

Why Social Epistemology Is Real Epistemology

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1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter of *Beyond "Justification"* (Alston, 2005), William Alston makes a few remarks about the reception of social epistemology by contemporary epistemologists. Commenting briefly on my social epistemology book, *Knowledge in a Social World* (Goldman, 1999), Alston first reports that it treats as objects of epistemic evaluation a variety of social institutions and interactions involved in the search for knowledge and its dissemination.¹ He then makes this comment:

It is worthy of note that much of the material in Goldman's book would be rejected by many contemporary epistemologists as 'not real epistemology,' and relegated to sociology, social psychology, or other social sciences, or perhaps to the philosophical foundations thereof. This is a prominent example of my earlier point that the boundaries of 'epistemology' are fuzzy and controversial, and drawn by different thinkers and from different perspectives in different ways. (2005: 5)

Although I haven't conducted a poll on the subject -- and I doubt that Alston has either -- his description of the reception of social epistemology (under my characterization) could well be right (at least vintage 2005). I too suspect that many epistemologists are not yet persuaded that social epistemology -- at least all of social epistemology -- is "real" epistemology. So I feel the impulse to try to make my case more persuasive. This paper is intended as an exercise of this sort.

2. Three Conceptions of Social Epistemology

I shall divide alternative conceptions of social epistemology (SE) into three types: (1) rejectionist, (2) preservationist, and (3) expansionist conceptions. My characterization of these conceptions of SE will be framed in terms of their relationship to the traditional, mainstream conception of epistemology. So let's inspect the central components of the traditional conception insofar as they bear on the prospects for SE.

First, in traditional epistemology the epistemic agents are exclusively individual human beings. Second, mainstream epistemology is heavily invested in the study of several concepts of epistemic evaluation or normativity, including justifiedness, rationality, and knowledge. Traditional epistemology is concerned with how individuals can acquire knowledge or maintain justified or rational credal states. Third, it is assumed that the evaluative/normative standards of rationality and justifiedness are not merely

conventional or relativistic in a pejorative sense, but have some sort of universal, objective validity. Fourth, the central notions of epistemic attainment -- certainly knowledge and possibly justification -- either entail or are linked to truth. Knowing proposition p entails p's being true, and a person's being justified in believing p (at least according to one mainstream view) is associated with belief-forming methods or circumstances that are truth-conducive. Finally, mainstream epistemology typically assumes that truth is an objective, largely mind-independent, affair. Let us call these assumptions the core assumptions of mainstream epistemology.

Next let me spell out the three conceptions of SE listed above by considering their respective stances with respect to the standard presuppositions of mainstream epistemology. First consider "rejectionist" SE. Very few of the writers I subsume under the rejectionist heading themselves use the label "social epistemology" for their project.² They present themselves as offering something like a "successor" subject to epistemology.³ Nonetheless, since they typically study science and other forms of "knowledge," mainstream philosophers might construe their approaches as types of epistemology, if only deformed or bastard versions thereof. The approaches I subsume under "rejectionism" are postmodernism, deconstructionism, social constructionism, relativism, and social studies of science, including the "strong programme" in sociology of science. What these movements share is a staunch rejection of many (if not all) of the tenets of traditional epistemology. Moreover, these rejections are largely inspired by, or predicated on, the social nature of the phenomena they study.

One strand of social constructionism holds that truths or facts are not in the world or of the world; they are not "out there" to be discovered but are mere social fabrications or constructions (Latour and Woolgar, 1986). As Steven Shapin puts it, "truth is a social institution" (1994, 6). Although rejectionists often use the term "knowledge" to identify their subject matter, they don't understand knowledge to be a truth-entailing, or factive, state of affairs. Knowledge, in their lexicon, is simply whatever is believed, or perhaps "institutionalized" belief. In rejecting objectivist rationality, we find proponents of the strong programme declaring that "there are no context-free or super-cultural norms of rationality" (Barnes and Bloor, 1982, 27). On the question of the nature of epistemic agents, at least a few rejectionists deny that individuals are epistemic agents at all. Only groups or communities qualify as knowers, according to Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1993), who writes:

In suggesting that it is communities that construct and acquire knowledge, I do not mean (or "merely" mean) that what comes to be recognized or "certified" as knowledge is the result of collaboration between ... individuals who, as individuals, know in some logically or empirically "prior" sense... My arguments suggest that the collaborators, the consensus achievers, and, in more general terms, the agents who generate knowledge are communities and subcommunities, not individuals. (1993, 124)

Thus, rejectionists dispute all or many of the main tenets of traditional epistemology. We might call them "social epistemologists" by courtesy, but there is an

enormous gap between their questions and the ones that traditionally go by the name “epistemology.” It is easy for mainstream epistemologists to deny that this type of SE is real epistemology.⁴

On the other hand, there are several questions currently occupying mainstream epistemologists that undeniably have a social dimension, and their treatment retains the core assumptions of traditional epistemology. So if SE is identified as the sector of epistemology that scrutinizes *these* questions, it isn’t beyond the pale of legitimate, “real” epistemology. This second method of identifying the scope of SE yields a preservationist conception, because it preserves or upholds the core features of traditional epistemology.

Which questions, exactly, are included within preservationist SE? At least the following two questions certainly qualify: “What is the nature of testimony-based justification?” and “What does rationality require agents to do who find themselves in a situation of peer disagreement?” How should such agents take account of the opinions of their peers, and how should they weight the peers’ opinions as compared with their own prior views. Both of these questions focus on justification and/or rationality, which are obviously concepts of epistemic evaluation in mainstream epistemology. Each can be addressed using standard assumptions of objectivity (whatever the appropriate criteria may be). Each concerns the proper doxastic conduct for *individual* epistemic agents. Since these “terms” of the inquiry conform to the core assumptions of mainstream epistemology, investigating these questions is clearly “preservationist” with respect to the tradition. Yet the questions also qualify as central topics of social epistemology.⁵

Thus, rejectionism isn’t the only possible conception of SE. It would therefore be clearly wrong for mainstream epistemologists to hold that no form of SE is “real” epistemology (where “real” epistemology is epistemology that conforms to the core assumptions of traditional epistemology).⁶ Of course, I myself cheerfully accept preservationist SE as one strand of SE. Still, although preservationist SE is entirely acceptable to me, and should be acceptable to traditionalists, it must be acknowledged that much (though not all) of what transpires in *Knowledge in a Social World* wouldn’t qualify as preservationist SE. Perhaps it goes beyond the acceptable limits of traditional epistemology. Let’s explore this possibility.

If one looks at the history of epistemology, it is admittedly unusual to treat social processes, and especially social institutions, as objects of epistemic evaluation. But this matter is a little hard to assess, since the term “epistemology” was not well entrenched before the twentieth century. John Stuart Mill did not say that he was doing epistemology when he held that the institution of freedom of speech has epistemically good consequences (including helping people avoid error). He didn’t avowedly call his free speech precept a piece of epistemology. But when he treated inductive inference, which many nowadays would consider epistemology, he didn’t call that “epistemology” either. Its discussion occurred in his book A System of Logic (1843).

The important question, I would urge, is not whether people called a philosophical treatment of social processes or institutions “epistemology,” but whether, by present-day

standards of what epistemology is all about, it makes good sense to extend philosophical activity from its pre-existing, primarily individualistic, pre-occupations to additional terrain. Certainly, this would not be entirely “preservationist.” It would go beyond the paradigm of what epistemologists have done in the past, so it would be expansionist. But what’s wrong with expanding a discipline’s scope? Does that mean it’s no longer the “same” discipline? Of course, there may be no clear-cut principles here. Similar problems arise for cross-temporal identity of scientific theories and theoretical referents, as is well known. But disciplines undergo change and classification all of the time. When Isaac Newton developed his physics it was called “Natural Philosophy.” Does that mean that it should be still be classified as “philosophy”? I would say that certain inquiries that once belonged to philosophy no longer belong there, and certain inquiries that didn’t always belong to philosophy should be brought (at least partly) under its umbrella.

The question remains: How could a treatment of social interactions and social institutions maintain sufficient continuity with traditional epistemology to qualify as the pursuit of similar goals? Wherein lies the continuity? That is the question to which the remainder of this paper is devoted.

3. Is Doxastic Decision-Making the Be-All and End-All of Epistemology?

What is “real” epistemology? According to many mainstream epistemologists, it’s the normative evaluation of intellectual conduct. Expressed slightly differently, it’s the evaluation, from a distinctively epistemic perspective, of the conduct of intellectual affairs. Now, what types of conduct and what types of affairs are intellectual? There is firm agreement on one type of intellectual conduct, where traditional epistemology concentrates its activity. If epistemology is restricted to the (normative) study of this type of conduct, it is difficult to extend SE beyond the preservationist territory already identified. This is what the resisters to expansionist SE might contend. But, I shall respond, there are good reasons to hold that this type of conduct doesn’t exhaust the range of intellectual conduct. And there are hints that even mainstream epistemology (and philosophy of science) appreciates this fact. When those other types of intellectual conduct are taken seriously, there is pretty clear sailing for expansionist SE.

One central type of intellectual activity is making doxastic decisions, i.e., forming doxastic attitudes toward propositions, where doxastic attitudes are classified either “categorically” in terms of belief, disbelief, and suspension (or withholding) of judgment, or in terms of degrees of belief, i.e., subjective probabilities.⁷ A very large part of epistemology is devoted to the normative study of this kind of activity. It tries to lay down appropriate principles or procedures by which an agent could be guided, given any set of evidence, in forming a credal attitude vis-à-vis a specified proposition. Because such procedures or principles are to be used by single agents, the default presumption would be that this is purely individual (not social) activity.

Although DDM is an individual activity (or primarily an individual activity – see section 7 below), we know that it can also involve social elements. Evidential inputs to

DDM come from many sources, including perception and memory. One type of input is speaker communication, presented orally or in print. This type of input is testimony, and it's obviously a social source. Which doxastic responses hearers or readers should make to testimonial inputs is a legitimate topic for epistemology, and it's clearly a social-epistemological topic. This much was conceded in admitting the legitimacy of preservationist SE. But this doesn't take us very far into SE. It doesn't lend itself to expansionist forms of SE that our imagined resisters intend to resist. If they can successfully defend the thesis that epistemology must be limited to the epistemic evaluation of (individual) DDM procedures, their brief against expansionist SE might be cogent.

What types or styles of epistemic evaluation is appropriate to the evaluation of DDM procedures? They center on either justification, rationality, or reasonability. The link between DDM evaluation and justification (or reasonability) can be stated as follows.

An agent is justified (rational, reasonable) in holding doxastic attitude D toward proposition P at time t if and only if attitude D is mandated by the correct DDM principles when applied to the total input (evidence) possessed by the agent at t.

For example, suppose that the correct DDM principles mandate belief in the proposition that there is a deer in the clearing when it visually appears to an agent as if there is a deer in the clearing. And suppose you undergo such a visual appearance at time t. Then you are justified in believing this proposition at t. To take a different case, suppose you didn't hear any weather forecast last night, and your memory tells you that, where you live, mornings are overcast about half the time. You have just awakened from a night's sleep and haven't yet opened your eyes. Finally, suppose that the correct DDM principles, applied to these evidential circumstances, mandate withholding of judgment with respect to the proposition that it's currently overcast outside. Then you are justified in adopting the withholding attitude toward this proposition, but not justified in adopting either the belief attitude or the disbelief attitude toward it.

An important corollary follows from what we have said. No matter what an agent's body of inputs or evidence at a given time, she can always be justified in holding a suitably selected attitude toward P. She need only select the attitude that conforms to the correct DDM principles. It doesn't matter how thin, scanty, or conflict-ridden her total evidence is; some justified attitude is available. True, if the evidence is indiscriminating or indecisive as between the alternative possibilities, the mandated attitude will usually be withholding, or a "middling" subjective probability like 0.50, 0.42, or 0.63).⁸ But, if the evidence is appropriate, an attitude of withholding, or agnosticism, can be perfectly justified. It can reach as high a level of justifiedness -- assuming for the moment that justifiedness comes in degrees -- as a justified belief can reach. There is no premium, in general, on justified belief as contrasted with justified agnosticism. At least this is so under a conception of justification that I shall call neutral justificationism. As soon as one departs from neutral justificationism, however, it's no longer clear that DDM conduct is the only proper object of epistemic evaluation.

Another possible label for neutral justificationism is “ostrich epistemology.” That’s because it implies that an agent who gathers no evidence to help assess the plausibility of P -- and hence winds up withholding -- is no less justificationally or rationally meritorious than one who gathers considerable evidence on the matter -- and hence may wind up believing. Acting like an ostrich – i.e., declining to gather any evidence – isn’t an inferior intellectual performance.

I am not suggesting that mainstream epistemology consistently or explicitly endorses neutral justificationism or ostrich epistemology. Actually, the entire issue is rather infrequently discussed in the terms in which I have formulated it.⁹ I introduce neutral justificationism here because if it were correct, it could bolster the cause of resistance to expansionist SE. I shall argue, by contrast, that neutral justificationism (or ostrich epistemology) is not a fully satisfying epistemology. There are several grounds for dissatisfaction with the view, at least as an all-encompassing view of the mission of evaluative epistemology.

4. Epistemic Evaluation of Evidence Gathering

The first ground for dissatisfaction with neutral justificationism is its omission of evidence gathering as a type of intellectual conduct worthy of epistemic evaluation. There are different ways to make the case for this conclusion. First, one can argue that justified belief is inherently more valuable than justified suspension. Since justified belief in P cannot generally be attained without obtaining compelling evidence for P, evidence-gathering conduct is often essential, and is therefore a proper object of epistemic evaluation. But what makes justified belief more valuable than justified suspension? Here one might appeal to Charles Peirce’s view that doubt, or suspension, is a psychological “irritation”, or “irritant.” One automatically seeks relief from agnosticism in the form of belief (even certainty).¹⁰ However, although belief is more highly valued than uncertainty, one isn’t entitled to believe “straightaway,” without a high level of evidential support. Typically, such evidence must be gathered intelligently, or skillfully, and what makes one kind of evidence gathering superior to another becomes a proper object of epistemic evaluation.

A second argument for a similar conclusion emphasizes the value of true belief, and would view justified belief as a means to true belief. This line of argument presupposes that justification (specifically, justification adequate for belief) is truth-conducive. If one wants to obtain a true belief, one needs to gather appropriate evidence to make such a belief justified. Hence, evidence gathering cannot be dismissed as epistemically irrelevant. At least for questions of interest, one does better to obtain a superior quantum of evidence than to keep one’s head in the sand, because this increases the probability that the evidence warrants belief, and only evidence-supported belief is highly likely to be true.¹¹ This argument differs from the first because it invokes a kind of epistemic goal -- true belief -- above and beyond justifiedness, and makes the case for evidence gathering as a proper object of epistemic evaluation on this basis.

A simple example illustrates the point. You go for a walk on a moonlit night and notice an object that is hard to identify. Some visual input is received, but it's inadequate to confidently identify the object. You then shine your flashlight on the object, and its character is decisively revealed. Shining the flashlight is an example of deliberate evidence gathering that increases confidence up to the level of "belief" and also fosters true belief.

Add to these arguments the fact that many knowledge-seeking professions evaluate their members' professional conduct in terms of evidence-gathering qualities. Assuming that these professions aren't misguided, this suggests that evidence gathering is an important kind of intellectual conduct. Consider two examples: historical scholarship and experimental science.

A historian who uncovers new documents that have a significant bearing on a given historical period will generally receive considerable credit from her peers. This is credit for her intellectual work, of course. New documentary evidence (or other kinds of evidence) is just the sort of thing historians seek. To be sure, new evidence doesn't always push an investigator's degree of belief in a target proposition in the direction of either 1.0 or 0 (i.e., toward belief or disbelief). New evidence sometimes undercuts prior evidence, thereby pushing the final degree of belief (for the moment) toward 0.5. Nonetheless, under suitable conditions, this will be a change that increases degrees of truth possession.¹² If truth possession is posited as an epistemic goal, evidence gathering again emerges as an important activity that merits epistemic evaluation.

Experimental science is also focused on evidence gathering. What experimentalists most highly praise in one another's work is the design and execution of experiments that lead to large shifts in the degrees of belief attached to hypotheses of interest to the research field. Described in Bayesian terms, a highly probative experiment is one in which there is a high ratio (much greater than 1.0) between the likelihood that (actual) outcome O would occur given hypothesis H_1 and the likelihood that O would occur given hypothesis H_2 . When Bayesian reasoning is applied to the observation of outcome O, the agent will make a relatively large change in her degree of belief. When certain conditions are met, moreover, this change in degree of belief is also associated with an objectively "expected" increase in the agent's degree of truth possession, no matter what the agent's prior probability.¹³ (Larger expected increases in truth possession are associated with larger likelihood ratios.¹⁴) Thus, it is good from the perspective of (expected) truth possession to design and execute experiments of this kind. Here is another case in which evidence gathering – this time through experimentation – has salient features worthy of epistemic assessment.

Now, there are types of evidence gathering with a distinctively social dimension. A doxastic agent can actively seek testimony from one or another speaker or writer. She can try to identify an expert or group of experts and read only their opinions, ignoring opinions of others she deems unreliable. Or she can take an opinion poll from a range of individuals. In addition to ascertaining people's opinions, she can inquire into the reasons for these opinions. Of course, doxastic agents do not create the specific contents

of the testimony they receive. But their activity influences the evidential contents received, and the characteristics of this activity have an epistemic bearing, especially if truth-acquisition is part of the epistemic goal.

It might be replied that there can't be purely epistemic principles for evidence-gathering conduct, because the amount of resources that should be devoted to gathering evidence about question Q depends on the agent's comparative interest in question Q, and interest isn't a purely epistemic matter (Feldman, cite ???). However, the fact that the choice of investigational methods is partly constrained by non-epistemic factors isn't very damning. We can easily fashion a principle that separates non-epistemic and epistemic elements. One such principle might be the following: "If R is the maximum amount of resources one is willing to devote to the investigation of question Q, the best modes of investigation are types V_1, V_2, \dots, V_n ." The agent's interest in Q isn't an epistemic matter, but the optimal modes of investigation or evidence gathering, given the value R, is highly relevant and looks like a purely epistemic affair.

5. Epistemic Evaluation of Speaker Conduct

Thus far I have argued that evidence gathering is a species of conduct (distinct from DDM) that is a proper object of epistemic evaluation. Moreover, some types of evidence gathering involve social or interpersonal activity, thereby lending themselves to social epistemological analysis. Are there other types of conduct that also fill this bill? Next I'll consider a species of conduct in which a speaker or writer addresses a discourse to an audience. The discourse can be a simple assertion or a series of interconnected assertions, for example, a chain of argument.

Several epistemologists in the recent literature hold that there is a norm of assertion that has an epistemic content, namely, "Assert P only if E" where "E" is some sort of epistemic condition. A popular version fills in "E" with "knowledge," yielding "Assert P only if you know that P."¹⁵ There is no unanimity in favor of the knowledge condition, but there is substantial agreement that E has some sort of epistemic content ("adequate evidence for P," "justification for believing P", etc.).

Does this guarantee the epistemic evaluability of acts of assertion? It clearly implies that if someone asserts something without satisfying the specified epistemic condition, her speech conduct deserves negative evaluation. But is this evaluation epistemic evaluation? Is a conversational norm that includes an epistemic condition necessarily an epistemic norm? Perhaps it's simply a rule of language or conversation.

Before addressing this question, let's examine several other cases in which epistemic factors are invoked in evaluating acts of speech or conversation. Consider an example from Paul Grice (1989). Suppose Ann asks a by-stander, Bob, where she can find petrol for her car, and Bob replies by asserting, "There's a petrol station around the corner." If Bob is aware (knows) that the petrol station isn't open, he shouldn't make this assertion. In saying "There's a petrol station around the corner," in the specified context, Bob conversationally implicates that the petrol station is open, though he knows this to be

false. This violates a norm to the effect that one shouldn't conversationally implicate something one knows, or justifiably believes, to be false. This is another conversational norm involving an epistemic condition.

Other conversational norms involving epistemic factors pertain to argument or argumentation, a more complex form of discourse. Consider enthymematic arguments, that is, arguments with unexpressed premises. Enthymematic arguments are hard to justify, yet it's undeniable that ordinary discourse is full of them. How is this to be explained, and is it defensible? A straightforward explanation and defense that appeals to epistemic factors is available here (see Goldman, 2003, 60). Suppose that the usual aim of argumentative discourse is to generate in a hearer a newly justified belief in the conclusion. Further assume that in assessing a conclusion's plausibility, an argument's hearer will not rely exclusively on the speaker's stated premises. A hearer will marshal all relevant evidence at her disposal, at least all evidence that readily comes to mind. Finally, suppose that on a particular occasion, evidence E is highly relevant to a speaker's conclusion and would be appropriate to include as a premise in the argument. As the speaker realizes, however, E is already widely known in the discursive community. Then the speaker is entitled to assume that his audience knows E and would think of it in contemplating his proffered conclusion. Why bother to mention E? Conversational efficiency dictates otherwise and epistemic considerations concur. A hearer will use E to help draw the conclusion whether it is mentioned by the speaker or not, and the hearer's justifiedness vis-à-vis the conclusion will be the same. Thus, presentation of an enthymematic argument, in which E is left unexpressed, is entirely in order, and warrants positive evaluation. But all this depends on epistemic conditions being right.

In response to these examples, a skeptic might contend that the rules or principles used here are linguistic principles, indeed rules of pragmatics. How do they lend support to the notion that epistemic evaluation is in play? I reply: they lend such support if the aforementioned rules derive from epistemic considerations. This is something Grice himself proposed (though didn't definitively endorse). Conversational maxims were theorized to result from a "Cooperative Principle," understood as a quasi-contractual matter. For the sorts of maxims we have discussed, the purpose of the contract might be "a maximally effective exchange of information" (1989, 28). If this is right, the foundation of the rules is epistemic in nature. Thus, epistemic considerations underpin and rationalize the evaluation of speaker conduct.

Other authors who endorse the idea of a social contract for the purpose of informational exchange is Edward Craig (1990) and Bernard Williams (2002). Williams, following Craig, highlights the uncontroversial fact that a basic function of language is communication, which includes telling other competent language users things that they do not know. In Williams's formulation, the need for this commonly arises because of "purely positional advantages." A speaker can tell someone else about a situation because he is or was in it, while his hearer is not or was not. Thus, there is a basic phenomenon of people's beliefs' contributing to a shared pool of information. Since people have the option of sharing or not sharing their beliefs, and sharing them sincerely or insincerely, there is a social need to encourage people to cultivate and exercise the

“virtue” of sharing their beliefs sincerely. This is the function of norms or patterns of praise and blame that try to inculcate these virtues. The virtues obviously have an epistemic foundation (producing greater knowledge among the language users), so they are epistemically grounded modes of evaluation. Since the conduct in question is obviously social in nature, though not doxastic, it introduces yet another type of object of social-epistemic evaluation, which goes beyond what I earlier called preservationist SE.

Once it is granted that even traditional epistemology admits speech acts as proper objects of epistemic evaluation, it is open to expansionist SE to say: Why not expand the scope of speech and communication that can be evaluated? As long as the mode of evaluation is recognizably epistemic, there could be sufficient continuity with traditional epistemology for it to qualify as “real” epistemology (though there would certainly be an expansionist dimension to it). This is how I proceeded in *Knowledge in a Social World*. First, I adopted a general mode of epistemic evaluation called “veritistic,” which consists in assessing social practices in terms of their impact on people’s degrees of truth possession (or “knowledge” in the weak sense).¹⁶ Types of communication practices that could be included ranged from assertion and argumentation to the choice(s) of media for conveying news to the public, e.g., traditional journalism, television, the Internet, and the blogosphere. Many parameters pertaining to news dissemination can be assessed, not only the practices of journalists and editors but also the forces that influence them, e.g., market forces, owners, and government (Goldman, 1999, chap. 6; Goldman, 2007, in press).

6. Institutional Design and Expansionist SE

To repeat, I don’t not identify expansionist SE with traditional or mainstream epistemology. Many “entities” I propose to treat as objects of epistemic evaluation are not so treated in mainstream epistemology. This is what marks my approach as expansionist. Nonetheless, this brand of SE is still “real” epistemology in virtue of its continuity with the tradition.

We saw in the previous section that certain types of conduct by non-DDM agents (that is, agents not acting in a DDM capacity) are nonetheless appropriate objects for epistemic evaluation. The conduct in question in the previous section was speech or communication. If this much is granted, there is already a precedent for allowing activity to qualify as epistemic although it isn’t executed in either a DDM mode or an evidence gathering mode. What seems crucial is that the activity or practice in question should be causally relevant to the doxastic attitudes of agents. It should be relevant, moreover, to the epistemic properties of these downstream events, for example, to the truth-valuational properties of the doxastic attitudes so formed.

Taking another step along the expansionist path, we can next consider additional candidate entities, namely, features of social institutions that have a positive or negative impact on the knowledge outputs of doxastic agents. Many social institutions provide platforms for the transmission of communication across individuals, and the governing

rules or procedures of these platforms help to shape epistemic outcomes. Here are three examples.

Legal adjudication systems have different arrangements under which factual evidence is gathered and assembled in a court of law, and then presented to selected doxastic decision-makers who judge a defendant guilty or innocent, liable or non-liable. The Anglo-American common-law system of adjudication, featuring partisan attorneys who proceed in an adversarial fashion, is markedly different from the Continental civil-law system, in which neutral judges play many of the roles assigned to attorneys and jurors in the common-law system. Rules of evidence in these systems may also vary considerably. The principal aim of any legal adjudication system is to issue factually correct judgments (see Goldman 1999, chap. 9; 2005), but some of these systems probably perform more reliably than others. Determining their reliability score is no simple matter; but any determination or estimate of a system's accuracy rate or error rate can be considered an epistemic evaluation of it. A legal adjudication system *per se* does not make doxastic decisions. But because it influences the epistemic quality of doxastic decisions made under its aegis – and this is its intended function – it's a proper object of epistemic evaluation.

Another example of such an institution is an enterprise that constructs major reference works such as Encyclopedia Britannica or Wikipedia. The intended function of these enterprises is the dissemination of knowledge or information to a large audience, and each is a social enterprise (involving multiple individuals). The enterprises are conducted, however, in strikingly different ways, with different operating principles for “selecting” contributors. The traditional encyclopedia selects “experts,” who are designated as the chief authors of their respective articles. A wikipedia, by contrast, offers standing invitations to all comers to contribute, even if they lack certified expertise on the subject-matter in question. The idea is that self-selected, mutually correcting contributors can pool their information to create a good informational product. So each system has a distinctive guiding principle. Which tends to produce better informational products is a question open to epistemic evaluation.

A third category of institutional arrangement involves either mandated disclosure or permitted concealment of certain classes of information, where concealments are rationalized on the grounds that they promote other disclosures. For example, the press generally favors “shield” laws that grant reporters immunity from being compelled to reveal their sources' identities in legal cases. (Most states in the U.S. have such shield laws, but the federal government does not.) The rationale for shield laws is to enable journalists to honor pledges of confidentiality to sources, which is said to increase the likelihood that sources will disclose important information via the press to the public. Is this in fact good knowledge-enhancement policy? There are many complexities here, including how different kinds of knowledge should be weighted. Undoubtedly some non-epistemic factors are mixed in here with epistemic ones, and these must be disentangled. But the general point is that these kinds of institutional arrangements have epistemic properties, and therefore belong on the agenda of an expansionist form of SE.

7. Problems of Epistemic Rationality for Collective Agents

A final example of expansionist SE comes full circle, as it were, back to doxastic decision-making. Now, however, we examine doxastic decision-making with a twist. Instead of restricting DDM to individual agents, as mainstream epistemology does, we contemplate the prospect of collective, or aggregate, agents that issue judgments on matters of fact. Unlike the proposal considered under rejectionist SE (see section 2), which limited epistemic agents to social entities, the present proposal merely allows social entities – along with individuals -- to qualify as doxastic agents. Collective or corporate entities are countenanced as agents both in everyday language and as a matter of formal law and government. We speak of judicial tribunals like the Supreme Court making judgments of law and of department committees making judgments about their peers' annual scholarly attainments (commonly undertaken to award merit increases). In recent years many philosophers have defended the metaphysical legitimacy of group entities with intentional states like intending and believing (see Gilbert, Tuomela, Bratman, Pettit, Searle, Schmitt). If this is a metaphysically defensible position for intentional states like belief or judgment, the question then arises of what are the constraints on the epistemic rationality of such a group entity, and whether there are special challenges that groups confront in meeting these constraints. Such problems are naturally addressed by SE, but they require an expansionist conception of SE, since mainstream epistemology confines its attention to DDM by individuals.

This entire issue is now the locus of a lively new sub-field called “judgment aggregation.” Philip Pettit (2003) identifies a certain paradox, first posed in the legal field (Kornhauser and Sager, 1993), and generalizes it beyond that field. Pettit calls it the “discursive dilemma.” The paradox concerns the relationship between the opinions of individual members who jointly comprise a group and the opinions of the group per se. When a group must render a judgment opinion on several logically related propositions, there are two ways to determine the group judgment as a function of the judgments of the members. Let propositions A, B, and C be thought of as an argument, in which A and B are premises and C is a conclusion. If one were letting the group judgment be fixed by majority voting among the members, one could first have the members vote on each of the premises, let those premise votes fix the group's premise judgments, and then let the group's premise judgments fix its judgment on the conclusion. Alternatively, one can let each of the several members fix their own judgments both on the premises and the conclusion, and let their vote on the conclusion fix the group's conclusion judgment. It turns out that there are circumstances in which these two methods yield different results. Which is the (more) rational method to use in fixing a group's judgments?

Problems get more serious and quite intriguing in light of a group of theorems, the first of which was proved by List and Pettit (2002). This theorem establishes the impossibility of group rationality somewhat analogous to Arrow's (1963) impossibility theorem that launched social choice theory. A set of judgments is called rational just in case the set is consistent and complete (in specified senses of these terms). Assume that each group member makes a rational set of judgments on these propositions. Then, surprisingly, a certain combination of conditions cannot be met by any group. There is

(as a matter of logic) no aggregation procedure that generates collective judgments from member judgments that satisfies the constraint of rationality plus the following three conditions: (a) universal domain, (b) anonymity, and (c) systematicity (see List 2005 for an explanation and exploration of these conditions). Interesting permutations arise if one allows groups to proceed under more relaxed conditions.

What, then, are the prospects for group rationality in light of these formal findings? The question is analogous to questions epistemologists ask when confronting other paradoxes of epistemological interest, e.g., the lottery paradox and the paradox of the preface. Just as mainstream epistemologists are concerned with how individual doxastic agents should proceed in the light of these puzzles, so social epistemologists would rightly be concerned with how group doxastic agents should proceed in the light of analogous paradoxes. Since rationality is a central concept of epistemic evaluation, it seems eminently appropriate for social epistemologists to engage in the project of evaluating alternative procedures for groups, or aggregates. Although this project necessarily falls under expansionist SE, because problems concerning aggregate doxastic agents don't arise within traditional epistemology, this strikes me as an eminently appropriate project for SE to pursue.¹⁷ Moreover, it maintains clear continuity with traditional epistemology, because in both cases one addresses the question of how doxastic agents should best deal with a choice among alternatives that strain our antecedent conception of what epistemic rationality requires.

8. Conclusion

To summarize, it was argued that epistemologists are well within their rights to view rejectionist SE as not “real” epistemology. By contrast, preservationist SE is unquestionably “real” epistemology; nobody can reasonably doubt that at least the topics mentioned as examples of preservationist SE (namely, testimony and peer disagreement) are bona fide epistemology. The principal issue, then, is whether it is reasonable to classify our examples of expansionist SE as “real” epistemology. I defended this classification for each of the categories discussed, on the grounds that there is strong continuity in each case with traditional, mainstream epistemology (despite undeniable points of departure). Obviously, one could agree with some of these classifications but not all. One could agree that examples W, X, and Y deserve to be viewed as “real” epistemology but disagree about Z. My general conclusion is that SE is an important and fascinating subject, however tightly or loosely some of its topics fit with traditional conceptions of epistemology.

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¹ As Alston reports, *Knowledge in a Social World* contains chapters that treat of Testimony, Argumentation, The Technology and Economics of Communication, Speech Regulation and the Marketplace of Ideas; and it applies these themes to the domains of science, law, political processes, and education.

² An exception is Steve Fuller, who used “social epistemology” both as the title of his first book (Fuller, 1988) and as the title of a journal he founded.

³ This is roughly where I would categorize Richard Rorty, whose *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) declared the death of epistemology and proposed some vague replacement for it, in the form of a “conversation of mankind.” His mantra was to “keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth” (1979, 377).

⁴ I am not prepared to endorse this denial in my own voice. For example, can’t one be a legitimate epistemologist and still endorse some type of epistemic relativism about justification or rationality? And what about a philosopher who examines arguments for and against relativism without taking a firm position of her own? Isn’t she doing real epistemology -- despite the fact that one of the “core” assumptions of traditional epistemology is the falsity of epistemic relativism? My purpose here, however, is only to explain or reconstruct the probable reasoning of those epistemologists who, according to Alston, would refuse to accept social epistemology as “real” epistemology. I am not necessarily joining them in excommunicating (even) rejectionist social epistemology. Of course, rejectionist social epistemology isn’t the kind I personally favor. But it’s a more delicate question to decide whether it deserves to be considered epistemology at all.

⁵ Indeed, they are the principal questions being addressed by other contributors to the present conference on social epistemology.

⁶ Alston doesn’t suggest that any epistemologists hold this position. He says that many would regard “much” of the material in *Knowledge in a Social World* – not all of it -- as not real epistemology.

⁷ For present purposes the term “decision” is used in a sense that doesn’t imply voluntary choice. Thus, in speaking of “doxastic decision-making,” I mean to avoid all problems and issues concerning doxastic voluntarism. Understanding the terminological in this fashion should, if anything, assist the cause of the resisters, so I can’t be accused of dialectical unfairness to my opponents.

⁸ Actually, what qualifies as a “middling” degree of belief depends on the partition of possible answers to the question at hand. If there are five possible answers, each of which is a priori equiprobable, then the lack of (further) evidence would dictate a subjective probability of 0.20 for each of the propositions expressing a possible answer.

⁹ However, I would say that Bayesian epistemologists in general would endorse the view. Among non-Bayesians, perhaps evidentialists like Richard Feldman are the best example of epistemologists who would endorse it. See Feldman (2000), reprinted in Conee and Feldman (2004), esp. pp. 182-186. This passage in particular seems to express Feldman’s view: “Evidentialism ... focuses on the epistemic value to be obtained immediately from the adoption of an attitude toward a proposition. The way to do that, in every case, is to follow the evidence one has.” (2004: 185)

¹⁰ In the modern epistemological literature, Isaac Levi (1967) has been the chief proponent of Peirce’s idea.

¹¹ Of course, gathering additional evidence doesn't always increase the level of evidence for any one proposition under consideration. New evidence can sometimes defeat, or undermine, old evidence, which might reduce the overall level of support for the previously "leading" contender. In this fashion, additional evidence sometimes makes agnosticism more justified than it previously was. This is why the sentence in the text says that superior evidence only "increase the probability" that superior evidence will warrant belief. (Later I shall introduce a mathematical finding about the probability that more probative evidence tends to increase truth possession. But an increase in truth possession can occur by reducing one's degree of belief in a false proposition, which could mean moving toward the middle of the subjective probability scale.)

¹² Degrees of truth possession might be measured naturally as follows (although this measure isn't uncontroversial). Any degree-of-belief n in a true proposition is assigned a measure n of truth possession. For example, if P is true, then having a degree-of-belief 0.85 in P counts as "possessing" the truth that P to degree 0.85 (see Goldman 1999, chap. 4, based on Goldman and Shaked, 1991). Using this measure it is provable that if an agent reasons in a Bayesian manner from new evidence, then under certain fairly stringent conditions, the objectively expected change in truth-possession from the new evidence is positive, no matter what the agent's prior subjective probability distribution. (See Goldman 1999, 121 or Goldman and Shaked (1991).

¹³ See Goldman, 1999, 119-121, or Goldman and Shaked, 1991.

¹⁴ See Goldman, 1999, 122, or Goldman and Shaked, 1991. This is the "second" theorem presented in this material.

¹⁵ See Williamson (1996, 2000) and others [???].

¹⁶ There was a parallel here with my earlier work. In *Epistemology and Cognition* (Goldman, 1986) I argued that epistemic evaluation in individual epistemology can consist of assessing psychological processes in terms of their impact on the veritistic properties of a user's belief corpus. By analogy, epistemic evaluation in SE can consist of assessing social practices in terms of their causal impact on the veritistic properties of the credal corpora of multiple members of society.

¹⁷ Of course, the project is being pursued by a growing number of theorists with varied backgrounds and affiliations, without waiting for epistemologists to decide whether it qualifies as a branch of epistemology. I am just saying that social epistemology is warranted in classifying this set of problems as falling within its purview, no matter what the academic appointments may be of the individuals who contribute to it.