

## Is Social Epistemology Real Epistemology?

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It is a great pleasure and indeed an honor to be the commentator on Prof. Goldman's paper.

I would like to start by saying that I am highly sympathetic to Goldman's kind of social epistemology. Many of the themes he develops in his book, *Knowledge in a Social World* and in his paper at this conference, have, I believe, great potential for giving rise to important and original research, and to some extent they have already done so. But the question here, of course, is whether or not these themes are important *to epistemology* by which I mean traditional, mainstream epistemology. To me this is less clear.

It is worth noting that the issue Goldman raises – whether or not social epistemology is real epistemology – is such that how we decide on that matter is bound to have practical consequences. If Goldman is right in claiming that social epistemology is real epistemology, substantial portions of social epistemology should be included in any complete introductory textbook or undergraduate course on epistemology. And philosophers writing exclusively on social epistemology should be eligible for academic positions dedicated to epistemology. After all, what they are doing is real epistemology.

In his paper, Goldman surveys a number of issues in social epistemology that are introduced roughly in order of increasing degree of “sociality”. For starters, testimony and peer disagreement are certainly social phenomena, although they are so in a comparatively innocent sense. Here the focus is still on the individual. It is just that her individual inquiry is placed in a wider social context. The next step up the sociality ladder is to study institutions with respect to how good they serve the epistemic purposes of individuals that aspire to attain truth and avoid falsehood. This step is significant because it represents a shift of attention from the individual person to the social institution and its design. We can proceed still further. Several researchers have maintained that it makes good sense to ascribe knowledge, belief, acceptance and the like not only to individuals but also to groups. Goldman is open to this suggestion, pointing out that it would raise interesting issues of how individual judgments are aggregated to form collective ones.

Now Goldman thinks that we can ascend up this social ladder and still do real epistemology, at least so long as there is continuity with what he takes to be the *core assumptions* of traditional epistemology, such as the objectivity of truth and the central role of normativity and rationality. Let us refer to this requirement as that of *individual-to-social continuity*. A further criterion that he introduces is that the social phenomena we are considering, like the Internet or judicial tribunals, should have causal influence on individual inquirer's doxastic attitudes (10). I will call this condition that of *social-to-individual causality*.

### First critical point: core issues vs. core assumptions

Let me now turn to my first critical point. Goldman, as we just heard, favors a characterization of epistemology in terms of certain “core assumptions”. I agree that there is, on this characterization, much continuity between Goldman style social epistemology and

traditional epistemology. After all, this brand of social epistemology is a normative enterprise; and it is predicated on the assumption of truth being, as Goldman puts it, “an objective, largely mind-independent, affair”, and so on for several other core ideas.

What I want to suggest, however, is that the picture changes if we, as indeed I believe many practitioners do, think of traditional epistemology, not or at least not only in terms a set of core assumption but also in terms of a set of *core issues*. If we do, the case for including much of social epistemology in traditional epistemology seems less compelling. Let me try to explain why.

What are the core issues in traditional epistemology? Well, the problem of skepticism would certainly be one, as would the problem of accounting for the nature of knowledge. And then we have or course the traditional rationalist-empiricist debate concerning the identification of legitimate *sources* of knowledge. We shouldn't forget the value problem: why is knowledge distinctively valuable? Then there is the question regarding the *limits* of knowledge. Are there truths that cannot be known? This list of core issues could of course be extended.

Now it seems far from obvious that social epistemology has much to offer by way of answering these and other core issues of traditional epistemology. The problem of the nature of knowledge, for instance, does not seem to involve in any crucial way a social dimension. Neither does the problem of the limits of knowledge. At least this is what I anticipate that most researchers would say about these cases. (I will return to social accounts of the core issues at the end of my comment.) So, Goldman's argument for his main thesis depends in large measure on a characterization of traditional epistemology that I believe many mainstream epistemologists would find seriously incomplete. I take this claim of mine to be in accord with a standard Kuhnian view on what constitutes a research paradigm, where the core issues – the questions that are considered to be most urgent – play a pivotal role for that purpose.

#### Second critical point: does Goldman's argument prove too much?

My second point will be that Goldman's argument seems to prove too much. My reasons for this claim draws on an analogy with the social sciences. The science of psychology is defined in Encyclopedia Britannica as a “scientific discipline that studies mental processes in humans and other animals”. There we also learn that “the issues studied by psychologists cover a wide spectrum, comprising learning, cognition, intelligence, motivation, emotion, perception, personality, mental disorders, and the study of the extent to which individual differences are inherited or are shaped environmentally”. Sociology, on the other hand, is claimed to be “a social science that studies human societies, their interactions, and the processes that preserve and change them”. Furthermore, “it does this by examining the dynamics of constituent parts of societies such as institutions, communities, populations, and gender, racial, or age groups”. Finally, “sociology also studies social status or stratification, social movements, and social change, as well as societal disorders in the form of crime, deviance, and revolution”.

Now clearly, there is, on this description, much continuity between psychology and sociology so that “The broad nature of sociology causes it to overlap with other social sciences such as ... psychology”. For instance, both aim at accounting for various aspects of human behavior, including various forms of “disorder”. Moreover, the groups studied by sociology causally influence the behavior of the individuals studied by psychology. Indeed, it is according to the same source “sociology's task to discover how organizations affect the

behavior of persons". On an abstract level, then, we have both individual-to-social continuity and social-to-individual causality. If Goldman is right in thinking that these very features are those that justify assimilating the social to the individual, sociology should be considered real psychology. But, as we know, it isn't.

Third point or rather a question: what, then, does it take for the social to be assimilated to the individual?

The answer to this question, I believe, lies not or at least not only in individual-to-social continuity and social-to-individual causality. For the social to be assimilated to the individual, there has to be, I submit, a general feeling that the core issues in the individual domain cannot be satisfactorily dealt with, not even in approximation, without bringing in the corresponding social dimension. In a word, there has to be a general sense of anomaly in the individual domain. The assimilation of social psychology to psychology bears witness to the fact that some issues in psychology are indeed such that they cannot be even approximately accounted for from a purely individual perspective.

A parallel case in epistemology is its recent assimilation of a theory of testimony. The inclusion of testimony in mainstream epistemology is due to the fact that, thanks mainly to Coady and his followers, it has become increasingly clear that the traditional account of the sources of knowledge in terms of perception, memory, intuition and so on is utterly incomplete. Unless we take testimony to be a full-fledged source of knowledge, we must conclude that we have much less knowledge than we thought we had. In that sense the traditional problem of accounting for the sources of knowledge simply could not be solved without bringing in, as a last resort, some social machinery.

It follows that for social epistemology *as a whole* to become a legitimate extension of traditional epistemology, it must be shown to have crucial bearing on a substantial number of core issues in the individual domain. Pace Goldman, it doesn't suffice that it complies with most of the core assumptions.

Here is how the current situation looks to me: Traditional epistemology and social epistemology are different areas of philosophical inquiry defined partly by their different sets of core issues. However, they share an interest in the epistemology of testimony which may, for reasons already given, be legitimately viewed as "real epistemology". Maybe the same is true also of the epistemology of disagreement without which, it could be maintained, any theory of justification would be radically incomplete, although I am less sure in that case. At any rate, once we have accepted the epistemology of testimony as real epistemology, it can also be invoked to shed light on another traditional issue, the value of knowledge. Clearly, knowledge is valuable in part because it gives the person who has it the right to transmit it to others via the speech act of sincere assertion or testimony. Having such a right is a good thing. Surely, any theory of the value of knowledge is seriously incomplete unless it can accommodate this social observation. So testimony is special in the sense that it is intimately tied to two fundamental problems of mainstream epistemology. Small wonder that it could be assimilated without much protest. Yet apart from these central problems concerning the sources and value of knowledge, respectively, there is to my mind no clear further candidate for socialization among the traditional core issues. For that reason, I am afraid that I don't fully share Prof. Goldman's optimism regarding the prospects of a more far-reaching inclusion of social epistemology within epistemology as traditionally conceived.