Social Epistemology at the Dawn of a New Decade

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This year-end reflection will return to the state of social epistemology and how it might go forward in light of the post-truth condition. Its point of departure is threefold. First is the recent assessment made by our field’s ‘honest broker’, the Danish philosopher Finn Collin, who has now twice compared my own version of social epistemology with that of analytic social epistemology, as epitomized by Alvin Goldman. Second is a recent and rewarding experience I had at the ‘mother of universities’, University of Bologna, which houses a Department of Philosophy and Communication. That department staged a workshop on ‘post-truth’ that brought together a variety of social epistemologists—analytic, continental and pragmatist. Third is Adam Briggle’s request for me to explain why the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s rather long entry on ‘social epistemology’ fails to discuss my work at all. All three are in the mix in what follows.

Revisiting Analytic Social Epistemology’s Pseudo-Naturalism

Collin’s (2019) most recent article confirms that analytic social epistemology’s avowed ‘naturalism’ has been always hollow. Indeed, I described it already in 1993 as ‘Tychonic’—in reference to Tycho Brahe’s valiant sixteenth century attempt to do justice to both Ptolemy’s and Copernicus’ world-systems without contradicting either. It was a mathematically brilliant attempt to save the phenomena without substantially advancing the science (Fuller and Collier 2004, chapter 3). And so, we see Goldman and his epigones mobilize the latest findings from cognitive/behavioural/evolutionary psychology to explain ordinary epistemic weaknesses (the Copernican move), yet some conceptually defined class of ‘experts’—who may not actually exist—remain immune to those failures (the Ptolemaic move). I shall later refer to Sanford Goldberg (aka ‘Goldman 2.0’) in this context.

In contrast, starting with my second book, Philosophy of Science and Its Discontents, I have called for a ‘reflexive naturalism’, which universalises—and in that sense, ‘democratises’—naturalism by applying the full range of human fallibilities to both experts and lay people with regard to any knowledge domain (Fuller 1993, postscript). This helps to explain why I have been sympathetic to postmodernism—defending it during the ‘Science Wars’ of the 1990s—and welcoming ‘post-truth’ these days (Fuller 2018). It also explains why I have consistently believed that the ‘meta-sciences’—history, philosophy, sociology, politics, psychology and economics of science—offer a more useful guide to ‘science policy’, broadly construed (i.e. both research and teaching), than professional competence in the sciences themselves. As I understand ‘social epistemology’, these fields offer a ‘second order’ frame of reference for assessing the life expectancy of any currently agreed knowledge claim, which circumvents much—if not all—of what is required of professional competence in a first-order field. I even invoked this idea in defence of intelligent design theory in Kitzmiller v Dover Area School District (2005).

Take the case of global warming. Before passing judgement, the social epistemologist should examine the current projections of climate meltdown in terms of the track record of such projections. After all, this is not the first time such projections have been made. To be sure, if young people such as Greta Thunberg front the latest calls—notwithstanding their lack historical memory or even subject-based competence—they are likely to be seen as more
'authentic', simply because of their future-forward focus. I don’t deny that Greta and her gang are sincere. My only question is whether they are adequately informed in the meta-level way that social epistemology can provide. Without denying that humans are primarily or even uniquely responsible for substantial climate change, one should also examine the reasons for the failures of past projections of doom—and if versions of those reasons might not be present now. I respectfully suggest that they might be.

Moreover, I don’t think it would take a ‘big research grant’ to make this point in a way that might affect policymakers. It just takes motivation, will and publicity, which is something that I invite social epistemologists to explore in the new decade. Let me be clear: I don’t mean this as a stealth ‘climate change denial’ strategy but simply a call to take the ‘meta-facts’ as seriously as the ‘facts’. Of course, I believe in anthropogenic climate change, and that we need to do more than we are currently doing about it. But this urgency is largely based on already existing inequalities in the world’s political economy. Wealth has not been adequately redistributed—by capitalist or socialist means—to sustain the radical environmental changes that humanity as a whole continues to cause. Moreover, this problem has been more squarely deposited on capitalism’s doorstep after Marxism’s failure. The democratic left’s ability to cope with a substantial ‘Green’ focus remains a work in progress, to say the least. Resolving human inequality would be politically so much easier if the fate of the entire planet did not need to be taken into account in any electorally responsive welfare scheme.

Social Epistemology’s Conspicuous Absences and Presences

Now let us turn to the composition of the Stanford Encyclopedia article (fall 2019) on ‘social epistemology’. It begins by identifying various historical precedents for the field from the history, philosophy and sociology of science, which were ones that I—alone among the early ‘social epistemologists’—incorporated into the first book ever published with the title, Social Epistemology (Fuller 1988). This and all of my subsequent works are conspicuously absent from the article’s bibliography. Interestingly, several of my works had been included in earlier versions of the article, if only to dismiss them. However, as one might expect of what Kuhn called ‘Orwellian’ historiography, they have been airbrushed out in successive editions. I expect that this process will continue apace, resulting in even the prior history of social epistemology minimized to the point of outright elimination. At that point, ‘social epistemology’ will appear as having originated with Alvin Goldman’s version of social epistemology.

No doubt, this turn of events will seem strange to, among others, the editorial board of the publishing house of the Chinese Communist Party, which is in the process of translating a set of five ‘social epistemology’ books into Chinese. Of those, three were authored by me, one is about me and the fifth is about the Cold War US philosophy of science context that provided the background for my extended analysis of Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. This is characteristic of the pattern that I have found in terms of the reception of social epistemology outside of the Anglophone analytic philosophy world. Even Wikipedia, which has not been especially hospitable to my work, nevertheless contains a somewhat more balanced account of social epistemology. So, although it is regrettable that the Stanford Encyclopedia fails to acknowledge my contribution to social epistemology, I believe that those who take the entry seriously stand the most to lose in the long term. But needless to say,
anyone wishing to set the record straight with *Encyclopedia*’s editors is certainly welcomed to do so!

As for Goldman’s version of social epistemology that is given pride of place in the *Stanford Encyclopedia*, it is little more than a branch of analytic epistemology, which borrows and sometimes reinvents concepts from other fields on a need-to-know basis for a project that, in practice, is an often distended version of conceptual analysis, occasionally punctuated by sound pieces of methodological advice that make sense even without the elaborate verbiage with which they are justified. However, this enterprise is not quite as harmless as I have just presented it, because the wall of words offers opportunities of rhetorical amplification, whereby broader normative claims are ‘derived’ from these sound pieces of advice that can’t really bear up under close—if less verbose—logical inspection. The logical positivists must be turning in their graves.

A good recent case in point is Sanford Goldberg’s *‘Should Have Known’* (2017), a bloated (aka ‘carefully worded’) 32-page article mainly devoted to conceptual capture of the law’s ‘culpable ignorance’ principle for analytic social epistemology. However, the penny drops halfway through the text, when riffing off an example from Ian Hacking, Goldberg asserts that a sailor who mislocated a sunken ship because he failed to read a key part of the ship’s log is guilty of not only professional misconduct—an ordinary case of culpable ignorance—but also of some more fundamental epistemological error. Goldberg then proceeds to embellish this point for pages until concluding that we are obliged to be sensitive to evidence that is in principle available to us but not necessarily covered by any of the usual norms by which we acquire and assess evidence. In short, people ‘should have known’ much more than they are normally held responsible for knowing.

To the disinterested observer, this looks like an attempt by an analytic philosopher to raise the bar for evidence sensitivity so high that only a fellow analytic philosopher could take it seriously. In contrast, a lawyer prosecuting a case that potentially involves ‘culpable ignorance’ would stick to professional norms and whatever contextual factors might enhance or diminish the defendant’s responsibility. Appeals to any superordinate epistemic norms (e.g. truthfulness, conscientiousness) would be unnecessary because they would be presumed in the professional norms. And when ‘culpable ignorance’ concerns an individual outside of a professional setting, the task would be the more psychological one of assigning a level of evidence-sensitivity appropriate to the defendant’s state of mind when s/he acted.

What makes Goldberg’s argument less than absurd—indeed, mildly menacing—is that his conclusion is meant to suggest the need for the social epistemologist to operate in some ultra-normative capacity, *à la* Plato, whereby s/he becomes the guardian of specifically ‘epistemic’ integrity, which is something that always seems to transcend the norms of actual epistemic practices. The *post-truth condition* is about recognizing this tendency for what it is and then immunizing oneself against it—all in the name of the *democratic intellect*. 
Analytic Social Epistemology’s Democratic Deficit

Democracy places the burden of proof on those who claim they know more than their audience about something that the audience is presumed to have already thought about. Those pretenders to persuasion include ‘experts’, not least ones in social epistemology. This is why rhetoric has been integral to democratic engagement. The claimant’s burden involves translating his/her own knowledge into a form that allows the audience to accept it as an extension of their own knowledge, on the basis of which collective action might be taken. It is not about subordinating the audience’s judgement to one’s own authority. Of course, you need not master the persuasive arts to shout ‘fire’ in a crowded theatre that actually happens to be on fire. Your direct acquaintance with the fire is sufficient to demand that everyone leave the theatre. However, as Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr wisely observed in Schenck v United States (1919), the doctrine of free expression enshrined in the US Constitution does not extend the right to ‘shout fire in a crowded theatre’ to all opinions. The relevance of this point to Goldberg and his ilk will be revealed shortly.

The original court case had concerned a socialist who called on Americans to resist the draft in the First World War by comparing conscription to slavery. Holmes—writing on behalf of a unanimous Supreme Court—deemed this to be speech designed to harm the national interest, given that the US had committed to the war. To be sure, figures from across the political spectrum had counselled against American entry into the war before President Wilson committed troops. However, for better or worse, they lost the argument. The losers were not thereby licensed to circumvent the normal channels of democratic persuasion, simply because they thought they knew better than those who won the argument. Of course, as Karl Popper always used to emphasize, any rationally constituted democracy includes mechanisms for reversing any decision taken, but these take the form of elections and other procedures explicitly licensed for such purposes. There are rules to the game.

I raise this bit of American constitutional history as a reference point for considering the normative ambitions of analytic social epistemology of the sort promoted by Goldberg—and what their material realization might entail. As we have already seen, once you wade through the thicket of Goldberg’s prose, you find an autocrat chomping at the bit. No existing standard of evidence and judgement is ever good enough because it fails to plug all the loopholes, thereby enabling ‘rogue’ cases to pass as genuine. Of course, those who engage in various epistemic practices understand this as a basic fact of life, which is why norms change over time. Here Popper’s advice is simply that regular ‘stress tests’ should be conducted on those norms. But this can be done by what MIT organizational learning theorist Donald Schön originally called ‘reflective practitioners’. There is no need for a superordinate class of social epistemologists to strip their autonomy, even if the needed reforms are not happening fast enough by the social epistemologist’s lights.

In Search of Social Epistemology’s ‘Will to Believe’

Looking at this move from a strictly philosophical standpoint, Goldberg appears to be reaching for some epistemic proxy for ‘realism’, which implies a ‘real’ standard of what one ‘should have known’, independently of professional norms and juridical norms of the ‘reasonable person’. Indeed, Goldberg takes to task poor W.K. Clifford, whose famed ‘ethics of belief’ involved people asserting no more than what they have evidence for. Goldberg
accuses Clifford of intellectual laziness, as if decision-makers could ‘always already’ have had
more evidence. While this is undoubtedly true as a point of logic, it misunderstands the
concept of evidence, which is precisely about what decision-makers actually know when they
make an actual decision. The culpable ignorance principle in the law is typically applied by
imagining what other normal professionals or reasonable people would have done under
similar circumstances—would they have requested more evidence, would they have decided
differently, etc. The lawyers are neither imagining that the agents are morally better than they
are nor making their decision at some evidentially better time.

It is telling that the person who originally contested Clifford’s thesis, William James,
proposed ‘the will to believe’, which takes Clifford’s evidence standard as given but then
obliges the agent to go beyond the evidence and involve him/herself in the decision’s
outcome. As former market trader and ‘black swan’ theorist Nassim Nicholas Taleb would
put it, you need to have ‘skin in the game’. What you lack in evidence, you make up by taking
personal risk. Pace Goldberg, you don’t concoct a fictional world of ‘possible evidence’.
James himself was harking back to Pascal’s Wager, but any contemporary proactionary
venture in the name of ‘transhumanism’ could equally suffice.

Fictional concoctions for realism of the sort promoted by Goldberg amount to aspiring
power grabs, but without the willingness to take the required risk. I say this because analytic
social epistemologists do not invoke these ‘higher standards’ idly. Like the socialist Schenck,
they generally think that the world has gone radically wrong—e.g. Trump, Brexit, the
lethargic response to climate change. Their writings amount to muffled versions of ‘shouting
fire in a crowded theatre’. Somewhat less muffled versions of the same shout appear in the
writings of Naomi Oreskes with regard to climate change. It’s a testimony to her intellectual
honesty—if not bloody-mindedness—that she has explicitly argued that democracy itself
may turn out to have been the West’s Achilles Heel if the much anticipated global climate
catastrophe comes to pass. In her dystopian projection, only an authoritarian China is left
standing (Oreskes and Conway 2014).

Under the circumstances, one might expect some concrete reforms from these epistemic
malcontents. But this is not the case. Instead they bombard our relatively democratic
institutions with a steady stream of high-brow complaints, some of which are accessible to
the general public (e.g. Oreskes) and some not (e.g. Goldberg). For Oreskes it amounts to
wishing that the scientific establishment could turn its collective judgement into the law of
the land, whereas for Goldberg it is more about wishing for rule by philosopher-kings. All of
this fantasy authoritarianism reminds me of nothing less than the ‘Young Hegelians’, the
liberal theologians whom Marx and Engels savagely critiqued in The German Ideology en route
to developing their own revolutionary political agenda.

Common to the Young Hegelians and the analytic social epistemologists, including fellow-
travellers like Oreskes, are two points. First there is an appeal to a superordinate normative
entity—call it ‘God’ or ‘Truth’—that potentially undermines the legitimacy of established
institutions, be it the church or the law itself. That sets up a potentially revolutionary
premise. However, there is then the countervailing second point, namely, a patent inability or
unwillingness to take the practical steps that would involve walking this talk. Instead they
simply contribute—unwittingly for the most part—to a general climate of scepticism, which of course offers opportunities for various agents to take advantage of the ensuing instability. In this regard, far from opposing the post-truth condition, Goldberg and Oreskes are arguably contributing to its worst tendencies. To be sure, back in the 1840s, Marx and Engels already saw an opening for their brand of Communism as a concrete vehicle for realizing the deification of humanity that a Young Hegelian such as Ludwig Feuerbach had foreshadowed without seriously trying to deliver. The challenge for those sympathetic to my brand of social epistemology is to reinvent the spirit—but not the letter—of Marx and Engels for these post-truth times.

References