ways to resist the common individualist
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interpretation of Hume on testimony. Axel Gelfert explores the social dimensions of Kant’s epistemology.

In “Seeking the Truth and Taking Care for Common Goods—Plato on Expertise and Recognizing Experts,” Jörg Hardy reconstructs and contextualizes Plato’s rich and subtle account of expertise as part of the Socratic-Platonic theory of a good life (eudaimonia). In many of Plato’s dialogues, from the Apology to the Laws, Socrates argues that the successful life requires a special kind of understanding that guides all our beneficial actions: the “knowledge of the good and bad.” This knowledge is to be acquired by carefully examining one’s own and other persons’ beliefs and attitudes; according to Socrates, this is a necessary condition for virtue and happiness. Most importantly for our concerns, the knowledge of the good and bad encompasses the particular knowledge of how to recognize experts in a specific art, craft, or science and, furthermore, to supervise and judge the expert’s works. The key element in Socrates’ theoretical and practical conception of expertise is what Hardy aptly calls the truth-and-caring criterion: “An expert has to make seeking the truth and avoiding (avoidable) error her supreme epistemic goal and she has to make caring about common goods the supreme goal of practising her expertise.”

In “Medieval Social Epistemology: Scientia for Mere Mortals,” Robert Pasnau argues that medieval epistemology adjusted the Aristotelian view of epistēmē to take into account the practical value of cognition. In this sense, considerations of the social utility of cognition lie at the heart of medieval taxonomies of scientia. Aristotelian epistemology understood epistēmē as a virtuous state or a perfection of the intellect. In the Posterior Analytics, Aristotle required for epistēmē that the proposition known be necessary and universal and based on a demonstration in the first syllogistic figure that has necessary premises explanatory of its conclusion. Medieval Aristotelians relaxed these requirements for scientia in light of the fact that contingent and social circumstances often prevent the achievement of such intellectual perfection. Using Robert Grosseteste as an example, Pasnau observes distinctions between the strictest case of scientia, which takes only an immutable object, lesser cases of it, which take as objects things that are always the same (as in mathematics) or always or nearly always the same in the course of nature (natural contingencies), and the weakest case, scientia commonly so-called, which takes unstable or changing contingent objects. The inclusion of the lesser and the weakest cases reconciles scientia with limitations of human cognition. In William Ockham, the weakest case, scientia commonly so-called, did not rest on demonstration but on testimony or perception. Pasnau addresses the key question raised by this relaxed grouping of strictest and lesser cases of scientia under the same heading. What could medieval philosophers have thought such different cases of scientia share? One answer is that all three cases of scientia, even the weakest, share some degree of certainty. Pasnau cites John Buridan as a philosopher who distinguished degrees of certainty in a manner that subsumes all three cases under certainty. The objects of the natural sciences afford some certainty, but a less than
perfect certainty because they are mutable (albeit only by a supernatural power). The lowest grade of certainty suffices for acting well morally. The different grades of certainty are enough for knowledge because each is enough to be right (to be the standard for cognition) in the different domains of natural science and everyday cognition.

It is a commonplace that mainstream philosophers of the early modern era, above all René Descartes, required knowledge to have an individualist basis. In his early work, Descartes required scientia in an individual to be deduced from what is intuited by the individual; hypotheses not so deduced could be accepted only provisionally, pending deduction from intuited premises. The certainty required for scientia ruled out reliance on unsupported sensory experience or testimony as a basis for knowledge. In the later Principles of Philosophy, Descartes apparently awarded standing to hypotheses not backed by deduction and thereby made room for the support of hypotheses by experiment; he did not, however, address the status of reliance on testimony. In the 1660s, testimony was expressly treated as a basis for the epistemic status of belief in Part IV of Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole’s The Art of Thinking. After the highly influential Port-Royal Logic, most textbooks on logic (broadly construed) and many treatises on epistemology contained chapters on testimony and historical probability. Among others, John Locke, David Hume, and Thomas Reid gave some attention to the power of testimony to justify belief. Reid is usually thought to have allowed that testimony is a basic source of justification: an individual can be justified by testimony without being justified in believing that the testifier is reliable on the basis of firsthand observation. Hume is standardly interpreted as holding a contrary, reductionist view of testimonial justification: a testimonially justified belief must ultimately be based on firsthand observation via a justified belief in the reliability of the testifier. Two contributions to this issue, those of Saul Traiger and Fred Wilson, contest this reductionist interpretation of Hume, though without attributing to him Reid’s position on testimony.

In “Experience and Testimony in Hume’s Philosophy,” Saul Traiger argues that Hume rejects the reductionist interpretation. Traiger traces this interpretation to a tempting but mistaken individualistic interpretation of Hume’s theory of ideas. He argues that the texts cited as evidence that Hume holds a reductionist view of the justification of beliefs based on testimony are not convincing because these texts speak to the causes of testimonial beliefs, not to their justification. Traiger also maintains that on Hume’s view testimonial beliefs are justified by appeal to further testimonial beliefs and not merely to beliefs from firsthand experience. So Hume’s view is on its face nonreductionist. Traiger concedes that the reductionist interpretation could be sustained if it were shown that nonreductionism is incompatible with Hume’s theory of ideas and his account of causal inference. But, he argues, these elements of Hume’s theory are in fact compatible with nonreductionism, if only because they entail that ideas have the objects they do in part because they satisfy certain social conditions. On Hume’s theory of ideas, we indulge in abstraction, and the objects of our abstract ideas

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are determined by the use of terms in public language. So our abstract ideas get their content in virtue of social relations. Moreover, on Hume’s theory of ideas, the ideas of such things as bodies and persons do not derive from impressions alone but involve fictions of the imagination. The process of feigning that produces these fictions involves social conditions, so that our ideas have their objects in part in virtue of social conditions. Traiger emphasizes that the relevant fictions are analogous to legal fictions: they arise from a conflation of ideas that are derived in a canonical manner from impressions with ideas that are not so derived. For example, in forming ideas of continuous bodies, we conflate the case of unobserved bodies, or discontinuous constant impressions, with the case of strict identity of impressions, which requires continuous impressions. This conflation depends on a social practice of extending the application of a given idea from the one case to the other. Since our ideas have their content in part because of social conditions, Hume’s theory of ideas must be compatible with nonreductionism about the justification of beliefs based on testimony. Traiger thus denies that a reading of Hume’s theory of ideas supports a reductionist interpretation of testimonial justification.

In “Hume and the Role of Testimony in Knowledge,” Fred Wilson also combats the individualist interpretation of Hume on testimonial justification. He begins by citing Hume’s critique in the first Enquiry of Descartes’ method of doubt. According to Hume, such a systematic doubt is psychologically impossible: one cannot doubt that one is a human creature and that the world is full of bodies and causes. But even if such a doubt were psychologically possible, we could not cure it by reason, since we must employ the very faculties systematically doubted if we are to provide a foundation for our beliefs. This critique suggests the alternative method of beginning with the products of our faculties, with what we already believe in everyday life, and developing our science by revision of these beliefs to rectify errors and fill in gaps in order to render our beliefs systematic. Wilson emphasizes that for Hume we are motivated to undertake such an inquiry by curiosity. For this purpose, we need principles for filling the gaps, and these principles are the ones that we have found to do a good job of replacing erroneous judgments about regularities with correct ones. Hume’s ideal is not the Cartesian one of an autonomous thinker but of a responsible knower. Hume summarizes these principles in the “rules by which to judge of causes and effects.” According to Wilson, these are supported by common human experience, not merely that of an individual. So they depend on testimony. It is true that for Hume our reliance on testimony depends on our experience of the veracity of testimony, but the relevant experience is not merely that of the individual. Rather, in responsible inquiry, we start with beliefs (in this case, about the veracity of testimony) that are not doubted, and we correct these where needed. Moreover, the fact that our experience in favor of the veracity of testimony is gappy does not prevent it from adequately supporting the generalization that testimony is reliable. Wilson notes that Hume countenances such gappy support, allowing inferences from the winding of the
watch to the motion of its hands, even though we observe that the hands do not always move. A gappy inference may similarly support the belief that testimony is reliable.

In “Kant and the Enlightenment’s Contribution to Social Epistemology,” Axel Gelfert shows the relevance of German Enlightenment philosophy (including, most prominently, Kant) to contemporary social epistemology. Gelfert begins with a rebuttal of the received view of the Enlightenment as an intrinsically individualist enterprise and of Kant as an arch-individualist. After exposing and dismissing these prejudices, he charts the history of philosophical discussions of testimony as a source of knowledge, from Christian Thomasius via Christian August Crusius and Johann Martin Chladnius to Georg Friedrich Meier and Kant. Contrary to what some historians of epistemology may have expected, the Sage of Königsberg issued in his lectures and writings a strong endorsement of the testimony of others as a source of knowledge. Drawing and expanding on recent work on Kant’s treatment of testimony, Gelfert explores, in the last two sections of his paper, Kant’s broader contributions to social epistemology, including an analysis of Kant’s remarks on the social basis of epistemic standards and their change as well as on problems arising from the ever-increasing “volume of knowledge”. As Gelfert makes abundantly clear, Kant spent much thought not only on theoretical questions of social epistemology, but also on questions of application, especially in the fields of scientific expertise and education.

The articles in this issue contribute to our growing awareness that philosophers of earlier eras explored diverse social epistemological topics and that social considerations affected their broader epistemological theories.

REFERENCES

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NOTES

3 Rick Kennedy’s *A History of Reasonableness: Testimony and Authority in the Art of Thinking* (2004) presents a wealth of material, but his interpretations and evaluations are not in every respect reliable. For a case in point, see Axel Gelfert’s contribution to this issue.
4 Cf. Kennedy (2004, ch. 4) and Scholz (2009a).