

Reply to Louise Antony
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Introduction

I would like to thank Louise Antony for her characteristically thorough and thoughtful response to my paper. That the problems I point to are political is something we agree about, as I am reasonably sure we largely agree both about diagnoses and about desirable directions of change; where we disagree is in my seeing those problems as also, and inextricably, epistemological. I suspect that the main reason that our disagreements have, over many years, been so intractable is that we are not offering different answers to the same questions but are, rather, addressing different questions. Fundamentally, I think, we disagree about how to understand the tasks of epistemology and how to characterize the problems it ought to be addressing. My work has aimed, literally, at changing the subject, by thinking about what problems concerning knowledge and belief are especially pressing now, hence what questions we should be asking, and arguing that those questions are importantly different from those — concerning the nature of knowledge as pursued by generic individuals — that are at the heart of analytic epistemology as currently practiced, however much those who pursue it may disagree about how to answer those questions.

Approaches to Epistemology

There is, as I and others have argued, a history to putting questions about the nature of knowledge as pursued by generic individuals at the center of epistemology. That history is profoundly practical and political and is inextricable from the history of European modernity, in particular, the creation and empowerment of the bourgeois individual, the generic "man". Originally meant to encompass only a small percentage of actual humans, his ranks have swelled as more and more of modernity's others have pursued the promise of liberalism, claiming, among other privileges, the right to rationality, including to science, that is, the right to be counted among those whose epistemic practices are described and prescribed by epistemology. Modern epistemology was at its inception eminently practical, something obscured by the current understanding of the field, most evident in the distinction — common, for example, in some European countries — between practical and theoretical philosophy, but clearly operating even when not so terminologically and institutionally marked. That the world of analytic epistemology no longer sees epistemology as "practical" is an indication that the project of authorizing generic individuals as proper knowers is no longer a live political project, at least for those in the worlds in which analytic epistemology is primarily pursued. (This is not to say that struggles for inclusion are no longer live problems — they clearly are — but rather that the terms of those struggles have shifted, importantly including issues at the heart of the debates that concern Antony and me, over the nature of inclusion, whether, specifically, inclusiveness demands shifts at the fundamental level of epistemology.) The domain of the properly epistemological within analytic philosophy has taken on a life of its own, no longer shaped by political struggle, and a major aim of my work has been to argue for a reorientation of the field around currently pressing epistemic problems.

Unlike many analytic epistemologists, however, I think that Antony would accept the idea that philosophy in general, and epistemology in particular, ought to be useful, even that it ought especially to be useful for political struggles such as those against sexism, racism, economic and military imperialism, and the inequities of class. If I correctly understand her position on these matters, she argues that, properly answered, the descriptive and prescriptive questions posed by analytic epistemology precisely *are* useful in this way: the methods of science, for example, are generally truth-conducive and hence valuable to everyone, no matter their particular interests or aims; and what we need to assure (and it is the task of politics and not of epistemology to take this on) is that the privileged actually follow the norms they officially profess (something, she correctly points out, they routinely do not do), that the projects undertaken using those methods be ethically and politically defensible (as they need not be and frequently are not: one can, as she also correctly points out, put truths to very bad ends), and that access to reliable methods be democratized (through, for example, education and the allocation of research funding). I understand Antony to be arguing that epistemology, along with at least much of what falls under the rubric of scientific method(s), is prior to political considerations, and immune from political critique, not, presumably, because it is without political consequence, but precisely because, given its connection to truth-conducivity, it is politically valuable, as it is valuable for any people, groups, and projects for which the truth is valuable — namely, everyone and all of them.

Getting It Right

I agree with Antony about the importance of getting it right about the world. It is one of the principal thrusts of my paper that what I call an unsustainable epistemology leads to knowledge claims that, while they might appear to be adequate from the perspectives of the more privileged, ultimately fail to do justice to the complexity of the world: they are, if not straight-forwardly false, at least over-simplified and misleading. One reason why, unlike Antony, I do not want to draw a line between epistemic considerations and moral/political considerations is because I believe the latter have consequences for the former — not just, as Antony clearly agrees, for how epistemic practices play out, but also for what we take to be appropriate norms for those practices. Furthermore, I believe that the connection between the sorts of moral and political practices Antony and I would both endorse and getting it right about the world is both closer and more complex than Antony would have it.

What we need from epistemic norms is that they be conducive to knowing well, and that has (at least) two components: the beliefs we come up with need to be more likely than not to be true, and they need to be rationally acceptable to a wide range of others — that is, we are seeking not only to understand the world but to do so in ways that are worthy of being trusted (in Scheman 2001, I argue that this is what we ought to mean by objectivity). These two elements are different but closely related. Different in that people can have good reasons for mistrusting even the best-arrived at beliefs of others (think about the story of the boy who cried wolf, which I'll discuss below); related in that when some people are systematically excluded from the processes of knowledge creation (in

part because they mistrust and are mistrusted by the more privileged) their critical and substantive contributions to the process are lost, and the distinctive ways in which they engage with — and come to know — the objects of knowledge others authoritatively study are no part of the authorized accounts. If we fail to adequately attend to the question of why some people systematically and rationally mistrust knowledge claims from privileged social locations, the question Antony would relegate to the “political”, we will fail even to ask the question of how knowledge claims generated at privileged locations may be problematically partial, incomplete, or simply wrong. These seem to me to be epistemological issues, and I see no reason to cordon them off, nor any value to delimiting the range of the properly epistemological to exclude them.

I also agree with Antony that it is important to take inquirers’ interests into account, that such interests shape the questions they choose to pursue, and that issues of power shape whose interests determine what research will be funded and otherwise supported. Where we disagree is in my not understanding why one would think that the influence of interests, power, and other matters of politics would stop there — stop, that is, at some point prior to such matters as: What does a researchable problem look like? What makes something a proper object of knowledge, or, for that matter, an object? What constitutes evidence? What sorts of considerations go into what counts as good reasoning? What is relevant to consider in deciding if certain beliefs are justified? We agree that knowledge-seeking is a motivated activity, and that the motivations behind it are properly subject to moral, ethical, and political scrutiny. We disagree about whether we ought to think about the methods of seeking knowledge — including the norms for doing so effectively, in ways that track truth — as themselves crafted so as to further some epistemic projects and thwart others. We probably also disagree about the nature of objects of knowledge — whether, that is (as Helen Longino, Bruno Latour, and others have argued), they are not naturally occurring, there to be found and examined, but rather constructed, carved out of the stuff of the world, into manageable, shapely chunks, suited both to our epistemic tools and to the interests those tools were themselves crafted to serve. Thinking of objects of knowledge in this way makes them no less real: rather, it is to take our engagements with them as themselves real, to break with the idea that realism about objects of knowledge precludes an equivalent realism about the subjects of knowledge and about the processes of knowledge acquisition.

The problem, as I see it, is this: conceptions of knowers, of objects of knowledge, and of the proper relationships between and among them are built into the way epistemology understands its tasks. Epistemological questions look very different if we shift the focus of epistemological inquiry, as I argue that we ought to, to the problems that face diversely socially located inquirers dependent for most of what they need to know on others with whom they are not acquainted and frequently have no good reason to trust, and to the problems that arise from the complex ways in which knowers and objects of knowledge are interrelated and interdependent. We cannot address *these* problems if we start with generic individual knowers: we will have already made what Wittgenstein calls “the initial move in the conjuring trick,” whereby, before we seem to have done anything substantive at all, we have stacked the deck in ways that make some moves inevitable and others impossible, and some questions impossible to pose.

Normative Epistemology

Epistemology, Antony and I agree, is a fundamentally normative enterprise. Some critics of especially Quinean naturalized epistemology have faulted it for eschewing the normative in favor of a (merely) descriptive account of how we come to form beliefs; but, whatever one might say about Quine himself, the opposition between naturalizing and normativity is one neither Antony nor I would accept. In her 1993 "Quine as feminist: The radical import of naturalized epistemology" Antony makes a case for naturalized epistemology as useful for feminist aims, a conclusion I would share, and one way to bring out the differences in our perspectives is to say something about just what naturalizing epistemic *normativity* should come to.

As I understand her, Antony ties epistemic normativity to truth conducivity: ways of knowing are better insofar as they are more likely to lead us to true beliefs. Thus, for example, in the 1993 paper she distinguishes between good and bad forms of bias on the grounds that embracing bad forms of bias — androcentric, racist, etc. — leads to false beliefs, while embracing good forms of bias — anti-sexist, anti-racist, etc. — leads to true beliefs. That is, on her account the "goodness" and "badness" are determined by their relationship to truth-seeking, not by their political valences. As she puts it in the present piece, "... we must be willing to talk about truth and falsity ... But we must be clear: The Dragnet theory is not false because it's pernicious; it's pernicious because it's false" (214). But if what's at issue is normativity, not just description, we can't so easily distinguish false from pernicious. She argues — persuasively, I think — that what she calls the Dragnet Theory (the full account is in Antony 1993) could not be a correct account of how we actually come to know. That is, it is descriptively false as an account of actual knowledge-acquiring practices, and also very bad advice: were one to try to model one's doxastic practices on it, those practices would spectacularly fail. And both the descriptive and normative claims hold across the board, independently of social location or epistemic or other interests. But this independence — of the epistemological from the political — holds only on a particular conception of what the questions, the subject matter, of epistemology are.

On Justification

Think about justification. For a start, it is an intrinsically naturalized notion. If it weren't — if justification were not tied to how we, as the sorts of creatures we are, go about, and are able to go about, forming beliefs — there would not be the gap there is between justification and truth. (From a God's-eye perspective, all and only true beliefs are justified.) For a belief to be justified is for the believer to have lived up to some reasonable set of standards, and what determines the reasonableness of those standards is not that they guarantee that the belief so-formed is actually true. (In the *Fourth Meditation* Descartes tries to close this gap, proposing a mode of justifying beliefs supposedly stringent enough to rule out error, but this is hardly a standard to which we typically hold ourselves or each other.) What the standards of justification are has a great deal to do with what we take to be our typical epistemic capacities and liabilities, and

how we think about *that* has a great deal to do with how we characterize the situations in which we typically form beliefs. One way in which social epistemology gets moved from the margins to the center of epistemology is through the recognition that what gets called "testimony" and gets treated as a special, non-optimal mode of belief-formation is, in fact, how we acquire most of our beliefs; and any account of justification has to centrally address questions about how we properly deal with what I have called our irremediable epistemic dependency (Scheman 2001). Antony's focus on generically human cognitive capacities may be appropriate when the epistemic processes under consideration are such things as perception and memory, but that focus is, I argue, inappropriate when we're thinking about how we acquire knowledge from others and transmit it to them. Here the sorts of situations that Miranda Fricker theorizes — of epistemic injustice — are clearly both common and consequential for any account of epistemic normativity.

Justification is thus not only a fundamentally naturalistic notion; it is equally a situated one. And given the centrality of epistemic dependence, the relevant situatedness is importantly social: whom and what we can rationally trust depends a great deal on the relationships in which we stand to those sources of authority. Consider the story of the boy who cried wolf: on this particular occasion, he might well be in an excellent position to know that a wolf is about to attack, and he might be entirely sincere in his attempt to alert us to the danger. Nonetheless — and to our detriment — it would not be rational for us to believe him; and were we to do so, our belief would not actually be justified. Many people stand in an analogous relation to the claims of even the best of Western science. In relation to their lives, the track records of the institutions from which those claims emanate rationally ground not trust but deep suspicion — meaning that whether or not they accept the scientific claims (and there are all sorts of complex reasons why they might or might not do so), such acceptance would actually be irrational and unjustified. It might very well be that the scientific claims are well-founded, that the methods by which they are arrived at are appropriate and truth-conducive, but that doesn't settle the question of whether *these* people, in *this* social location, with *this* set of historical and contemporary relationships to the sites from which the knowledge claims issue would be justified in believing them. The consequences of disbelief may well be catastrophic; but that fact doesn't make the disbelief irrational, any more than it would be irrational for the townspeople, however catastrophically, to reject the warnings, even if in this case well-founded, of the boy who cried wolf.

On Testimony

At this point a plausible response — one that Antony might suggest — would be to note that anyone at all can be in the position of the townspeople in relation to the boy who cried wolf; the problem is one that faces any, or the generic, knower: it is simply the problem of testimony, which, although not central to analytic epistemology, can nonetheless be addressed by it. For a start, the story makes it clear that testimony is a second-best doxastic strategy: if it really matters if the wolf is at the gate, you'd be well-advised to go check it out yourself. And, if that's not feasible or possible, you should better vet your sentries, doing background checks so as not to rely on mendacious children. The literature on testimony typically argues along these lines, including

alongside the testimony itself evidence as to the credibility of the testifiers, meaning both the likelihood that they are in a position to know what they're talking about and their reputation for sincerity (see, for example, Root 1998). The situatedness of knowers is not epistemologically interesting, any more than it is epistemologically interesting to note that at the moment I can report directly on the weather in Cape Town, while my friends back in Minnesota can report on the weather there.

But the plausibility of this response rests on the sleight of hand I mentioned above. The situation of those who have been marginalized, exploited, and misrepresented by privileged knowers has a crucial disanalogy with that of the townspeople being misled by the boy who cried wolf. In the case of the townspeople their dependency (and consequent liability to misinformation) is not systematic or structural, and it is easily remediable: noticing it does not require fundamentally shifting the focus of epistemology; we just need to add on a set of questions we might not have thought to ask but that can be addressed within the same general framework of evidence and reasoning. And so long as we have in mind generic (i.e., implicitly privileged) knowers, that is how the problem of testimony will appear to us. But when we shift the perspective from which epistemological questions arise to that of less privileged, more systematically vulnerable inquirers, things look quite different. Epistemic dependency affects differently situated knowers differently: for those whose perspectives are characterized by systematic subordination, problematically trust-undermining dependency is both structural and, in the absence of fundamental political change, irremediable.

The norms of appropriate reliance on testimony, addressed to generic knowers, presume a relatively even doxastic playing field on which to gather and assess the evidence of the reliability of those on whose testimony one relies; and those norms make sense only against the — typically unarticulated — bracketing of the real world in which doxastic playing fields are systematically and structurally uneven. From the perspectives of those for whom that unevenness is a glaringly obvious fact the norms of individual doxastic responsibility are a cruel joke when it comes to assessing the knowledge claims from privileged locations. And among what becomes obvious, beyond the untrustworthiness of those whose epistemic practices are woven into oppressive histories and institutions, is just how much those practices are missing through their arrogant presumption of adequacy. People cannot survive without significant knowledge about how the world around them works; and, while hardly infallible, traditional knowledges are not just raw material to be taken up and transmuted into "real" knowledge, and only once transmuted actually justified. Framing epistemological questions from less privileged standpoints shifts those questions to ones that are attentive to the workings of power and to the complexities of creating genuinely critical engagements that take seriously the nature of justification.

On the Politics of Justification

Recognizing the inherently naturalized nature of justification thus brings the question of normativity into sharp relief. The core question concerns the limitations on the acquisition of true beliefs: when are those limitations considered to be part of the

background situation against which the subject's beliefs are evaluated as meeting or failing to meet the standards of justification, and when are those limitations "held against" the subject, making the beliefs in question count as unjustified? Justification, that is, is always relative to the "available evidence", and always appeals, explicitly or implicitly, to notions of epistemic responsibility: my beliefs will fail to be justified not only if I fail to draw the obvious conclusions from the evidence I in fact have, but also if I culpably fail to notice or to look for evidence that I could have obtained had I cared to. Antony clearly recognizes the doxastic irresponsibility of those who for economically or politically motivated reasons ignore — and encourage others to ignore — evidence of, for example, global warming, but she sees this problem as political and not epistemological. As she puts it, "Scheman's analysis says that members of the dominant class fail to learn because they harbor defective concepts of knowledge and employ ineffective norms, I say that they fail to learn because they don't care. In indicting the epistemology of the dominant, Scheman seems to be saying that the methods of inquiry they adopt are inadequate to their epistemic goals. I, on the other hand, insist that their methods of inquiry are all too adequate, and that it is their epistemic goals that are wrong. The founding error is not cognitive; it is moral, and the corrective lies not in philosophy, but in politics" (2013, 16). It is that distinction that I'm calling into question.

In order to assess the rationality of a belief — understood as the appropriately responsible exercise of doxastic agency — we need to idealize the knowing subject: does the belief in question meet the standards to which knowers ought to be held? But the question — exactly the analogue of the question Charles Mills raises in relation to political theory — is what we ought to be abstracting away when we characterize the idealized knower (Mills 2005). We don't hold blind people responsible for not seeing what those with normal vision can see, and we don't hold anyone responsible for not seeing what only x-ray vision would reveal (unless they're radiologists). But clearly we don't want to say, "well, this person is just sloppy, jumping to conclusions all over the place — that's just how he is; so, given that fact about him, this particular (patently absurd) belief counts as justified." Nor, presumably, do we want to say, "well, this person gets all her news from Fox and right-wing blogs, and all she's been exposed to is anti-climate change rhetoric; so, given that fact, her disbelief in climate change counts as justified." Similarly — to pick up on Miranda Fricker's notion of testimonial injustice — we ought not to count as justified a belief formed by dismissing — on, for example, sexist or racist grounds — the testimony of someone in a position to be reliably reporting on what's going on. The beliefs in all these cases count (or ought to count) as unjustified because the ways in which they were formed don't live up to the standards to which responsible believers ought to be held: the circumstances that explain the fact that the beliefs are held are not exculpatory; the believers ought to have known better.

But what I argued in the present paper — and at greater length in Scheman 2001 — is that the situation is quite different in the case of those who have good reason not to trust the relevant testimony, in particular, when it comes from sources that have a track record ranging from dismissive arrogance to outright deceit and exploitation. Of course, this is a political matter; I couldn't agree more. But it is, it seems to me, also an epistemological one, since we cannot properly understand the nature of justification without taking it on.

Normative Questions about Norms

Putting it this way makes it clear that we're dealing with a case of meta-normativity — that is, with normative questions about the norms by which beliefs are judged to be or fail to be justified. And, as Mills (2005) has argued, to give an account of justification that brackets the political questions about the systematic unevenness of the epistemic terrain precludes giving those questions the attention they need if we hope to understand what knowledge is and how we ought to be acquiring it. We cannot, that is, give an account of justification for idealized epistemic agents and leave for some other venue (politics) a consideration of why and how people fail to live up to such idealizations.

The justifiability of beliefs we think are false — for example, the rejection of what we take to be good science — is thus a complex matter. Clearly, justification *ought* to track truth: it is epistemically a good thing when one's ways of deciding what to doubt and what to believe tend to lead one to reject false beliefs and affirm true ones. But when this is not the case, it can be difficult to ascertain where the problem lies — when, in particular, one is not in fact justified in believing as one does and when, although one is mistaken, perhaps in ways that others can clearly discern, one's beliefs and doubts are nonetheless justified. Antony's critique thus leads me to emphasize (as I did not in the article) an important reason for starting from the perspective of the vulnerable — namely, that social, economic, and political structures typically distort the doxastic landscape in ways that produce systematic failures of justification for true beliefs. Thus, not only are there some truths that, as standpoint theories tell us, are best seen from the vantage point of the subordinated, but also from that standpoint we can discern the structures that undermine trust, making it irrational to accept claims that are actually very likely to be true.

To argue, as I do, for starting investigations from the standpoint of those who are distinctively vulnerable, is not to ignore the sorts of things that Antony points out: that vulnerability doesn't guarantee that one will think clearly or effectively or that one's practices will be sustainable, that marginalization and subordination carry with them serious epistemic liabilities, and that the epistemic practices associated with privileged social locations are often highly truth-conducive. Taking vulnerability as a standpoint is not to romanticize such locations, the people who live in them, or the actual epistemic practices they engage in. Rather, it is to suggest that those of us who care about the lives and futures of those rendered excessively vulnerable especially by our own relative comfort and prosperity (and I have no question at all that Antony cares and that it matters to her that her philosophizing express this care) ground our philosophizing in attentiveness to those locations, in particular, in how to understand justification: for example, what needs to be the case for the science we believe in to be rationally acceptable? And, beyond that, what is occluded by the ways in which our science circumscribes its objects of knowledge, and how might we — all of us — better understand the world if diverse sorts of uncontrolled exposure to its "kicking back" were seen as a source of genuine knowledge — not incorrigible (nothing is), but part of a genuinely democratic, critical conversation?

It's not that vulnerability leads to knowledge in some immediate way: the myth of pure indigenous knowledge is just that, a myth, and a pernicious one. The supposedly more direct and "natural" relationship in which indigenous peoples are taken to stand to their worlds has, as Uma Narayan (1997) and others have argued, served precisely to *disauthorize* them as knowers (see also Scheman 2008). What counts — and ought to count — as knowledge is always an achievement and is always subject to challenge and critique. But the specific norms of abstraction, isolation, and control that characterize modern western science are distinctive and, however undeniably powerful and useful, limited. Laboratory science, randomized controlled clinical trials, and other methods that characterize modern science are, as Antony notes, powerful and effective epistemic tools. I have not argued that we should abandon them. But they lead us astray not only when they are taken to be sufficient to ground the rationality of belief for any rational agent but also when they are taken to be transparent windows into the structure of reality, rather than particular, contextualized, socially embodied ways of relating to objects of knowledge that are constructed through those relationships and that need to be attentively recontextualized back into the rest of the world. Failure to attend to such recontextualization has the consequence that scientific expertise is unlikely to be as sensitively attuned to local circumstances — and therefore as genuinely useful — as it would be were it arrived at through respectful collaboration.

The epistemic norms and practices characteristic of modern Western science have a great deal to offer, including in helping to remedy some of the problems they have helped to create: global warming, antibiotic-resistant organisms, soil and water depletion, pollution. But actually accomplishing those goals, as well as contributing to human knowledge in other ways, will require an uncharacteristic degree of humility, both to appropriately respond to the trust deficit, and to learn how to learn from — by respectfully, critically engaging with — diverse local knowledges. To suggest that we ground inquiry in norms of sustainability and attentiveness to the epistemic situation of the most vulnerable is not to reject scientific expertise: rather, it is to take seriously both the reasons why what is valuable in that expertise is rationally unacceptable to many who would benefit from it, limiting their ability to understand the world, and equally the ways in which that expertise is not the ultimate arbiter of its own success, answerable only to its own standards, and worthy of a monopoly on reliable ways of knowing. To the extent that modern science has something to offer to the world's dispossessed (and it is clear that it has a great deal to offer), it needs to take on the responsibility of making a case for itself, and that means trying to understand how it fits into the world, specifically how it looks from the standpoint of those whom it has been used against, whose ways of knowing it has been used to stigmatize, who have no reason at all to trust it and much good reason not to, and whose complex, sophisticated, relationships with things in the world have something to teach the rest of us.

Conclusion

What I am calling for is a heightened rigor, an increased concern for getting it right, and a greater respect for the real world in all its complexity. In Wittgensteinian terms, there is

no bedrock of practice-independent rationality, itself immune from critique; in Quinean terms, everything, including logic, is potentially revisable. In terms neither would have embraced but both should have, epistemology has as its subject matter real activities in a real world characterized by systematic inequality and inequity; and thinking seriously about knowing well requires not that we somehow try to find a place that stands outside all of that (as we should have learned from both of them, there is no such place), but precisely that we grapple with it, with all the critical tools we can muster — and that means that we cannot cordon epistemology off from politics.

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