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“Performing Knowing: A Reply to Collins”


http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-33t
Harry Collins and I agree on many things. We both value clarity of expression, as well as informed agreement and disagreement. We agree about the intimate relation between action and intention. We agree that it is a mistake to assign an intention to a collectivity. This means, I believe, that it is a mistake to attribute actions to groups or other collectivities. “Actions, as we use the term, are tied up with intentions, and intentions are internal states” (Collins and Kusch 1998, 18).

What we seem to disagree about is the truth of the following assertion: “the primary subject of knowledge is the group, not the individual” (Collins and Kusch 1998, 5; footnote 3). Collins affirms it. I deny it. Our disagreement seems to turn on what each of us means by “subject of knowledge”. I mean “the performer of an act of knowing”. I now understand Collins to equate the subject of knowledge with the locus of knowledge.

My disagreement with Collins turns on my denial that “knowledge” is something that can be possessed,” the same sense that money or physical objects can be possessed. If “knowledge” is imagined to be something that can be possessed, then it follows that it can be possessed by either a collectivity or a person. I do not, however, imagine knowledge to be something that can be possessed. I imagine “knowledge” as inseparable from acts of knowing, as something performed, rather than possessed.

So I can agree with Collins that the locus of knowledge is always a collectivity, sometimes as small as a collectivity of two persons. What I mean by this is that persons perform acts of knowing in social settings. Even if the person who performs the act is physically separate from other persons, others are virtually present. If, however, “knowledge” is imagined as something that is performed, rather than possessed, then it follows that a person can perform an act of knowing, but that a group or other collectivity cannot.

This is an issue that divides social epistemology. Calvert-Minor (2011) contends that collectivities are epistemic agents, and Grasswick (2004, 2011) argues that “individuals-in-community”, rather than the communities-as-communities, are the agents of knowing. My position is very similar, if not identical, to that of Grasswick. I had previously thought that Collins’s position was very close to that of Calvert-Minor, but after considering his denial that collectivities can perform actions, including acts of knowing, I am much less sure of this than I was previously.

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References


