

Knowledge and the epistemic function of  
argumentation  
Commentary on Gascón's "Where are dissent and  
reasons in epistemic justification?"

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## 1. TWO KINDS OF EPISTEMOLOGY

José Ángel Gascón's essay "Where are dissent and reasons in epistemic justification?" (Gascón, 2020 <sup>1</sup>) is an exposition of a version of a social functionalist epistemology. I agree with Gascón's emphasis on reasons and on taking into account dissent as important parts of epistemology. But I think that these concerns do not require a social functionalist epistemology, but that, on the contrary, Gascón's social functionalist epistemology throws the baby out with the bathwater. It does so by excluding also a traditional, at its core individualistic epistemology, which defines central concepts like 'justified', 'knowledge' still in individualistic terms as the result of a mental cognizing process but is open to social extensions, e.g. concerning cooperation in the acquisition of knowledge or the transfer of knowledge via argumentation. Such a socially open epistemology with an individualistic core – or "open individualistic epistemology" for short – is also the basis of the epistemological argumentation theory. In the following I want to explain and defend this open individualistic epistemology together with the epistemological argumentation theory (sect. 2) and explain on this basis some problems of Gascón's theory (sect. 3).

## 2. JUSTIFIED BELIEF AND THE EPISTEMIC FUNCTION OF ARGUMENTATION

Propositions are *true* iff their (defining) truth conditions (which pertain to the meaning of the terms used in the proposition) are fulfilled. Besides these primary, defining truth conditions, there are also secondary (effective) epistemological principles which state secondary

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<sup>1</sup> The page numbers in the following references to Gascón's article refer to the manuscript, which is 16 pages long.

conditions for when (certain) propositions are true, e.g. the deductive epistemological principle: 'A proposition is true if it is logically implied by true propositions' or the genesis of knowledge principle: 'A proposition is true if it has been correctly verified'. (Lumer, 1990, pp. 32-34; 2005, pp. 221-222)

The way to (more than accidentally) true beliefs is cognition: Cognition consists in checking whether the conditions of such epistemological principles or truth conditions are fulfilled and thereby reaching a positive result. When somebody recognizes along these lines, he has founded his belief and his belief is founded or justified. (Lumer, 2005, p. 215)

The *certain methods of cognition* such as observation and deduction from true premises have only a very limited range; with them alone one cannot recognize the vast majority of propositions which we need for our planning, decisions and orientation in the world. e.g. predictions. *Uncertain* but effective *epistemological principles*, which cannot guarantee the truth of the thesis in question, but at least its probable or frequent truth or verisimilitude, bring an enormous and sufficient expansion of our wealth of knowledge. Such principles as those of inductive logic, statistics, probabilistic inferences, or of practical rationality are based on probability theory or rational decision theory. (Lumer, 2005, pp. 231-234; 2011a, pp. 13-19; 2011b; 2014)

The price for this enormous expansion of what we can recognize is uncertainty; and this means that the propositions thus recognized can be wrong: The cognizer has correctly followed the rules of the uncertain type of cognition, thus also correctly cognized, but she has just had bad luck, the resulting proposition is nevertheless wrong or not even truth-like.

A justified belief (or cognition) consists of 1. the belief that *p*, and 2. the associated subjective justification i.e. memory of essential steps in acquiring this belief (Lumer, 1990, pp. 30; 34-36; 2005, p. 215). As said, even a (correctly) justified, but just uncertainly justified belief can be wrong – or the correct recognition process first comes to a false result, which later, however, is corrected by accident. This is what happened in the second Gettier example (Gettier, 1963, p. 23; quoted by Gascón, 2020. pp. 2-3). – This is also my answer to Gascón's question, "in what sense is someone justified, if he cannot convince a better-informed audience?" (Gascón, 2020, p. 3): The belief of the knowledge subject is *more weakly justified* than that of the audience. Apart from the social criterion for the justifiedness of a belief proposed by Gascón – to be able to "convince a better-informed audience" –, there is also the individualistic criterion: the cognition subject has recognized in a correct way that *p*, and remembers sufficiently the substantial steps involved.

A first important extension towards social cognition and social epistemology are *arguments* and their use in *argumentation*. *Valid arguments* are tailored to the cognition just described. They are oriented by effective epistemological principles and assert that all conditions of such an epistemological principle that have been concretized for a certain thesis are fulfilled and then infer that the respective thesis is true or acceptable. An argument oriented on the deductive epistemological principle, i.e. a deductive argument, asserts that a certain set of propositions  $q_1, \dots, q_n$  is true, furthermore, it asserts (often only implicitly) that these propositions logically imply the proposition  $p$ , finally, it also asserts the thesis  $p$  thus justified. (Lumer, 1990, pp. 44-49; 2005, pp. 221-224) If an argument is constructed in this way and is therefore valid, and if the argument is also used *adequately*, namely with an addressee who has already recognized the premises as true, then it can guide the cognition of the addressee: The argument tells the addressee which things he must check to recognize  $p$  as true; and the addressee checks  $q_1, \dots, q_n$ , as well as the logical validity of the inference. If he himself now masters the deductive epistemological principle, then the addressee can immediately infer that all conditions for the truth of  $p$ , after this epistemological principle, are fulfilled; and he will then accept  $p$ , i.e. believe it.

Further extensions of the individualistic core of epistemology towards social epistemology are e.g. arguments from expert opinion (Lumer, 2020) and dialogical argumentative discussions with the aim of cooperatively searching for truth (Lumer, 1988).

### 3. GASCÓN'S SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY – A CRITICAL DISCUSSION

In the constructive part of his paper Gascón defends two major theses: 1. an "*argumentativist epistemology*" (my term, C.L.) and 2. *social functionalism in epistemology*, which is rather a conglomerate of related theses.

"*Argumentativist epistemology*" is the thesis that cognition, knowledge and justified belief consist in the fact that the respective belief can be justified argumentatively by the cognition subject to others and defended against their objections. Gascón puts it this way: "If, by the end of the discussion, the arguer has provided sufficiently adequate and strong reasons and has dealt with her opponent's counterarguments, then she can be considered justified in her belief" (Gascón, 2020, p. 1). Or: "Beliefs are justified by means of argumentation" (Gascón, 2020, p. 2).

It is undisputed that an opinion is justified if someone can justify it argumentatively and defend it against objections. Rather, the following is disputed: 1. Does the reversal of this implication (and hence

also the equivalence) also apply: Is a belief justified *only* if the subject can justify it argumentatively and defend it against objections? 2. If we assume for a moment that the equivalence holds: Does the idea of epistemic justification as argumentative justification capture the essence of cognition and argumentation?

*On 1:* There are cognitions, justified beliefs independent of some actual argumentative defence, even independent of the ability to argue. 1. Cognition is phylogenetically and ontogenetically older than argumentation. There are – relatively primitive – societies completely without a culture of argumentation. After all, these societies have developed language and other cultural assets. Would one deny, for example, that they have justified beliefs about the value of individual cultural assets, about the success of certain techniques, etc.? 2. Children in Western societies start to provide arguments at the age of about four years. By then they have learned their (simple) language and many other things from their social environment with correct reasoning methods such as observation or induction – e.g. after various experiences that they will like this kind of juice, that the parents will not be pleased about a certain way of acting, that the parental house looks like this. Why should one deny that these beliefs are justified by their respective genesis? 3. There are non-inferential cognitions, especially observations: Observation then leads to a belief justified by observation. However, because observation is not an inferential reasoning procedure, the resulting beliefs cannot be justified argumentatively in the narrower sense. – If there are now justified beliefs, cognitions also independent of the possibility of argumentative defence, then such a possibility cannot be the condition for the justifiedness of belief.

*On 2:* Does the idea of epistemic justification as argumentative justification capture the essence of knowledge and argumentation? With regard to argumentation, the question then arises whether there is a conception of rational argumentation that does not already presuppose individual cognition? Gascón makes no suggestion what such a conception might look like, how argumentations would have to function, what exact purposes they would have, etc. According to the above analysis of the functioning of argumentation, an "argumentativist" conception of cognition contradicts what actually happens epistemically when arguing: Premises are presented, inferential relations are asserted, etc., and the addressee is thus guided to recognize the thesis as acceptable. The truth of premises can also be recognized independently of argumentation, as can the validity of an inference. Argumentations only optimize such cognitive processes by presenting suitable material for recognizing the acceptability of the thesis. And the criteria for the validity of arguments are oriented on the criteria for rational cognition, effective epistemological principles, etc. To sum up, there is nothing

social recognizable about such cognitive processes that take place independently of the argumentation.

Gascón's social functionalism in epistemology is a conglomerate of related theses, each based on theories of other authors, in particular: Mercier & Sperber, Tomasello, Brandom, Leite and Craig. The most important of them is Craig's theory:

*Craig: knower: = good informant:* 'Knowledge' is, according to Craig, a concept that originated in the course of social information exchange and serves to mark good informants: "The concept of knowledge is used to flag approved sources of information" (Craig, 1990, p. 11, quoted in Gascón, 2020, p. 7). It is uncontroversial that the concept of knowledge *can* be used for this purpose. What makes this sentence a thesis of social functionalism is a stronger interpretation, according to which the marking of good informants is the very function of the concept of knowledge; and I presume that Gascón means this stronger interpretation.

What I want to show now is that this conception provides a false analysis of the primary – namely epistemic – function of knowledge and reason, which also does not do justice to the social significance of knowledge; actually, this conception even presupposes an individualistic cognition and knowledge as the basis of social knowledge, as outlined above. Is a knower primarily a good informant? That knowers are good informants is, as I said, undisputed. What is astonishing about the *definition* of 'knower' as a good informant, however, is that the idea of such a definition presupposes an independent, traditional, individualistic concept of knowledge. For the next question is immediately: and who is a good informant? Yes, a knower (or someone else with justified beliefs) who has recognized what he claims on the basis of effective epistemological principles and procedures, and who therefore provides information as true as possible. The informant's interlocutor would also like to become a knower himself in this sense, namely to have a justified belief that represents the world as truthfully as possible, etc. Without this primary, individualistic sense of 'knowledge' and 'justified belief' one cannot explain the value of information at all; information would at least no longer be something that would help us to orient ourselves in the world.

This brief critique shows that social functionalist epistemology as such cannot explain the sense of cognition, reason and argumentation. And wherever it aims at something epistemically useful, it presupposes an individualistic concept of knowledge and cognition, according to which the individual observance of rules of cognition leads to acceptable beliefs. Only on this individualistic basis can one explain how the inclusion of others can help us to more well-founded beliefs –

whereby the individualistic core of epistemology is then socially expanded.

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