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**RUSSELL'S CRITICAL THINKING AND SOCIAL
APPROACHES OF KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION**

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Abstract

The traditional concern in epistemic investigation is the attainment of genuine knowledge about reality. Consequently, mainline epistemology has witnessed the emergence of different theories by individuals conducting epistemic affairs as independent investigators on how we can acquire justified true beliefs. However, in recent times, there have been considerable recognition that aided individual endeavours capable of yielding significant results. Nevertheless, this approach is greeted with the uncertainty of the degree to which bias could be mere socially attained knowledge. This situation is further compounded by the fact that bias is an unconscious phenomenon that negatively distort people's judgement and perception irrespective of their intellectual ability. Through critical analysis and comparative method of investigation of philosophers' stands on knowledge acquisition, this paper argues that bias in social epistemic endeavour could be controlled. The paper recommended the application of Russell's notion of critical thinking as a possible way to overcome biases in the social approaches of knowledge acquisition. This entails a conscious rational combat to overcome biases.

Keywords: Bias, Critical Thinking, Justified True Belief, Knowledge Acquisition, Social Epistemic Endeavour, Critical Thinking.

Introduction

There has been a remarkable recognition of the impact of social dynamics in the conduct and focus of epistemology. This is done with the underlining belief that social factors are significant enough to aid the conducts of epistemic activities and their outcome. Some philosophers argued that the consideration of these social factors is necessary to complement or correct the traditional individualistic approach prevalent in the history of western epistemology. Consequently, an individual does not solely occupy the central position in the conduct of epistemic activities; it is very much permissible and accepted that such investigation be done in the consciousness and recognition of immense contributions from others. Such contributions are considered as enhancing epistemic endeavours, since it is ordinarily accepted that an individual could acquire knowledge from others. This development in knowledge acquisition buttresses the claim that epistemic agents are social, highly interdependent, information-using, information-sharing beings.¹ Recent discusses on these cognitive exercises are situated within the realm of testimony.

However, while not disputing that an epistemic subject could benefit from others, there is also the issue of the possibility of an epistemic subject inheriting prejudices and bias from others – individuals, social agents, social structures and the societal beliefs. In other words, social epistemic practice places an individual in a position of being susceptible to unconsciously inherited bias, prejudices and stereotypes from others or the group to which the epistemic agent defers. As such, the agent engages his epistemic object unconscious of the inherited bias which consequently determines his conceptions and perceptions. This may include his perception of self-identity and the identity of others, situations and reality, on the one hand; and how such perceptions determine his views on the other hand. This then becomes a possible breeding ground for epistemic injustice. Since the subject is unwittingly harmed by the social epistemic practices he is exposed to, he unconsciously discriminate others

in such biased state in epistemic matters.

To avert this, this work proposes that for testimonial belief to qualify as a justified belief and constitute a reliable ground that is freed of stereotypes, it is pertinent that an epistemic agent's belief be further subjected to a second degree of analysis and personal evaluation. In other words, every epistemic practice and interaction requires what Bertrand Russell refers to as critical habit of the mind in order to prevent wronging oneself as a knower.

Traditional Approach to Knowledge Acquisition

An individualistic approach to epistemic activities occupied the central stage for a long time in the history of philosophy. This personal dimension which involved an individual as a sole agent in epistemic activities was a common phenomenon. While some philosophers engaged in this practice without casting doubt on the validity of the contributions derivable from others, there were philosophers who considered what is derived from sources other than oneself as invalid and largely pruned to errors. For philosophers in this category, only what is derivable from a subject's internal states or reasons can qualify as knowledge. Consequently, this is an attitude that knowledge acquisition becomes limited to what is only attainable through an individual's singular effort. Rene Descartes is a key figure in this approach to knowledge.

Descartes believes that he had 'clear and distinct ideas' of his thought.² For him, only the self, particularly with the aid of reason, constitutes the only valid means of attaining indubitable knowledge. He maintains that introspection is an infallible source of knowledge. This internalist foundationalism which is couched in his popular maxim of "*Cogito ergo suum*" ("I think, therefore I am") prioritizes one's own state of mind in epistemic affairs more so as it pertains to certainty and justification. That explains why Alvin Goldman and Matthew McGrath aptly remarked that Rene Descartes created a roadmap for epistemology. The plan

was to meditate, reflect, and otherwise conduct one's intellectual affairs in a thoroughly self-adsorbed way. No consideration was to be given to other people's thoughts or opinions, to how their knowledge might inform one's own.³ In other words, Descartes seems to have charted a course that epistemic discourse followed for many centuries. Evidently, John Locke for instance, opines that knowledge can be acquired through intellectual self-reliance. According to him,

For, I think, we may rationally hope to see with other Men's Eyes, as to know by other Men's Understanding. So much as we ourselves consider and comprehend of Truth and Reason, so much we possess of real and true Knowledge. The floating of other Men's opinions in our brain makes us not a jot more knowing, though they happen to be true.⁴

He sums this up as "other men's opinions floating in one's brain" do not constitute genuine knowledge.⁵ This is a strong indication of the rationalistic approach to knowledge that flows from Descartes.

Rationalism as a doctrine pertaining to how knowledge is attained prioritizes reason over experience. It considers reason as the most reliable source of knowledge, and argues that we will understand a significant body of knowledge about the world and the way it operates through the application of reason. Following Descartes, rationalists consider the mathematical model as basis of human knowledge because these models are eternal, clear, certain and unshakeable.⁶ Consequently rationalism denied the necessity of experience in the attainment of knowledge, and social considerations are largely irrelevant to epistemological concerns.⁷ Others who hold this view include; Leibniz and Spinoza.

Empiricism as Partial Beginning for Social Dimension of Knowledge

However, empiricism deemphasized reason as the gateway to indisputable human knowledge. Its proponents advanced the claim that experience is a genuine source of what we know. There is a subtle acknowledgement in the tenets of the empiricists that an epistemic agent could be aided from objects out of himself. Empiricists give credence to what an epistemic agent accessed through his senses as valid form of knowledge. It also accepts experiential evidence as materials for the formation of ideas in place of inner ideas of the rationalists. This can roughly be considered an initial basis for the departure for Thomas Reid. He advocated a wise and beneficent Author of Nature who intended that we should be social creatures, and we should receive the greatest and most important part of our knowledge by information of others. The author of nature purposely implanted in our nature a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us.⁸ Ever since then, and more pronouncedly in the twentieth century, some philosophers have emphasized this possibility of social interactions in knowledge acquisition.

Social epistemology is premised on the common practice of how epistemic activities are embarked upon on concrete experience, as there are evidences of social factors that inform our epistemic lives. An epistemic agent as a being in connection with others in a community participates in their social beliefs and are consequently influenced by others. Social epistemology gives credence to this phenomenon and emphasizes that individuals' conduct of epistemic inquiries are not devoid of what they have acquired through their participation in the social life of their communities. Rachel McKinnon opines that:

While the history of epistemology has largely focused on the individual knower in isolation, recent decades have seen a shift towards anti-individualism and the

recognition that knowledge is social. No knower is an island: we depend on social structures and other people for the acquisition, creation, and dissemination of knowledge.⁹

This approach is expected to enhance and develop how epistemic activities are embarked upon. According to Steve Fuller,

social epistemology implies that somehow the sole individualistic approach to epistemic issues is not the right way to begin the problem of what the issue about knowledge is. The point is that we need a collective understanding of how the world is before we can talk about it. This is what social epistemology is about in a basic way.¹⁰

Social epistemology is an enterprise concerned with how people can best pursue the truth (whichever truth is in question) with the help of, or in the face of others. It is also concerned with truth acquisition by groups, or collective agents.¹¹ Social epistemology focuses on our shared or common knowledge of the world, and how individuals benefit from each other's understanding of it. This is not a claim that what an epistemic agent knows depends completely on what is derived from others, rather, it is a view that others' testimony can enhance what an individual knows: Therefore, social epistemology examines the social and interpersonal dimensions of knowledge thereby emphasizing that most of our intellectual enterprises are interwoven with the intellectual enterprises of others.

This recent approach in epistemic endeavours that made it possible for an epistemic agent to complement his activities with what others have to offer in the particular area of interest seems to be common-sense based, as it is ordinarily believed that "two good heads are better than one". Through mutual critical exchange of ideas in the form of alternative explanations and

critical assessment of each other's conjectures, ideas are refined.

This approach in epistemology and social sciences has challenged, and seems to have enhanced traditional mode of conducting epistemic activities at least in recent times. Goldman identified two conceptions of social epistemology. According to his classification, a conception of social epistemology sees it as part of main stream or traditional epistemology that considers the impact of a group on the individual. This view recognizes an interaction between the individual and social bodies, and how such interaction could shape an individual's epistemic position. The other consideration he identified places social epistemology within the struggles of postmodernist movements geared at replacing traditional epistemology thereby redirecting the activities and issues of traditional epistemology.¹²

Nevertheless, the former is consistent with the progress in the mainstream epistemology whose project focuses on enhancing the individual from the dynamics that abounds in the social sector. In this sense, social epistemology does not strive to displace traditional enterprise in epistemology. Instead, it is an emphasis on the benefits that abound in the social conduct of epistemic endeavours.

It sees no reason to think that social factors or practices inevitably interfere with, or pose threats to, the attainment of truth and/or other epistemic desiderata, such as justified belief, rational belief, etc. There may indeed be identifiable cases (which we shall explore) in which specific types of social factors or social interactions pose threats to truth acquisition. But, conversely, the right kinds of social organization may enhance the prospects of truth acquisition.¹³

In that wise, the epistemic agent remains an individual conducting his activities within the purview of the principle of normativity and focuses on some sorts of objective validity

and resolved commitment to the central notions of knowledge, justification and truth that will inform his doxastic decision. However, one wonders that with the viability applause credited to social interaction, why have philosophers neglected such venture that is purported as portable in enhancing their activities? Other concerns include; the extent to which social dimension contribute to or improve epistemic endeavours. What is the justification of any belief garnered from social domain? Do such beliefs qualify as epistemic sources of knowledge? Since testimony is key in knowledge acquisition in the social sector, how reliable is testimony as a source of knowledge? How does one overcome prejudice and bias which are seemingly inevitable in social epistemic practices? Consequently, since the 1970s, philosophers have taken an ever-increasing interest in such topics as the epistemic value of testimony, the nature and function of expertise, the proper distribution of cognitive labour and resources among individuals in communities, and the status of group reasoning and knowledge.¹⁴

Testimony

In simple term, testimony implies that - If S knows that p and S asserts that p to H , and H accepts p on the basis of S 's testimony, then H knows that p . H comes to know a proposition as true through the testimony of S . Jennifer Lackey highlights the common place of testimony in the general life and epistemic practice as she avers that virtually everything we know depends in some way or other on the testimony of others - what we eat, how things work, where we go, even who we are.¹⁵ Like other sources of knowing like perception, memory, learning, and inference, testimony has come to be accepted in common place as a reliable source of knowledge. We usually accept what others say and act on them as reliable source for us to form what we believe and know. According to Axel Gelfert, in contemporary epistemology, 'testimony' is used as an umbrella term to refer to all those instances where we form a belief, or acquire knowledge,

on the basis of what others have told us. Whenever we believe what a trusted friend tells us, learn about world events by reading the newspaper, accept a stranger's answer to our request for directions, receive a medical diagnosis from our doctor (etc.), we rely on the testimony of others.¹⁶

In response to the epistemic status of testimony as source of knowledge justification, epistemologists are divided along the broad headings of reductionism and anti-reductionism. For the reductionists, a posteriori acceptance of testimony as a source of knowledge that relies on other sources like perception, memory and induction. This tension is expressed in line with the contention of both sides by Gelfert that considered from a perspective, testimony is not different from other epistemic sources such as; perception, memory, inference and introspection, as it furnishes us with beliefs we make our own. On the other hand, testimony is different from other sources of knowledge as it depends on the mental operations of another person.¹⁷ Hume, who is considered the pioneer of reductionism argues that: our assurance in any argument of this kind (from testimony) is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses.¹⁸ While anti-reductionists represented by Reid, posit the natural tendency in humans of "a disposition to confide in the veracity of others, and to believe what they tell us." Reid takes testimony as an independent source of knowledge.¹⁹ Despite these divergent views testimony has received considerable attention in epistemology, and the issue has since moved from (anti)reductionist debate to include 'how' and 'when' of learning from others.

Prejudice and Bias as Challenges to Social Knowledge

The possibility of prejudice accounted for Descartes' internalist approach to knowledge. According to Descartes,

there is no novelty to me in the reflection that, from my earliest years, I have accepted many false opinions as true, and that what I have concluded from such badly assured premises could not but be highly doubtful and uncertain.²⁰

To avoid prejudice and bias which are capable of colouring the object of knowledge, Descartes doubted all knowledge forms which include sensory perception, intellectual beliefs, mathematical demonstrations and self-evident truth, giving credence only to what he acquired through his reason. For him, “that way I shall take great care not to accept any falsity among my beliefs and shall prepare my mind well for all the ruses of this great deceiver that, however powerful and artful he maybe, he will never be able to mislead me in anything.”²¹ As Shai Frogel opines:

Descartes is certain that the method he adopts in the *Meditations* fits his philosophical goal, not because it will necessarily lead him to truth, but because it will enable him to avoid false beliefs (imagining knowing what he does not know). In this respect Descartes is a follower of Socrates, who sees in the struggle against his own false certainties an essential step in the direction of true knowledge. This could explain Descartes’ use of the hyperbolic doubt: it is his way of ensuring that his consciousness remains clear of false certainties.²²

It is evident from this that in epistemic parlance, prejudice or bias usually deters an epistemic agent from attaining the correct information of his epistemic object. This is instantiated in Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice*. This is a moral social epistemology that argues that an epistemic agent may be wronged specifically in his capacity as a knower.²³ This is a situation in which an agent is deprived due to the coincidence of association

and circumstance of lack of conceptual resources. According to Fricker, epistemic injustice means that statements by members of particular groups are systematically neglected or discredited, for instance because of negative social stereotypes associated with them. In this case, the hearer does not accept the content of what is being passed to him because he has developed an unconscious mechanism that discredit the speaker. Epistemic injustice is the idea that we can be unfairly discriminated against in our capacity as a knower based on prejudices about the speaker, such as gender, social background, ethnicity, race, sexuality, tone of voice, accent, and so on.²⁴

Fricker presents two types of epistemic injustice as testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Fricker explains that testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences.²⁵ The former occurs when a speaker is given less credibility than she deserves because the hearer has prejudices about a social group to which the speaker belongs; while the later occurs when, as a result of a group being socially powerless, members of the group lack the conceptual resources to make sense of certain distinctive social experiences.²⁶ These are two degrees of epistemic injustice and both are situated within the realm of credibility judgement. In both cases, the epistemic agent (the hearer) refuses to grant the required level of credibility to a speaker who provides testimonial form of knowledge. This becomes clearer in McKinnon's analysis of the conditions necessary for a hearer to know something from a speaker. These conditions are: (a.) what the speaker says is true (b.) the speaker is sufficiently reliable in their testimony (that is, when they assert some proposition, *p*, *p* is probably true), and (c.) the hearer has some reason to think that the speaker is reliable. Whenever these conditions are present, the hearer can lay claim to knowledge.

However, this situation changes due to the presence of prejudice in the form of either of the two epistemic injustices identified by Fricker. Among the three conditions identified for one to know, the second comes under attack as the epistemic subject fails, due to prejudice, to acknowledge that the speaker possesses what is required to be sufficiently reliable. Consequently, the agent arrives at deformed credibility judgement caused by failure to consider the speaker as credible. That is why McKinnon avers that judging the credibility of a speaker is a fraught task, rife with opportunities for prejudices and implicit (or explicit) bias to creep in.²⁷ The attention shifts from the immediate experience of knowledge acquisition to what has been previously conceived about the person passing the information and the misgivings of opinions surrounding the speaker.

Prejudice and Bias Explained

Etymologically, the word prejudice is from the combination of two Latin words *prae* which means “before” and *judicium* which means “judgment” Put together, the Latin root becomes *praejudicium*, and it means “previous judgment”. It is judging the present from the past. It is a feeling of unfair dislike directed against an individual or a group because of some characteristic (as race or religion). The immediate effect of this is that prejudice constitutes an obstacle to dealing with issues *prima facie*. This is out rightly against the focus of philosophy as a discipline that focuses on the attainment of truth.

There is a long history of discourse on prejudice among philosophers. In the classical era of philosophy, Cicero describes prejudice as the opposite of truth, associated with error not caused by ignorance but the outcome of manipulation. During the Enlightenment, prejudice covers all forms of erroneously acquired stands, as aptly presented in Francis Bacon who represented this human cognitive frailties in the forms of preconceptions that block our attainment of truth of reality in *The Idols*. The French philosopher, Voltaire, along with other

revolutionaries conceived prejudice as all forms of errors of the mind, and that they are almost impossible to eradicate. Hence, Hans-Georg Gadamer in line with Martin Heidegger posit that we have a pre-understanding which colours our conceptions of things.²⁸ Prejudice could be likened to a shield that prevents right perception of things. It could act as blockage to accessing the correct properties of an object. If likened to a screen, it determines the coloration that the object of perception gets.

In the same way, implicit bias is unconscious conception of a group of persons who are categorized based on unguided rational opinions. Persons in the group are stereotyped and considered more often in negative connotations that do not represent them. For the fact that it is usually unconscious, implicit bias manifests itself in an automatic assessment of persons and influences how we behave towards them which is often in discriminating manners. Both prejudice and implicit bias are mental associations that, though do represent true picture, but nevertheless present and inform our opinions of people and how we relate with them. Michael Brownstein opines that in most instances, the people are often not aware of the prejudice or bias. So, people can act on the basis of prejudice and stereotypes without intending to do so.²⁹ This is significant for social acquisition of knowledge.

Epistemic agents are participants of a social setting and structures. An epistemic agent being an integral part of society is exposed to the activities of the social group which to a remarkable extent shapes what he knows and how he conducts his epistemic activities. Alex Madva avers that the harms and inequities suffered by individuals on the basis of race and gender depend to a great extent on social-institutional forces. It seems that merely knowing what many others believe about a group leads individuals to act in some respects as if they themselves believed it too.³⁰ This further shows the problematics associated with social knowledge of which stereotyping is at the center. These are not just epistemic but moral issues involved in social knowledge. An instance of this has been identified previously in

epistemic injustice. In the light of these issues, how can we still validate knowledge from the social circle?

Russell's Critical Thinking as an antidote to Social Approaches of Knowledge Acquisition

As a specie of social knowledge, Fricker suggested the acquisition of necessary virtues that would help reduce the negative effects of the vices of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices. She opines; that considered purely as an intellectual virtue testimonial justice aims ultimately at understanding and more immediately at neutralizing the impact of structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.³¹ This virtue is both epistemic and moral in dimension. An epistemic virtue is a character trait that constitutes an epistemic advantage for the individual who possesses it and for those who interact with him or her. It is roughly a set of attitudes and dispositions that facilitate the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge.³² This is necessary to make the conduct of epistemic activities in social sphere more rational and more just. One who possesses these virtues will be able to focus on and process the object of knowledge without giving in to pre-conceived opinions. This portrays some resemblance with Husserl's phenomenological bracketing. Pre-conceived ideas are bracketed to pave way for direct access to the object of consideration.

Furthermore, in order for social epistemology not to be a breeding ground for prejudice and bias, it is pertinent to employ Russell's conception of critical thinking. Russell's notion of critical thinking consists in the development of specific rational abilities in the form of virtues of both epistemic and ethical imports. This consists of an attitude of subjecting the content of our epistemic investigation into critical analysis that is devoid of presumptions and unfounded claims. This is because we live with various degrees of belief that we take their truth for granted neglecting, as Russell noted, that our most unquestioned convictions may be as mistaken as those of Galileo's opponents.³³ William Hare

refers to the qualities as critical skills. He considers Russell's conception of critical thinking as consisting of a wide range of skills, dispositions and attitudes which together characterize a virtue which has both intellectual and moral aspects, and which serves to prevent the emergence of numerous vices, including dogmatism and prejudice.³⁴ These critical skills are expressed in the tripartite abilities which are:

First, the ability to form an opinion for oneself, which involves, for example, being able to recognize what is intended to mislead, being capable of listening to eloquence without being carried away, and becoming adept at asking and determining if there is any reason to think that our beliefs are true; Second, the ability to find an impartial solution, which involves learning to recognize and control our own biases, coming to view our own beliefs with the same detachment with which we view the beliefs of others, judging issues on their merits, trying to ascertain the relevant facts, and the power of weighing arguments; Third, the ability to identify and question assumptions, which involves learning not to be credulous, applying what Russell calls constructive doubt in order to test unexamined beliefs, and resisting the notion that some authority, a great philosopher perhaps, has captured the whole truth.³⁵

These constitute the mental activities and not a formulae necessary to arrive at unbiased knowledge. They are rather the constitutive elements of rational attitude or disposition or habit. To emphasise the importance of attaining unbiased knowledge, Russell further gave "The Ten Commandments of critical thinking" as follows:

- i. Do not feel absolutely certain of anything.
- ii. Do not think it worthwhile to proceed by concealing evidence, for the evidence is sure to come to light.
- iii. Never try to discourage thinking, for you are sure to succeed.
- iv. When you meet with opposition, even if it should be from your

husband or your children endeavor to overcome it by argument and not by authority, for a victory dependent upon authority is unreal and illusory.

v. Have no respect for the authority of others, for there are always contrary authorities to be found.

vi. Do not use power to suppress opinions you think pernicious, for if you do the opinions will suppress you.

vii. Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.

viii. Find more pleasure in intelligent dissent than in passive agreement, for if you value intelligence as you should, the former implies a deeper agreement than the latter.

ix. Be scrupulously truthful even if the truth is inconvenient, for it is more inconvenient when you try to conceal it.

x. Do not feel envious of the happiness of those who live in a fool's paradise, for only a fool will think that it is happiness.³¹

Conclusion

From the discussion and argument presented we can draw some necessary implications. One of such is that humanity would be denied an essential aspect of its nature and necessary mode of existence if the social dimension is downplayed or totally neglected. This is because, considered from the insertion of human existence, there is also a coming to play of a social union. Consequently, attempting to remove the dynamics of the social would also amount to a deliberate move towards an incomplete cognitive appreciation of humans as social beings. That being the case, and as pointed out earlier, epistemic transactions are inevitable in social relations.

Also, as breeding plots of knowledge acquisition, it cannot not be fully ascertained that knowledge from anything external to the agent is free from prejudice. Thomas Hobbes's Idols testify to this. For instance, Nigerians as citizens of multi-ethnic groups hold strong views about each other based on their ethnic affinity. Therefore, it is important for epistemic agents to develop an epistemic "gauge" that would assist him in sieving pieces of

information assessable to him. This is the precise point of Fricker which this paper recommends to be Russell's critical thinking.

Looking at the commandments of thinking postulated by Russell, we can also come to a conclusion that a subject has knowledge of a thing if and only if the subject is in some way aware of it such that he or she is in a position to think and talk about it. Therefore, we need to see this bias in perspective of awareness before we can make self-acclamation of that which we claim to know. Upon closer look at Russell's ten essential rules of critical thinking, we will see elements of social approaches to knowledge in them. Thus, Russell's critical thinking is indeed an antidote to social approaches in acquisition of knowledge.

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