
A Critical Exposition of the Social Turn in Epistemology

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Abstract

This paper is a critical exposition of the social turn in epistemology. Traditional epistemology has largely focused on how the individual comes to know various subject matter such as knowledge about the world, other minds or some particular subject areas. By so doing, it examines the resources available to the individual in terms of evidence, experience or individual capacities like reasoning capacity that could be brought to bear on questions such as: What can I know? If I do know something, how do I know that I know it? If I fall short of knowledge, how do I know that I do not know anything? What is reasonable or unreasonable for me to believe? This has made traditional epistemology, a highly individualistic enterprise that accounts for knowledge from the angle of a solitary inquirer. Contrary to this approach, recent trends in epistemology have witnessed a paradigm shift from an epistemic solitary inquirer to an epistemic social inquirer. This shift in focus marks the social turn of epistemology as knowledge is not to be analysed as an exclusive property of the individual but with the consciousness of the social determinants of knowledge. Against this backdrop, this paper critically exposes the subject matter of social epistemology in contradistinction with traditional epistemology. In a bid to achieve this aim, the paper briefly juxtaposes the concern of social epistemology with that of traditional epistemology. In addition, it outlines the taxonomy of social epistemology. Furthermore, it articulates the basic approaches to social epistemology. Finally, it evaluates the claims of social epistemology.

Key Words: Epistemology, Traditional Epistemology, Social Epistemology, Solitary Inquirer, Social Inquirer.

Introductory Background

In its classical conceptualization, traditional epistemology is articulated on Plato's analysis of knowledge. In his books, *Meno* and *Theatetus* Plato laid the foundation for what is generally referred to in epistemology as the traditional or standard account of knowledge. In these books, he outlines what distinguishes knowledge from right opinion or true belief. In his words, “knowledge is more honourable and excellent than true opinion because it is fastened by a chain” (*Meno*, 189). This description is what is famously captured by commentators as “justified true belief” based on Plato's statement that “true opinion combined with definition or rational explanation, is knowledge” (*Theatetus* 545). Hence, from Plato's analysis epistemologists infer that knowledge is nothing other than a justified true belief. (Ibrahim 86). That is, a person X knows a proposition P if and only if:

- (i) P is true
- (ii) X believes that P is true

(iii) X is justified in believing that P is true

A careful look at the above analysis of knowledge shows that the emphasis is on the subject of knowledge. That is, a knower who believes P to be true, and whose believes in the truth of P is justifiable. Thus, the dominant concern is the evaluative state of the cognitive of the knowing subject, that is a subjective inquirer. In this sense, the prevailing concern is highly individual and centred on the knower. In a self-reflective pronoun form, the fundamental questions this analysis of knowledge raise are:

- i. What do I know?
- ii. What are the criteria for what I know?
- iii. What medium of knowledge do I have access to in order to know what I know?
- iv. Can I know what I set out to know? If yes, what makes it possible? If no, what makes it impossible?

From the above set of questions, it is clear that the dominant pronoun is “I”. this suggests that the concern of traditional epistemology is the epistemic status of the subject of knowledge. For this reason, it is argued that the corner stone of traditional epistemology is the cognitive status of a solitary inquirer. Thus, knowledge is an exclusive subject of the individual knowing subject.

This subjective epistemology is revived and strengthened in Descartes' dictum *cogito ergo sum* meaning “I think, therefore, I am”. Here, Descartes presents himself as a solitary inquirer within a subjective meditation geared towards the validation of his thinking self as the basis for his existence and by extension the proof for the existence of external realities. In essence, the thinking self in its cognitive process is detached from any social context that may have influenced its subjective meditation. In the preface of his work, *Knowledge in a Social World*, Alvin Goldman re-echoes this concern with an admonition as follows:

Traditional epistemology has long preserved the Cartesian image of inquiry as an activity of isolated thinkers, each pursuing truth in a spirit of individualism and pure self-reliance. This image ignores the interpersonal and institutional contexts in which most knowledge endeavours are actually undertaken. Epistemology must come to grips with the social interactions that both brighten and threaten the project for knowledge. (vii)

In the above, Goldman observes that traditional epistemology sees the cognitive enterprise as a solitary endeavour devoid of any social determinants of knowledge. This solitary description of the knowing process fails to account for the social reality of knowledge. By so doing, it denies us the interpersonal and institutional condition of knowledge. He therefore calls for a recognition of how our knowledge claim is socially conditioned and determined. This sort of calls marks the social turn in epistemology and of course the emergence of social epistemology. As a distinct discipline, social epistemology emerged with the publication of the momentous work of Steve Fuller, *Social*

Epistemology (1988), Alvin Goldman's knowledge in a *Social World* (1999), C. A. J. Coady's *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (1992). The ideas of these three works constitute the major foundation of the social turn in epistemology.

What is Social Epistemology?

The term “Social Epistemology” is a nomenclature that marks the social turn of epistemology. It is the study of how social interactions and systems affect knowledge and the pursuit of truth. It emphasizes the need to examine the connections between social realities and cognitive processes. Robert Audi sees social epistemology as “the study of the social dimensions or determinants of knowledge, or the ways in which social factors promote or perturb the quest for knowledge” (746). In effect, epistemology takes a social turn as it inquiries into the basic epistemological questions into the basic epistemological questions about the nature, sources, and scope of knowledge with the consciousness of how the individual is embedded in social circumstances and how he/she relies on other people and aspects of social environment in order to gain knowledge (Ibrahim 36). For this reason, it is seen as the branch of epistemology that studies how our knowledge claims are socially conditioned and determined.

In view of its emphasis on the social conditions of knowledge, social epistemology is sometimes confused with sociology of knowledge whose aim is to “locate whatever body of belief a group asserts as a true account of reality and then try to illuminate it by reference to social variables” (Bloor, 483). It is instructive to note here that while sociology may be purely descriptive, it is also normative, analytical, critical and hermeneutical in its methodic approach. This means that social epistemology is at the intersection of quantitative and qualitative approach to the analysis of knowledge. The fundamental question of social epistemology according to Fuller (2) is how the pursuit of knowledge is to be organized given that under normal circumstances knowledge is pursued by many human beings, each working on a more or less well-defined body of knowledge and each equipped with roughly the same imperfect cognitive capacities albeit with varying degrees of access to one another's activities.

Social epistemology is not a radical departure from mainstream epistemology but a continuum; it seeks to unravel how social conditions can vitiate or promote epistemic inquiry. In this sense, knowledge is not an exclusive property of the individual but the community; it is the “social system that houses a variety of procedures, institutions and pattern of interpersonal influences that affect the epistemic outcome of its members” (Goldman, 13). This is exemplified in the testimony and rational recourse to experts' opinions as a guide to rational decision making on various human existential challenges.

The Taxonomy of Social Epistemology

A critical look at the preceding discussion reveals that an individual within the context of social

epistemology is rooted in interpersonal relationship and epistemic dependence. This means that the individual's knowledge subsists within the structure of communal knowledge. Knowledge therefore is not a personal property but a collective property. Therefore, the illustration X knows P in traditional epistemology is replaced with G(Group) knows P if and only if the members of G jointly accept P and where the latter obtains just in case each member openly expresses a willingness to let P stand as the view of G or openly expresses a joint commitment to accept that P. In this sense, no one claims to have epistemic monopoly of any subject matter or issues under discussion. Knowledge is first and foremost considered as the property of the community of which the individual is part and parcel of. There is also emphasis on collective or group justification where the group judgement supersedes the individual and is seen as the individuals' judgements written-large. Although the normal thing is to prefer the group or institutional standpoint to that of a particular individual(s) making up the up the group. For instance, the position of the Nigerian Medical Association (NMA) on the outbreak of an epidemic will be preferred to the submission of an individual doctor on the same issues. However, though a rare occurrence, there may be instances where an individual view turns out to be accurate than the judgement of the body or institution. A case in reference here is Dalton's atomic theory which states that atoms are indestructible particle of an element was later accepted by scientists and atomic experts as true. However, Marie Curie and Pierre Curie went separate ways and disproved it in the phenomenon of radioactivity. The same holds true of Copernican heliocentrism against Ptolemaic geocentric view widely accepted by astronomers and scientists of his time. This is the subtle criticism of collective judgement and justification. Truth, it is said, is not often a question of number and consensus.

1. Testimony or Justification of Testimonial Knowledge: Here, positions like reductionism, anti-reductionism, assurance and dualism take the centre stage of discourse. The key epistemologists here are C. A. J. Coady, David Hume, Thomas Reid, Jennifer Lackey, Elizabeth Fricker and Peter Graham etc.
2. Epistemic Disagreement. The content here examines the suitable doxastic attitude of the epistemic agent vis-à-vis the epistemic status of an idea, say 'h' when its contrary 'not-h' are equally defended. We have thinkers like Alvin Goldman, Jenifer Lackey, Jonathan Ballantyne, Feldman, David Christensen etc.
3. Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: This is classified by some epistemologists like Elizabeth Anderson under social epistemology with emphasis on the cognitive emancipation of women (gynocentrism) from male-dominated views (androcentrism).
4. Epistemology of Groups: This is a subfield of social epistemology that explores the possibility of epistemic properties and processes at the group level.
5. Wikipaediemology: This refers to the epistemology of social media – trying to separate the true information from propaganda.
6. Epistemology of Democracy. It critically assesses democracy as the government of the

people in the face reigning despotism and totalitarianism. It examines, among others, such questions as – is the so-called group judgement a true image (or decision of the people or collective rationality) or a few individuals under the guise of the masses? Does democratic norm epistemically enhance quality decision making? Answer to these fundamental interrogations could be in the affirmative where democratic principles are properly applied but in Nigeria, like in most African countries, “the norms of free expression and open discussion enable propagandists, demagogues and strategic actors of other kinds to manipulate and mislead democratic citizen” (Talisie, 357).

Basic Approaches to Social Epistemology

In the literature of social epistemology, three basic approaches are derivable. These are classified here as follows:

- (i) **Social Dependence of Knowledge:** This approach to social epistemology appreciates the social dependent character of the individual on certain kinds of social factors in the process of knowing and forming reasonable beliefs. It views social epistemology as simply a description of how social factors influence beliefs, without concern for the rationality or truth of these beliefs.
- (ii) **Integrative Specialism:** This is the division of labour approach to intellectual inquiry. It is the dimension of social epistemology that investigates how individuals (experts) work together to acquire knowledge. This is usually obtainable in the content of a reach team or other teams of investigators where each expert focuses on a segment of the research for quality investigation. The findings of each specialist are then integrated in order to achieve the main objective of the research. An example of this form of social epistemology is what is termed interdisciplinary inquiry where epistemic division of labour is required.
- (iii) **Group-Individual Knowledge:** This approach to social epistemology investigates the possibility of reducing group knowledge to the levels of individuals within the group. Here, the individual comes to know something only because that knowledge is parasitic on what the group knows. For instance, if we say that the philosophers Association of Nigeria (PAN) knows that the engagement of government on policy decisions from a philosophical framework is an imperative for national development. This entails that individual members of the association knows this on the basis of the knowledge of the association which they belong.

Evaluation

The social turn in epistemology termed “social epistemology” situates the knower within the social habitat that in one way or the other shapes and determines his/her cognitive capacity as well as the processes involved in the developing any epistemic awareness. The recognition of the social determinants in knowledge acquisition brings about what we can term the “social ontology of

knowledge". This refers to the social situation that conditions the knower as a social epistemic being. This understanding of the knowing being is a pre-requisite for articulating why the perception and behaviour of a knower determines the outcome of what he or she knows. In this sense, social epistemology provides a more comprehensive outlook of the cognitive enquiry as it situates the knower within the social conditions of knowing. This is because the one who knows is a social being and as such knowledge is not a solitary inquiry but an inquiry that is embedded in the social structures that conditions its possibility. Thus, social epistemology marks a paradigm shift in the understanding of the determinants or conditions of knowledge from subjective epistemology to group epistemology (Ibrahim 36). This shows that the knower relies on other people and aspects of social environment in order to gain knowledge. This understanding of knowledge brings about the virtue of epistemic humility and the spirit of collective necessity in the quest for knowledge. This is because if X knows that knowing P entails a recognition of the social aspect of X and P, then, the idea of a solitary inquirer which fosters the possibility of epistemic arrogance and close mindedness. Is curtailed.

Furthermore, a careful consideration of the taxonomy of social epistemology shows that it is a continuum of traditional epistemology. The subjective or individualistic epistemic evaluation in traditional epistemology is expanded to collective doxastic evaluation to accommodate the idea that knowledge is not an exclusive property of the individual but a social reality. This is essentially the case when we come to terms with the fact that there is hardly anything we know or claim which has not either directly or indirectly come from the testimony of others, that is, the knowing community. However, social epistemology faces some basic challenges the undermines its lofty ideals. Firstly, its supposition of the existence of normative facts is problematic. The existence and nature of normative facts is open to debate which can make social epistemology controversial. Secondly, the problem of reductionism challenges the claim of social epistemology. This is because reductionism relies on individual observation to justify believing testimony. However, some critics argue that most of people cannot reconstruct a good inductive argument from their own experience alone. Thirdly, the problem of information cascades undermines social epistemology. Groups can be prone to epistemic problems when combining beliefs. For example, if a group of people all have private information that one stock is better than another; the beliefs of the group can become influenced by each other's actions. This can lead to a cascade of buying one stock over another, even though some people may have private information that suggests the other stocks is better. Finally, social epistemology is questioned on considering the contrast between treating individuals as cognitive agents and treating groups as cognitive agents.

Conclusion

We began this paper by situating the social turn in epistemology within the paradigm shift from an epistemic solitary inquirer in traditional epistemology to an epistemic social inquirer in social epistemology. It was noted that this shift was occasioned by the idea that knowledge is not an

exclusive property of the individual but a phenomenon embedded in the social condition that generated it. The paper drives home this point by juxtaposing subjective structure of traditional epistemology with the group consciousness of social epistemology. Thus, it rephrases the X knows P in traditional epistemology with G(group) knows P of social epistemology to establish the centrality of the social dimensions of knowledge. This becomes necessary as traditional epistemology has been criticized for exhibiting two form of individualism. First, it takes the individual in isolation from its social setting. Second, traditional epistemology presumed the individual to be the locus of epistemic properties such as belief, knowledge, cognition, rationality, epistemic virtue and objectivity.

In effect, the paper submits that we must constantly be conscious of the fact that a knower is a member of a social group and as such his/her knowing capacity is in one way or the other determine by the knowledge of the group. On a note of caution the paper highlights the major challenges that confront social epistemology ranging from the issue of normative facts, reductionism, information cascades and the contrast between individual cognitive agents and group cognitive agents.

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