

Social Epistemology and Its Ways of Setting Policy
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Introduction

According to my vision, setting policy is both a practical and theoretical task of social epistemology. This way of thinking is akin to Steve Fuller's (see Finn Collin, <http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-UI>). Generally speaking, I accept Fuller's definition of social epistemology as a "normative discipline that addresses philosophical problems of knowledge using the tools of history and the social sciences." Of particular importance to me is that Fuller actualizes the practical potential of philosophy by turning social epistemology to work on "rational knowledge policy".¹ Even in contemporary Russia such an idea sounds revolutionary and breaks the predominant way of thinking about philosophy as the sphere of endless speculation and 'brain fitness'—far removed from the daily needs of life.

As we know, naturalism implies "various relations of epistemology to natural science" (see Tom Rockmore, <http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-EJ>). If we take epistemology to be not only naturalized but also "politicized", we are obliged to show its various relations to politics and policy making. There are direct and indirect ways to understand this idea.

Part I

Social epistemology is intended to provide "policy" inside science itself; otherwise, talk about its normative character would be meaningless. As a normative discipline, social epistemology influences the process of doing science on methodological, axiological and organizational levels and, in this way, contributes to decision-making about what to accept as well-grounded knowledge and how to optimize the process of knowledge production. However, not only professionally trained epistemologists can fulfill such a job. Scientists and administrators often perform this effort on their own. Still, better outcomes can be produced if done in communication and collaboration with those who specialize in a subject.

In terms of "policy", classical epistemology aimed at an epistemic dictatorship, consisting in setting strict and universal rules for scientific work—the 'logic of inquiry', as positivists would say. Social epistemology emphasizes a democratic pathway, proposing collaborative interdisciplinary program for researchers in various fields of cognitive studies. In contrast to front-office decisions taken from the classics, social epistemologists avoid *a priori* rules and formulate regulative hints, working on case-by-case basis.

Obviously, social sciences and philosophy have become the main sources of ideas and tools for social epistemologists. But the additional options can be included to this list over time. Since the individual is not much separated from the collective, the humanities

¹ Fuller, Steve. *Social Epistemology*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, 22.

are also relevant for our studies, especially if we consider the point “what is science asking us to become?” (Thomas Basbøll, <http://social-epistemology.com/collective-vision/#ise>). Moreover, social epistemology can interact with natural sciences, and some members of SERRC already exemplify it (for example, Melinda Bonnie Fagan, <http://social-epistemology.com/collective-vision/#objects>). I am skeptical about the existence of fixed disciplinary boundaries. The body of cognition is too complex and alive for it. Everything intersects everything else at certain points. Consequently, classifications and separations of disciplines are nothing more than imperfect and temporary conveniences.

Any discipline can start a dialogue and relationship with any other field of research. The same thing can be observed in the case of philosophical disciplines. When Rudolf Carnap, following the trend of logical empiricism and analytic philosophy, tried to set a new field of studies and method for philosophy, he was thinking mainly about reducing philosophy to logical analysis (of syntactic or semiotic forms). We know the end of this story, but it is curious to learn what Carnap was saying about it in his later writings:

In earlier periods, I sometimes made attempts to give an explication of the term “philosophy”. The domain of those problems which I proposed to call “philosophical” became step by step more comprehensive, as Morris indicates. Yet actually none of my explications seemed fully satisfactory to me even when I proposed them; and I did not like the explications proposed by others any better. Finally, I gave up the search. I agree with Morris that it is unwise to attempt such an explication because each of them is more or less artificial. It seems better to leave the term “philosophy” without any sharp boundary lines, and merely to propose the inclusion or the exclusion of certain kinds of problems”.²

In another instance, Carnap makes an observation that also determined much my way of thinking about this issue. He says “What is philosophy?” is essentially a terminological question.³ If the conventional nature of disciplinary division is grasped by us, we understand, among other things, two important points: 1) The open character of interactions between social epistemology and other academic disciplines; 2) The specific design of social epistemology that focuses on social (conventional) side of knowledge. In the light of this vision, I tolerate the wide range of attempts to show the places of philosophy and social epistemology in the system of knowledge. The only requirement for such attempts is that they should develop a viable project, communicate with tradition, solve problems and produce decisions.

It is interesting that I acquired such ideas (quite in the spirit of social epistemology) during work on a PhD thesis about Rudolf Carnap and modern formal methods in science studies. “Classical epistemology”, then, appears more complicated than usually supposed—a theme that deserves special attention. For now, I note briefly that we can expect not only relations between different variants of social epistemology (Finn Collin

² Schilpp, Paul Arthur (ed.). *The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap*. La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1963, 862.

³ Carnap, Rudolf. *Introduction to Semantics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1942, 250.

<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-UI>), but also the interaction between different branches inside epistemology; for example, between formal, and social, epistemology (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-bayesian/#BaySocEpi>) or evolutionary and social epistemology (<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology-evolutionary/#1.1>) and so on. I am sure this dialogue can be very fruitful.

Part II

My last topic concerns “the chief aim of social epistemology”—“the optimal social organization of knowledge production”.⁴ From a practical perspective, I think this formula requires additional details. Usually, it is said that social epistemology is interested in topics of knowledge production and distribution. As for distribution, this process seems only the part of much larger phenomenon that must be the target of attention—the functioning of knowledge in the society. This phenomenon includes things such as the distribution, perception, distortion of knowledge (e.g., manipulation) and other kinds of use (for example, for social group organization as was described by Miika Vähämaa, <http://social-epistemology.com/collective-vision/#empirical>). All these processes have epistemic aspects that can be studied and influenced by social epistemologists and others interested. (Here, I mean people who also study these phenomena or deal with them).

Accordingly, our ability to set the social policy is becoming more extended. In addition to knowledge, science and technology, it is possible to talk about information policy and education policy. We already have in the SERRC examples of thinking in this direction (see María G. Navarro <http://social-epistemology.com/collective-vision/#judgment> and Elisabeth Simbürger <http://social-epistemology.com/collective-vision/#work>). The number of applications is not restricted and before us is a boundless ocean of possibilities. Since science, technology and education are super-factors in the social development and shaping the future, social epistemology can provide the important material for strategic political thinking and planning.

My concern is the idea that the practical potential of social epistemology can be realized solely by a certain way of combining thinking and acting; that is, the call for intellectuals to come down from theoretical heaven to reside on sinful earth. That is the how Steve Fuller does philosophy. He provides an example of such activity. I was always inclined to this model of intellectual “ministering”, too. That is why I am glad to join the SERRC. It lends an opportunity to develop this project of simultaneous philosophical thinking and social acting. At least, the task of developing intellectual equipment for future society is of great importance, but that is not just a matter for social epistemology.

Conclusion

This statement is the brief description of my vision. Many ideas from here are the subject of my current thinking. I am only starting to interact with social epistemology and look forward to working together.

⁴ Fuller, Steve. *Social Epistemology*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, 22.

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