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Social Epistemology and Epistemic Agency

Decentralizing Epistemic Agency

Edited by Patrick J. Reider

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A Proposed Research Program for Social Epistemology

Sanford C. Goldberg

In the last thirty years or so, philosophers, social scientists, and others have begun to speak of and pursue inquiry within a distinctly "social" epistemological framework.[1] In one sense, the fact that there should be a "social" epistemology is easy to explain. As standardly conceived, epistemology is the theory of knowledge. As standardly practiced, the theory of knowledge is interested in the various *sources* of knowledge. We might think to explain the existence of a distinctly "social" epistemology, then, in terms of the existence of distinctly social sources of knowledge.

While there is much to this explanation, it is at best incomplete. For one thing, our community is implicated in our body of knowledge in ways that go far beyond that of being a source of information. For another, this purported explanation fails to make clear precisely why many theorists think that social epistemology presents a challenge to certain aspects of the epistemological tradition. In order to appreciate the nature of this challenge and to deepen our explanation for the existence (and rationale) of a distinctly social epistemology, we would do well to revisit the reasons for thinking that there are distinctly social sources of knowledge. These reasons point to a central deficiency in traditional epistemology. Once we recognize this deficiency, we will be in a position to appreciate the variety of different ways in which knowledge acquisition is (often, and perhaps even typically) a social activity.[2]

Traditional epistemology is individualistic in its orientation: it focuses on the states, skills, and background information of individual epistemic subjects. As such it recognizes only two general ways for an individual to

acquire knowledge of her environment: through perception (broadly construed), or through inference (relying on one's own background information). Once this framework is accepted, we are limited in the role(s) that other people can be recognized as playing in one's pursuit of knowledge. Put in the starkest terms possible, others' antics and appearances—their doings and sayings, their dress and manner of presentation etc.—are no different in principle from the antics and appearances of *any* of the objects in one's environment. That is to say, on this individualistic framework other people's antics and appearances have the status of *evidence* from which one can come to know things through inference. On this picture, when I come to know, for example, that the dean is in London through your telling me that she is, my route to knowledge here is no different in kind than the route by which I come to know that it's cold outside by seeing my brother reach for his parka, or the route by which I come to know that we have a mouse problem by observing the mouse droppings under the sink, or the route by which I come to know that it is currently raining by hearing the characteristic patter-patter-patter on my roof. In each case perception makes available to me a piece of evidence—an utterance of yours; a piece of nonverbal behavior of my brother's; mouse droppings; sounds coming from the roof—from which I go on to make inferences. In making these inferences, I am relying on my background information, both for interpreting the evidence in the first place (you have *asserted that the dean is in London*; those things are *mouse droppings*; that's the sound of *rain*), and for knowing which inferences to draw from my evidence (e.g. *your asserting something is highly correlated with the truth of what you've asserted; the presence of mouse droppings is highly correlated with the nearby presence of mice; my brother's reaching for his parka is highly correlated with it's being cold outside*).

I believe that this approach to the role others play in one's pursuit of knowledge fundamentally mischaracterizes that role. To be sure, we often do draw inferences from others' antics, speech, and appearances; and when we do, their antics, speech, and appearances serve as evidence. But there are also cases in which we rely on others *as epistemic subjects in their own right*. Perhaps the clearest and most straightforward example of this—but by no means the only one—is the case of testimony. When we accept another's word for something, we regard them not merely as providing potential evidence, but also, and more centrally, as manifesting *the very results of their own epistemic sensibility*. When one comes to acquire knowledge in this way, it is plausible to think that the epistemic task has been socially distributed; and we might speculate that subjects who share knowledge in this way constitute (part of) an epistemic community. That is to say, they are members of a group whose knowledge environment is structured by various social practices regarding the acquisition, storage, processing, transmission, and assessment of information.

I cannot pretend that this picture is anything but controversial among those who grew up in the more traditional, individualistic orientation that characterizes orthodox epistemology. Even so, I won't defend this picture further here.[3] Instead, I would like to suggest how social epistemology looks from the vantage point of those who take this picture seriously. For those who do take this picture seriously, we stand in a fundamentally different relation to other epistemic subjects than we do to the rest of the items in our environment. Since the point at issue reflects the roles epistemic subjects play as epistemic agents in a common epistemic community, it will be helpful to begin by saying a few words about epistemic subjects, epistemic agents, and epistemic communities.

Throughout this chapter I will want to be able to refer to the sort of entity of whom we can intelligibly ascribe knowledge and other epistemic states (such as justified or rational belief). I will use the term *epistemic subject* to do so. Thus other people are epistemic subjects: we can intelligibly affirm or deny that Smith knows that it is raining, or that Jones believes with justification that the economy will improve. But so too some collectives might be epistemic subjects as well: at any rate we do affirm or deny such things as that the Obama administration knows that immigration laws in the United States need to be addressed, or that the firm's engineering team believes with justification that the bridge is no longer structurally sound.[4] In addition to speaking of epistemic subjects, I will sometimes want to highlight the various roles that epistemic subjects play in acquiring, storing, processing, transmitting, or assessing information. When I want to highlight these roles, I will speak of them (not as epistemic subjects, which they remain, but rather) as *epistemic agents*. This difference in nomenclature—between "epistemic subject" and "epistemic agent"—marks a *notional* difference: to speak of an epistemic agent is to speak of an epistemic subject, albeit in a way that highlights the role(s) played by the subject in the process(es) by which knowledge is acquired, stored, processed, transmitted, or assessed. Finally, I will also be speaking of the practices, institutions, and norms that structure the relations between epistemic agents as they go about their information-seeking business (both individually and socially); to do so I will speak of their shared "epistemic community."

Having introduced these terms, I can now proceed to describe in more detail how (from the epistemic point of view) our relations to other epistemic subjects differ from our relations to the rest of the items in our environment. Here I highlight three dimensions of difference. These dimensions correspond to what I will proceed to call the core project of social epistemology: that of characterizing the *epistemic significance of other minds*.

The first way in which our relations to other epistemic subjects differ from our relations to the rest of the items in our environment is this: epistemic subjects stand in various *epistemic dependency relations* to other

epistemic subjects in their shared epistemic community. The basic idea of an epistemic dependency relation can be brought out in terms of the nature of epistemic assessment itself, in which we assess a subject's belief (or her degree of belief) in a proposition. Such assessment aims to characterize how well-supported her belief is (alternatively: whether that degree of belief is warranted by her evidence). This sort of assessment is a fully normative affair, since it appeals to standards (e.g. of rationality, epistemic responsibility, and/or reliability, among other standards) whose satisfaction is required if the subject's (degree of) belief is to count as amounting to justified belief or knowledge. I describe one subject (S_2) as *epistemically dependent* on another subject (S_1), then, when an epistemic assessment of S_2's belief—an assessment along one or more of the dimensions just described—requires an epistemic assessment of the role S_1 played in the process through which S_2 acquired (or sustained) the belief. (As we will see below, it will be helpful to think of S_1 here not merely as an epistemic subject but as an epistemic agent.) It is of course a substantial assumption that we do exhibit epistemic dependence on others; traditional epistemology would deny this. But social epistemology as I understand it embraces this assumption, and with it recognizes that our epistemic tasks are often socially distributed among the members of our epistemic community. Relying on another person's say-so is *one* kind of epistemic dependence (for which see Goldberg 2010); but it is not the only kind, and it is a task of social epistemology to enumerate and describe the variety of kinds of epistemic dependence exhibited in our interactions with others.[5]

A second way in which our relations to other epistemic subjects differ from our relations to the rest of the items in our environment lies in the variety of norms that enable us to calibrate our expectations of one another as epistemic agents, as we pursue our inquiries (whether individually or jointly). Consider for example the expectations you have when you rely on your doctor, or your lawyer, or your accountant. You expect them to be knowledgeable in certain ways, to be apprised of the best practices, to be responsive to any relevant developments in their specialties, and so forth. Alternatively, consider the expectations you have of the other members of your research team, or of your business partners. You expect them to do their jobs properly, to notify the rest of the team (the other partners) if there are any developments that bear on the research of the whole team (the success of the business), and so forth. Or consider the expectations you have of your neighbors, friends, and family members. When you have long and mutually acknowledged traditions of informing one another of the news in certain domains, you come to expect this of one another. Or, to take a final example, consider the expectations you have when you encounter someone who tells you something. You expect her to be relevantly authoritative regarding the truth of what she said. In many and perhaps even all of these cases, the expectations themselves

reflect various norms that regulate our interactions with other epistemic agents. In some cases, these norms are provided by professional or institutional organizations, and rationalize our reliance on members of those professions or institutions; in other cases, the norms in question are established explicitly, as a matter of agreement, e.g. among team members or business partners; in still other cases, the norms themselves are part of the practices (e.g. of information-sharing) that emerge over the course of repeated interaction between the parties, after the parties mutually (if perhaps only implicitly) acknowledge their mutual reliance on certain aspects of the practice; and in still other cases, the norms are part of sophisticated social practices (such as those regarding the practice of assertion[6]) whose features are, if only implicitly, mutually acknowledged by all participants. (This is not intended to exhaust the possibilities.)

Norm-sanctioned expectations, I submit, are not so much *predictions* of the behavior of our fellows—although they may give rise to such predictions—as they are *normative expectations* of our fellows. For example, your expectation that your doctor knows best practices for the treatment of your condition is not (or not merely) based on the evidence that doctors *are* generally reliable in this way; rather, it constitutes something you normatively expect of her. It is akin to parents' expectation that their teenager will be home by midnight (an expectation to which they are entitled even if their teenager has a long history of staying out too late). These expectations enable us to solve complicated coordination problems we face as we seek to acquire knowledge in communities that exhibit a highly differentiated division of intellectual labor. I regard it as a central task for social epistemology to enumerate and describe the norms that underwrite these expectations, to articulate their epistemic bearing on the *predictive* expectations they underwrite, and ultimately to evaluate the norms themselves in terms of their role in securing true belief and knowledge.[7]

Since the notions of normative and predictive expectations will loom large in the sections to follow, it is important to be clear about the relationship between them. To a first approximation, one epistemic agent, S_2, *normatively* expects something from another epistemic agent, S_1, when S_2 *holds* S_1 *responsible* in the relevant way. Such normative expectations are warranted by the norms of prevailing practice (for a defense of which see Goldberg (forthcoming)). When a normative expectation is warranted in this way, I will speak of agents' *entitlement* to have the normative expectation in question. As I noted above, there are two fundamental theoretical questions regarding normative expectations. First, given a set of normative expectations sanctioned by the norms of a given practice, do these expectations actually conduce to epistemically good outcomes? In asking this, we are taking a critical perspective on the norms and practices of a given community, with the aim of assessing how well these norms and practices serve epistemological ends. (As I will argue in section 3, this is

one place where the traditional normative vocabulary of e.g., epistemology, will come in handy.) Second, how do the normative expectations to which an agent is entitled relate to corresponding *predictive* expectations she has? The latter expectations are a species of belief (about the future), and hence are straightforwardly assessable from an epistemic point of view. But it remains to be seen how being entitled to hold someone responsible for an outcome relates to the justification one has for *believing* that one will get that outcome. And this point brings me to the third way in which our relations to other epistemic subjects differ from our relations to the rest of the items in our environment.

Given the normative expectations one has on those on whom one epistemically relies, as well as the epistemic dependence that results thereby, the epistemic assessment of beliefs formed through one of the "social routes" to knowledge (Goldman 2002; see also Goldman 1999 and 2009) is decidedly different from the epistemic assessment of beliefs not so formed. Insofar as epistemic tasks really are socially distributed, our assessment itself must be a social one. It must take into account not only the other individual(s) on whom the belief epistemically depends, but also the social practices and the norms that regulate these practices. This will include the various practices and norms that constitute what we might call the "epistemic environment" in which agents go about their knowledge-seeking business—and (as noted in the preceding paragraph) their relationship to the justification of belief. To the extent that one's epistemic environment bears on the proper assessment of one's beliefs, we will need to rethink the nature of epistemic assessment, in a way that reflects the various epistemic dependencies and social norms that are implicated in the production and sustainment of belief. I regard it as a task for social epistemology to reconceive the nature of epistemic assessment, and, where needed, to reconceive the categories employed in the assessment.[8]

In short, what I would call the *epistemic significance of other minds* can be seen in (i) the various forms taken by our epistemic dependence on others, (ii) the variety of norms that underwrite our expectations of one another as we make our way in the common epistemic environment, and (iii) the distinctive epistemic assessment(s) implicated whenever a doxastic state is the result of a "social route" to knowledge. In characterizing (i)–(iii) we aim to capture the ways in which our relations to other epistemic agents differs from our relations to the rest of the items in our environment. And it is this, I propose, that provides the rationale for a distinctly social epistemology: social epistemology ought to be the systematic investigation into the epistemic significance of other minds, where this is understood to involve the epistemic tasks I have described in connection with each of (i)–(iii).

There are several lessons to be drawn from the foregoing rationale.

First, if the foregoing rationale is to be our guide, it is an open question to what extent epistemology is social. To be sure, it is social at least in part because we depend on others as sources of knowledge. But this does not exhaust the roles others play in our pursuit of knowledge. Consider the roles other play as experts, as well as in the certification of expertise; in policing standards of assertoric speech and writing; in peer review; in professional organizations, where there is a need to articulate and police standards of professional (including intellectual) behavior of its members; in devising technologies aimed at enabling us to discern more of nature's secrets, and in training others how to use that technology; and in the process by which we educate our young to become thoughtful, critical, productive members of our own knowledge community. In all of these (and no doubt many other) ways, we depend on each other epistemically. As I see matters, it is the task of social epistemology to enumerate and describe these ways, to characterize the norms that underwrite our expectations of one another in these efforts, and to evaluate these norms in terms of their role in securing true belief and knowledge. None of us should be confident of the precise contours of social epistemology (or its place in epistemology more generally) in advance of an extended investigation into these matters.

A second lesson is this: it is an open question how best to understand the role of technology in inquiry. Here I mean to include not only tools of communication and information technology but also the distinctive technology and instrumentation employed in mathematics and the social, natural, and human sciences. On one hand, technology falls within that part of the world whose antics, it would seem, provide us merely with evidence. On the other, technology itself is typically the result of a good deal of epistemic effort: other epistemic subjects bring their epistemic sensibility to bear on the construction, validation, employment, and teaching of technology. What is more, at least some of our technology—here I have in mind scientific instruments—is specifically designed for the purpose of providing results which represent, or at least enable us to discern, aspects of the world's features. Thus our reliance on technology does appear, in both indirect and direct ways, to involve reliance on other epistemic agents. It would thus seem that social epistemology would do well to explore the epistemological dimension of our reliance on technology.

And there is a third lesson as well: it is an open question whether the solitary epistemic subject is the only proper unit of analysis at which to conduct epistemic assessment. So far I have been speaking as if the unit of analysis *is* the individual subject. But many social epistemologists will take issue with this assumption. The development and evaluation of the case for and against this assumption ought to be on the agenda of social epistemology.[9]

All three of these lessons suggest that we do a great disservice to the potential of social epistemology research if the only rationale we recognize for pursuing this research is that there are social sources of knowledge. Such a conception is far too limited. In studying the variety of epistemic dependency relations, the set of epistemic norms that enable epistemic tasks to be socially distributed, and the nature of the epistemic standards used to assess the resulting beliefs, we can see clearly why social epistemology is not merely one category among others on the list of sources of knowledge. We can also see the sort of challenge that social epistemology presents to orthodoxy. In a nutshell, our epistemic dependence on others cannot be understood in the orthodox (individualistic) terms of traditional epistemology, nor can the questions about the nature and scope of this dependence find their place among the standard questions of individualistic epistemology. It would thus be a significant mistake to think that acknowledging the relevance of social epistemology is merely adding one other item to the list of knowledge sources.

In short, I submit that the pursuit of social epistemology is the attempt to come to terms with the epistemic significance of other minds. There is a straightforward rationale for making such an attempt: other people are (not mere sources of knowledge, but) epistemic subjects in their own right who, through their epistemic agency, bring their own epistemic sensibility to bear in all sorts of ways as we shape and operate within a common epistemic environment.

1. SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND EPISTEMIC AGENCY

The foregoing provides a clear sense of the relevance of epistemic agency to issues of social epistemology. The link is provided by the variety of norms that underwrite our normative expectations of one another as we make our way in the common epistemic environment.

As I already mentioned in an endnote (note 6), one sort of norm that underwrites our normative expectations of one another as inquirers is what philosophers of language and epistemologists have called the "norm of assertion." Consider the sort of expectation you form when another person tells you something: if a person tells you that things are thus and so, you hold the speaker responsible for being in a suitably authoritative epistemic position to judge that things are thus and so. Precisely what this involves—whether this requires that the speaker know, or merely that she have good reason to believe—is a matter over which there is some debate. But the basic idea, that each of us expects others to be relevantly authoritative when they state that things are thus and so, is easily seen in our practices. (Consider how you would react on learning that what you were "told" was something the speaker had no good reason to think was true.)

Now it is a tricky matter to say precisely how the norm in question, requiring suitable authoritativeness when one makes an assertion, bears on the epistemic standing of beliefs that are acquired through accepting another's assertion. Does the presence of this norm, together with a hearer's absence of reasons to doubt the speaker's assertion, justify acceptance of that statement? Or does the hearer need to have additional positive reasons to think that the speaker lived up to the norm on this occasion?[10] But whatever one thinks about this matter, it seems patent that hearers do expect speakers to recognize that when an assertion is made the speaker renders herself answerable to the relevant expectation itself. And herein we see one dimension of agency in our social epistemic practices: speakers ought to act so as to conform to the standards that govern proper assertion.

Nor is the "norm of assertion" the only norm that bears on our wider practices in which information is acquired, stored, processed, transmitted, or assessed. Also relevant here are moral norms. For example, consider how the moral norm enjoining us to help others in need can generate an obligation to respond to another's need *for information*. Take a case in which a good friend asks you something. If you know the answer and have no good reason to refrain from responding, you should tell her. If you don't tell her under these conditions and she were to find out that you knew, she would be warranted in saying, "You should have told me so!" This sort of case gives added significance to the agency involved in satisfying the norm of assertion: not only must we regulate our speech so that we don't assert something when we *fail* to be relevantly authoritative, there are also cases in which we are under moral pressure to assert when we *are* relevantly authoritative. Among other things, this will require that we be responsible in determining *whether* we know the answer to a question presently before us.

The satisfaction of other norms structuring our epistemic environments illuminates still other aspects of epistemic agency. (Here I must be very brief.) The professional must be in a position in which she has all of the relevant evidence—that is, the evidence properly expected of her. One who relies on a doctor, for example, is entitled to expect that the doctor's degree of expertise and knowledgeableness conforms to all of the relevant professional standards, and that she (the doctor) stays abreast of all of the relevant developments in her specialization (perhaps under the regulation of a specialist group, such as that for pediatricians or radiologists, etc.). These standards themselves are norms that structure our reliance on doctors: they enable the ordinary citizen to take systematic advantage of the medical expertise in her community at only a small epistemic cost[11] to herself. Once again, the norms articulate what we properly normatively expect of the relevant individuals *as epistemic agents*: we expect that these individuals have acquired the evidence properly expected of them, that they have the knowledge properly expected of

them, and in general that they have behaved with the sort of epistemic responsibility properly expected of them. Similar things can be said of our reliance on other professionals as well.

The prevalence of other norms regulating our epistemic communities highlights still other aspects of epistemic agency. Consider the sorts of expectations we have when we rely on familiar kinds of devices and instruments: thermometers and other temperature gauges, clocks, the instrumentation in our cars, GPS navigation, and so forth. Although it is often a straightforward matter to learn how to "read" these devices, most of us do not have anything beyond the most rudimentary understanding of how the devices themselves work. And, while many of us have enough experience with them to have empirically grounded confidence in their reliability, it is by no means clear that one *needs* to have such experience in order to be in a position to acquire knowledge through reliance on the devices. To see this, consider a young child just learning to tell time; and suppose such a child learns, not by looking at real clocks, but by looking at images of clock-faces, where she is told by her teacher how to read time by the orientation of the clock's hour and minute hands. Once the child learns to "read time" in this way, it would seem that she is in a position to know what time it is by looking at a clock, *even if her teacher never once testified to the reliability of clocks* (and even if the child herself did not have other evidence with which to confirm their reliability). Here it is natural to think that once we are properly initiated into a clock-using community, one can take for granted that clocks tell proper time. This presumption is defeasible, of course, and one must remain sensitive to the possibility that a particular clock on which one is relying is not working properly (and so is not a reliable indication of the time).[12] But the point is that one need not *also* acquire additional positive evidence for thinking that the clocks around here are reliable; the norms governing our interactions with clocks would appear to entitle us to *presume* as much, with defeat of this presumption requiring positive reasons for doubt in a given case. Once again, these norms correspond to expectations it would be proper to have regarding a range of epistemic agents: those responsible for the production, maintenance, and training in the usage of the devices and technologies themselves. (No doubt, the expectations to which we are entitled will vary according to the sort of technology in question, the prevalence of its use, and perhaps other factors as well. Our use of clocks may be atypical in this regard, in that our use of more technical instruments may not ordinarily come with an entitlement to make similar assumptions about their reliability.)

These last two cases are instances of a general point I made above. In pointing to the norms that structure our epistemic environments—the norms that warrant various sorts of normative expectations we have regarding the objects and people in our environment—we are pointing to expectations we have of one another as epistemic agents. We operate in

an environment whose norms entitle us to form certain expectations, and hence to solve certain coordination problems that arise, when we epistemically rely on others in various ways. To be sure, we can make efforts to become aware of the various norms that structure our epistemic environment; and we can bring ourselves to reflect self-consciously on the evidence we have for thinking that things in general (or this person or that device in particular) reliably conform(s) to the norms. I surmise that most mature humans do have a good deal of relevant evidence, and that we do on occasion self-consciously reflect in precisely this way. But I submit that we typically do so only when we suspect that the situation doesn't seem right: when the person speaking to us doesn't appear to be fully confident, or is evasive; when one's watch has been making strange sounds recently; when the thermometer reads 20 degrees F, yet we know that it is in the middle of a Chicago summer; and so forth. What is more, I submit that there is a rationale for the otherwise curious fact that we are entitled to have various normative expectations within our epistemic community: having norms regulating our epistemic environment is precisely what enables us to focus our energies as agents on acquiring the results which, supposing that all is working as the norms require, provide us with detailed, sophisticated, and useful knowledge of the world around us. In other words, the norms themselves are part of what enable the division of epistemic labor to be as far-reaching and as systematic as it is.

2. AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAMME FOR RESEARCH IN SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

In this penultimate section I want to use the foregoing characterization of social epistemology and its connection to epistemic agency, in order to describe the (seriously interdisciplinary) nature of the social epistemology research programme. This research will require the work both of those social science disciplines that study the prevailing norms and practices of our epistemic communities—disciplines such as history, sociology, political science, education theory and practice, psychology (cognitive and social), and anthropology—but also disciplines that bring a more "normative" orientation to the discussion—philosophy, law, parts of psychology,[13] economics, and perhaps others as well.

As I have been presenting matters, social epistemology is the systematic study of the epistemic significance of other minds (as manifested in connection with (i)–(iii) above). The emerging picture, then, is this: Epistemic subjects are conceived of as subjects in a community of knowers. Each subject has her own on-board cognitive competences; and among these cognitive competences are some that pertain to her role as an epistemic agent who aims to exploit the high-quality information that is

available in her social environment—whether in the form of testimony, or in some other way in which information is acquired, processed, stored, assessed, or transmitted in a social way. Part of what enables this process to be as systematic and far-reaching as it is, I have suggested, are the set of norms that structure our epistemic environments. As agents, epistemic subjects operate in contexts in which a good deal of their interactions with other agents and with the world are regulated by standards pertaining to the flow of information in those environments. These standards (or norms) enable agents to get a bigger bang for their epistemic efforts than they would get in the absence of any such norms: were each agent forced to confirm for herself the reliability of the various sources of information available to her in her environment, and were she forced as well to confirm various hypotheses regarding what sorts of information are available (and how frequently), she would have to expend a good deal of effort simply learning about the various aspects of the flow of information within her environment—effort that might be better (more productively) spent learning about her world more generally.

From this description it is clear that there is an important role to be played in social epistemology by empirically minded social science. We need to know precisely what our information-relying practices are, what the norms or standards of those practices are taken to be, how (if at all) these norms or standards are communicated to members, how (if at all) they are enforced, how information does in fact travel through the network, and so forth. This constitutes what we might call the *structural description* of our various and overlapping epistemic communities. Without a detailed characterization of this sort, we would be theorizing blindly. Researchers from such disciplines as sociology, history, political science, psychology (especially cognitive and social psychology), education theory and practice, and anthropology are well suited to exploring these issues, and to providing the needed description.

But it is important to have the input of what I would describe as more "normative" disciplines as well. By calling a discipline "normative" I mean that it does not merely rest with a description of what our norms or standards are (and what they are *taken to be*), but instead is interested as well in what our norms or standards *could* and *should* be. As noted above, any theorist who hopes to address such normative questions must start off with a clear structural description of what those practices and their norms are (or are taken to be). But our normative theorist can then ask whether these practices and norms are proper, whether they are as they ought to be. That is, the theorist in one of the "normative" disciplines will normatively assess the very norms of our current practices, with an eye towards seeing whether these practices (and the norms taken to govern them) live up to the highest (epistemic, moral, or political) standards we have (or ought to have).

The "normative" disciplines I have in mind here include philosophy, law, areas of psychology, and economics. The normativity of these disciplines is seen in that they employ or explore norms or standards of assessment which can be used, in turn, to assess the normative standards of our current practices. The law brings in legal norms: it assesses practices in terms of their *legality*, and it assesses laws in terms of their *constitutionality*. Philosophy brings in epistemic as well as moral and political norms: epistemic standards enable us to assess beliefs in terms of such things as *reasonableness*, *rationality*, *reliability*, and *evidential well-groundedness*; moral standards enable us to assess actions in terms of their *moral goodness* or *badness*, or their *moral permissibility*; and (normative) political standards enable us to assess institutions and practices in terms of their *justice* and *fairness*. Parts of psychology have a distinctly ameliorative bent,[14] bringing in norms of reliability to assess the effectiveness of individual and group behavior: it assesses the behaviors of individuals and groups in terms of the speed and ease with which these behaviors produce their results, as well as the likelihood that those results will be true (or at least accurate enough for practical purposes). Finally, economics might be thought to be normative insofar as it aims to capture an assessment of the *rationality* of practices and actions (understanding rationality in terms of expected utility).[15] Given a structural description of our actual practices and the norms taken to govern them, we can assess these practices, as well as the individuals who participate in them, in the normative terms drawn from these disciplines. Do these practices live up to the highest ideals articulated in the normative disciplines? (And if they do not, should we conclude that it is the practices which need to change, or rather that we need to revisit our highest ideals?)

At this point I can imagine theorists from the more empirically minded social sciences recoiling at the thought that we can and should bring normative theory to bear on our actual practices. One worry on this score might be based on the idea that it is not the business of theorists to revise our practices; the best that we can do is describe those practices. Another more fundamental worry on this score might be based on a doubt whether there even is a "normative" orientation we can have beyond that provided by the practices themselves. Those who deny that there is such an orientation will endorse something like what I will call *Descriptivism about Normativity* (or 'DN' for short):

> (DN) Once we describe the social practices through which it comes to pass that things are *taken* as knowledge, *count* as good evidence, *pass for* being a justified theory, are *certified* as authoritative, are *regarded as* a legitimate criticism, and so forth, we will thereby have said what needs to be said about the relevant norms and standards themselves.

From the perspective of those endorsing DN, attempts to attain a meta-normative perspective on these very practices will be naïve at best, impossible at worst.[16]

But these worries are unfounded, and it is important to appreciate why. When it comes to the practices that structure our epistemic environment, mere description is not the end of the social epistemology story. First, the practices themselves (as well as the standards taken to govern them) can conflict, and when they do so we will want some way to address this conflict. Second, it can come to pass that, in certain local contexts, we want to criticize the extant practices or norms, and we will then be in need of some normative orientation within which to cast our criticisms. To these two points it might be said that we should study how *the communities themselves* resolve matters when their knowledge practices reach opposing verdicts, or how *they themselves* criticize their own practices and respond to such criticisms, etc. This would be in keeping with DN and its fully descriptive characterization of the normativity of knowledge. But this response is inadequate. While we would do well to study such things, we would also do well to aim to occupy a critical perspective even when addressing a community's responses to its own internally-generated criticisms and difficulties. To do otherwise is to accept without criticism the community's own standards (or at least their standards for criticizing their standards). In addition to being groundless, such an acceptance risks degenerating into a thoroughgoing form of subjectivism.

Let me provide one illustration of how we might use the language of the more "normative" disciplines to address the adequacy of the standards of our actual knowledge practices. I have in mind the kinds of expectations we bring to bear in assessing others' assertions—the sorts of expectations described above. There are good reasons to think that even the most progressive-minded among us brings all sorts of implicit biases to bear as we do so—biases that systematically disfavor women and members of underrepresented minorities. If we induced our standards from our actual practices, the standards themselves would be decidedly unfair. But to make precisely this sort of point, we would do well to appeal the normative standards of epistemology, ethics, and normative political philosophy. (Indeed, the groundbreaking work of Fricker (2007) aims to do just this.) It would be a shame if we surrender the possibility of normative critiques of this sort out of a prior commitment to DN.

3. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to articulate a research programme for social epistemology, understood to be the systematic study of the epistemic significance of other minds. In my presentation, such a programme involves addressing at least three things: (i) the various forms taken by our epistemic dependence on others, (ii) the variety of norms that underwrite our expectations of one another as we make our way in the common epistemic environment, and (iii) the distinctive epistemic assessment(s) that are appropriate whenever a doxastic state is the result of a "social route" to knowledge. I noted that it is in connection with (ii) that we see the most straightforward link between social epistemology and epistemic agency: the norms of our knowledge communities enable us to enhance the epistemic effects of our efforts beyond what they would be if each of us had to confirm for ourselves the various features of our epistemic communities. Finally, I argued that the study I envisage will require a healthy dose of both empirically minded social science as well as the input of the "normative" orientations found in disciplines like philosophy, law, ameliorative psychology, and economics.

NOTES

1. With thanks to Matt Kopec and Patrick Reider, for extensive comments on an earlier version of this paper.

2. 'often' or 'typically': I want to remain neutral on the issue whether ordinary perceptual knowledge is social in any interesting sense. (Those who think it is often appeal to the social dimension brought in by one's public language in shaping one's perceptual capacities.)

3. But see Sanford Goldberg, *Relying on Others: An Essay in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), and Sanford Goldberg, "The Division of Epistemic Labour," *Episteme* 8 (2001).

4. I say they 'might' be epistemic subjects: there is some dispute whether this talk of collectives as epistemic subjects is necessary, or whether it can be translated into talking about individual people and their relations to one another. I am neutral on this question here.

5. I make some initial taxonomic distinctions in Goldberg, "The Division of Epistemic Labour."

6. This idea is prevalent in the literature on the so-called "norm of assertion." See e.g. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), Jennifer Lackey, "Norms of Assertion," Noûs 41 (2007), and the various papers in Jessica Brown and Herman Cappelen, eds., *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Arguably, this idea can be traced back to a "deontic scorekeeping" view of assertion developed by Robert Brandom, "Assertion," Noûs (1983), and Robert Brandom, *Making it Explicit* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). However, Brandom's approach to assertion is explicitly distinguished from the approach favored by the "norm of assertion" crowd in John MacFarlane, "What is an Assertion?" in *Assertion: New Philosophical Essays*, ed. Jessica Brown et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Sanford Goldberg, *Assertion: On the Philosophical Significance of Assertoric Speech* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015) for my attempt to take this idea and develop it into a full theory of the speech act of assertion.

7. I offer a framework in terms of which to theorize about these norms in Goldberg (forthcoming).

8. See Goldberg, *Relying on Others*; Goldberg, "The Division of Epistemic Labour"; and Sanford Goldberg, "Should Have Known," *Synthese* (forthcoming) for various extended arguments to this effect, and attempts to develop this sort of framework.

9. See e.g., Deborah Tollefsen, "From Extended Mind to Collective Mind," *Cognitive Systems Research* 7 (2006); Deborah Tollefsen, "Groups as Rational Sources," *Collective Epistemology* 20 (2011); Philip Pettit and Christian List, *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jennifer Lackey, "Group Knowledge Attributions," In *Knowledge Ascriptions*, ed. Jessica Brown et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); and Miranda Fricker, "Group Testimony? The Making of A Collective Good Informant?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (forthcoming).

10. For reasons I explore in Goldberg, *Assertion*, chapters 2 and 3, something like this is the heart of a spirited debate in the epistemology of testimony.

11. The "small epistemic cost" is that those who would rely on doctors must be properly sensitive to indications that they are in the presence of a doctor, and must remain sensitive as well to signs of incompetence or insincerity even when in the presence of a doctor. (This requires less effort and less expertise than what would be required to attain expertise in the medical subject-matter itself!) Of course, this reduction in *epistemic* cost comes at a *financial* cost to ordinary citizens; but that is another matter.

12. Or that the recent change to daylight savings time makes salient the possibility that one's clock is an hour off. (With thanks to Matt Kopec for raising this possibility in this connection.)

13. I have in mind those parts which study effective/defective individual and group epistemic behavior, where effectiveness is determined in terms of the reliability with which such behaviors eventuate in beliefs that are true.

14. See, for example, Stephen Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); and Michael Bishop and J. D. Trout, *Epistemology and the Psychology of Human Judgment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). The description "ameliorative psychology" is taken from Bishop and Trout.

15. I acknowledge that not all economists will be happy with this normative characterization of economics!

16. Arguably, a view in the neighborhood of DN is held by Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity* (Cambridge University Press, 1989); Steven Fuller, "Social Epistemology: A Quarter-Century Itinerary," *Social Epistemology* 26 (2012); and others in the science studies tradition.

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