



Testimony and intellectual autonomy

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Abstract

Recent epistemology has been notable for an emphasis, or a variety of emphases, upon the social dimension of knowledge. This has provided a corrective to the heavily individualist account of knowledge previously holding sway. It acknowledges the ways in which an individual is deeply indebted to the testimony of others for his or her cognitive endowments, both with respect to capacities and information. But the dominance of the individualist model was connected with a concern for the value of cognitive autonomy. It is unclear how due recognition of the social dimension can allow for this value. It is argued here that there are ways of construing intellectual autonomy that not only can make it consistent with these new emphases (in particular, with the approach to testimony favoured by the author) but also respect its status as an epistemic concept. The author's approach is contrasted with Alvin Goldman's recent development of an approach to social knowledge via the idea of maximising truths. This seems to leave insufficient scope for intellectual character and autonomy. So concepts of independence, mastery, intellectual self-creation and intellectual integrity are explored in order to develop a perspective on cognitive autonomy adequate to the insights of social epistemology. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Much epistemology of the late twentieth century was dominated by the idea of naturalising epistemology. The phrase was Quine's but its genesis may be found in Hume's empiricism and in some of the impulses of the later Wittgenstein. At its best, the instinct of the naturalisers was soundly based in a certain hostility to arm-chair theorising and to philosophers dictating rules for rationality and authenticity

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to practitioners of actual knowledge at the coal-face of science and other disciplines. But the idea that epistemology could be a merely descriptive study of the standards that happen to apply in various specialised areas of inquiry, and hence a version of social psychology, is ultimately as self-defeating as the parallel notion that ethics should be a version of anthropology.

Epistemology may have been too arrogant and high-handed in the past, but it is a normative discipline or it is nothing (hence the rapidity of the move from naturalised epistemology to the end-of-epistemology). Given the staggering successes of some of the natural sciences, it would be foolish to adjudicate upon their procedures from a lofty external position; but this does not require philosophical capitulation. Philosophy (or was it theology?) may have claimed an absurd title as ‘the queen of the sciences’, but the philosophical role of stepping back from the practical exigencies of experimenting, theorising, surveying, speculating and testing in order to reflect on the meaning of it all and of its relation to common modes of thought shared by all humans is surely indispensable. For the fact is that the various things called ‘sciences’ or ‘disciplines’ or honoured by widespread acceptance in different, or even the same, societies as intellectually prestigious vary considerably in structure, method and evidentiary validation. The search for an ordered perspective and even adjudication upon this variety may be difficult and elusive, but it is not palpably futile.

I do not mean that a separate philosophical caste is essential; there is, I think, a good case for a specific philosophical vocation or even profession, but it is separate from the case for the philosophical reflection we call epistemology. This reflection can, and should, be carried on by the various practitioners of the sciences and other disciplines. They should themselves recognise the degree to which their discipline is philosophical and seek to understand its philosophical dimensions. The case for a separate discipline of philosophy arises from the massive complexity and specialisation of contemporary knowledge. It is a persuasive case, but what is also persuasive is the need for philosophers to know as much as they can about the areas of knowledge they discuss and to be as closely engaged with practitioners as is possible.

The ethical analogy used above is suggestive in several ways. If both ethics and epistemology are normative studies, then there may be certain important points of intersection. Epistemology is concerned with the values of knowledge and truth, just as ethics is concerned more comprehensively with the good. W. K. Clifford, that ‘enfant terrible’ of nineteenth-century British philosophy, once wrote an essay called ‘The Ethics of Belief’, an essay which harked back to certain distinctly moral concerns with the right paths to knowledge characteristic of John Locke.¹ I do not want to endorse all the forms that Clifford’s concern took, but the idea that the pursuit of knowledge involves value options, some of which may be ethical, is a fruitful one.

In his recent book *Knowledge in a social world*, Alvin Goldman argues specifically for a certain sort of consequentialist attitude to social knowledge, emphasising the importance of what he calls a veritistic approach to the topic.² Goldman and I share

¹ Clifford (1999).

² Goldman (1999).

certain sympathies in epistemology. We both emphasise the significance of the social dimension of knowledge and its neglect by traditional epistemology, and we are both critical of those relativisms about knowledge (or ‘knowledges’) that are fashionable in post-modernist circles. Yet there are differences. Most of these are to do with the relations between individual and social epistemology, but only one of them will directly concern me here.³ This arises from the consequentialist form of veritism that Goldman embraces, and a discussion of this should throw light upon the problem of intellectual autonomy. But I want to begin with my own views on testimony and social knowledge and with a certain tension that seems to exist between them and the ideal of intellectual autonomy. Since I think this ideal important, though somewhat obscure, and I am naturally attached to my own view, the tension is something I need to explore. But the need goes beyond personal priorities, since the ideal is deep in Western intellectual culture and in the sciences, and also appeals widely beyond that cultural environment.

My concern for issues raised by the ideal of intellectual autonomy was already flagged in my book *Testimony*, where I tried to make it clear that my position was not inimical to cognitive autonomy, as long as it was properly understood.⁴ But these remarks were no more than suggestive about how such autonomy was in fact to be properly grasped. So the present occasion gives me an opportunity to expand on those remarks. My interest in doing so was heightened by an incident in Beijing when I was lecturing a few years ago to a class in the philosophy of science at Beijing University (or Peking University, as many of its staff and students still prefer to say). I had been expounding to the class the basic epistemological thesis of my book *Testimony* which argues for a primitive role for our reliance upon the word of others in the possession of knowledge. The discussion that followed was lively, wide-ranging and intelligent, but after the class a woman student who had been anxious to ask a question, but had not been able to catch the Chair’s eye, got me aside and said: ‘I am persuaded by most of what you have said, but I want to know what this dependence on others does to the idea of autonomy. I strongly support the autonomy of thought, and here in China it is most important to have such autonomy, and there is much resistance to it. So what can you say about it?’

This seemed to me then, as now, a good question that posed a real epistemological challenge. It was particularly striking in demonstrating the appeal of the ideal of intellectual autonomy beyond the confines of ‘western’ culture, confines that are far more permeable and negotiable than is often pretended by academic cultural theorists and political ideologues. What follows are some first steps at answering the question and meeting the challenge.

Let me begin with the value that is often thought to reside in the idea that a knower should have more than true belief. In spite of the complex difficulties in

³ Goldman does not discuss the issue of the relation between social and individual epistemology fully but his attitude seems to be that they form two comfortably adjacent compartments of philosophical study. My view is that the social dimension raises more problems for our conception of individual epistemology than Goldman seems to think.

⁴ Coady (1992). For the brief discussion of autonomy see pp. 99–100.

determining what that ‘more’ should be, the philosophical tradition is replete with efforts to provide it. In twentieth-century analytical philosophy, it was indeed something of an obsession, as the industry provoked by the Gettier paradoxes illustrates. There is an interesting nest of connections here reaching in different directions: on the one hand towards broadly veritistic outcomes (i.e. the idea that knowledge so characterised is more reliably oriented towards truth), but on the other towards issues of epistemic virtue and character. When Plato spoke of true opinion needing the addition of a ‘logos’ he was indeed concerned to anchor true beliefs, and concerned in a way, therefore, with their external reliability, but he was also concerned with the sort of agent that the knower had to be, with her understanding and comprehension, with her insight into the Form of the Good. Similarly, the development of modern empiricism that stimulated much of the twentieth-century obsession with defining individual knowledge was notable both for a concern with specifying conditions that would secure true belief against an environment regarded as hostile to its acquisition, and for the development of intellectual character. Much of this could be characterised as a concern for ‘cognitive autonomy’ and it is a fascinating question how this idea can be related to the enterprise of social epistemology. *Prima facie*, an emphasis on the autonomy of the individual knower might seem inimical to the strongly social emphasis on authoritative and expert knowledge, and on the social foundations of so much individual thinking and intellectual resources. Indeed, in my book, I discussed one such version of epistemic autonomy that is so inimical, at least to my interests in social epistemology. This is the version articulated by my former teacher John Mackie, who once argued that there was an ideal of autonomous knowledge built into the empiricist tradition of epistemology such that our wide-ranging dependence on testimony could only be admitted as knowledge (on this model) if ‘the knower somehow checks for himself the credibility of the witness’ whenever he relies upon one. Checking this ‘external fact’ (as Mackie called it) will need to be based upon the knower’s own observations or else on further testimony. If it is based on further testimony, that, in turn, will need personal checking. Mackie is attracted to this traditional picture, though he sees its difficulties and doesn’t eventually endorse it fully.⁵ But, as I argue in my book, this prospect either reduces the autonomous knower to an impotent grasp of very little or, if he achieves anything like the scope of the knowledge that he could be expected to have, his further personal checking must rely explicitly or implicitly on the checks of others that themselves remain unchecked. This is so even if we ignore the elements of dependence on others that are involved in the very use of an inherited and socially confirmed language—a use that any serious version of intellectual autonomy must presuppose. Strictly understood Mackie’s autonomous knower is confined to a grasp of primitive and uninteresting items of knowledge: he is an autonomous ignoramus.

This objection, and related objections, could be further elaborated, as they have been by me and by others, but I am going to take it that the picture Mackie presents is not viable as an account of cognitive autonomy. This, I think, would be accepted

⁵ Mackie (1970), p. 254.

by most of the increasing number of philosophers who believe that testimony has an important and hitherto neglected significance for our understanding of the nature and role of knowledge, even when they disagree with the theory I have given of that significance and role. What account of cognitive autonomy, more feasible than Mackie's, can be supplied?

Before trying to sketch the outlines of such an account, let me say a brief word or two about ideals. This is necessary because it seems plausible that cognitive or intellectual autonomy functions ethically as an ideal. In this it may contrast with such an imperative as the duty not to take innocent human life or a duty not to tell lies or to be faithful to your friends. These latter are achievable *tout court* but an ideal seems essentially to outreach our capacities to fully achieve it. Some have even argued that it is essential to an ideal that it is wholly unachievable. There are, I think, certain obscurities in that claim, but we should not think that the (apparent) unrealisability of an ideal is sufficient to rescue the Mackie thesis. If ideals are unrealisable, this should not be because they are incoherent or based upon fallacious reasoning. The ideal of peace may be unattainable in reality because of the ingrained structural faults of human politics and the congenital flaws of human nature, but the vision of world without war is not internally self-contradictory. If I am right, Mackie's picture of the autonomous knower does suffer from a type of incoherence that makes it unsuitable, even as an ideal. The thesis that ideals are 'unrealisable' cannot be used to rescue it.

2. The veritistic project and intellectual character

To return to Goldman: the dominating value in his conception of social knowledge is truth, or more specifically true belief. He conceives of his task as one of assessing the ways in which our various social practices serve to maximise true beliefs. So, he says: 'veritistic social epistemology aims to evaluate social practices in terms of their veritistic output, where veritistic output concerns states like knowledge, error and ignorance'.⁶ And he goes on explicitly to compare his procedure with that of consequentialism in moral philosophy, saying: 'The structure here is perfectly analogous to the structures of consequentialist schemes in moral theory. One type of state, such as happiness or utility, is taken to have fundamental or intrinsic moral value, and other items, such as actions, rules, or institutions, are taken to have instrumental value insofar as they tend to produce (token) states with fundamental value'.⁷ It is important for Goldman that the key term 'knowledge' used to describe the positive fundamental value is understood merely as true belief; he eschews altogether certain classical analyses of knowledge, despite having notably contributed to them elsewhere, and builds his account of social knowledge firmly upon true belief and what promotes it.

⁶ Goldman (1999), p. 87.

⁷ Goldman (1999), p. 87.

Before exploring further the value structure of Goldman's thinking, we should note his explanation of this use of an unfashionably narrow concept of knowledge. He says that if one distinguishes weaker and stronger sense of 'know' and 'knowledge', then there are clearly strong senses in which some further condition on true belief to do with justification and the exclusion of alternative possibilities is required. 'Super-strong knowledge that *p*' excludes all rival possibilities to *p*, whereas, more sensibly, merely 'strong knowledge' excludes only serious or realistic possibilities. He is, however, concerned entirely in the book with the very weak sense in which knowledge is equivalent to true belief, since, as he says, 'people's dominant epistemic goal is, I think, to obtain true belief plain and simple'.⁸ Goldman thinks that this usage exists in common language (and I think he is right), but, in any case, it also has the advantage of circumventing a long and distracting discussion of the intricate questions that surround stronger versions of knowledge.

In many ways, this seems to me a healthy move. So much epistemology of the last decades of the twentieth century devoted itself to Gettier and his heritage, and to debates between internalists and externalists about knowledge that readers of the epistemological literature were liable to develop intellectual vertigo as they found themselves climbing higher and higher up an ever-narrowing tower that removed them further and further from firm ground. Their condition was made no better by the suspicion that the tower might actually be made of ivory. Enmeshed in seemingly endless refinements on the quest for the right sort of justificatory condition for the subject's knowledge state or the right sort of externalist tracking condition for his beliefs, I was often assailed by the heretical thought that, contrary to Plato, maybe plain old true belief was good enough. Certainly, Goldman's project cannot be accused of remoteness from reality nor of the dizziness induced by excessive professional introspection; his cuffing of the fashionable post-modernist epistemological extravagances and his forays into law, politics and education are valuable antidotes to the sort of vertigo I mentioned above.

Nonetheless, Goldman's choice of 'true belief' as his target value raises certain problems that are connected with the history of modern epistemology, and, particularly, with the value that was thought to reside in the idea that a knower should have more than true belief. As I indicated earlier, there are connections here reaching in different directions: on the one hand towards broadly veritistic outcomes, but, on the other, towards issues of epistemic virtue and character that are less clearly consonant with Goldman's veritism. They are less clearly consonant precisely because of his radical consequentialism, and I shall try to show that his position suffers, in the epistemic arena, from certain difficulties to be found in consequentialism generally as a moral theory. These are: (1) that the choice of fundamental or intrinsic values to be maximised or promoted tends to be too narrow, and (2) that there are value side-constraints (as Nozick has called them in another connection) on the pursuit of overall value that it fails to acknowledge. In connection with (1) there seem to be a range of epistemic values other than truth which a social epistemology should be concerned

⁸ (Goldman, 1999, p. 24).

with, and these are those that a richer (or stronger) concept of knowledge would encompass. I have in mind here such values as are, for example, indicated by the following concepts: understanding, comprehension, perspective and wisdom. These words stand for both intellectual values to be aimed at and for the agent characteristics of those who achieve them in whole or in part. They are all implicated, at least potentially, in some stronger understandings of knowledge than the weak sense employed by Goldman, and they also raise a question about the nature of his maximising project. This question comes to the fore most directly in his discussion of education and its purposes, to which I shall return. In connection with (2), it is at least conceivable that the satisfaction of some of the values involved in intellectual autonomy and intellectual character might militate against the grand project of truth-maximisation. In the case of education, for instance, it may be that the cultivation of intellect will sometimes conflict with the maximising of true beliefs in the community. Of course, this claim is ambiguous in various ways and we will have to scrutinise it more carefully, but, for now, let it serve to flag an area of potential problems.

I imagine that Goldman might make the following responses to these suggestions. One is that his consequentialism is narrow only with respect to truth. He admits that there are many other values than truth and that a concern for justice or health might trump the imperative to increase true beliefs—as a concern for the rights of defendants in court may legitimately disallow the admission of certain probative evidence, or, in the case of freedom of speech, the desire ‘to promote participation in self-governance or to enhance autonomy or self-fulfilment . . . could outweigh veritistic considerations’.⁹ This is true, but my claim is that the values I am concerned to stress are themselves intellectual values. This brings us to a second response, namely, to allow these as within the realm of the veritistic enterprise, but as instrumental, rather than intrinsic values. This is certainly a plausible manoeuvre, and fits with what Goldman says in drawing his structural parallel with consequentialism in moral theory, but it has the disadvantage that it remains to be shown that these are invariably instrumental. It is a feature of intrinsic values that they can also serve other ends (as Aristotle realised long ago), and it is certainly the case that there are intimate connections between truth, understanding, comprehension, intellectual autonomy, perspective and wisdom. Certainly, one would expect the cultivation of these dispositions and values normally to promote truth, but I am not persuaded that they must always maximise truth in the way the veritistic project apparently envisages or that they are only valuable if they do.

It may seem that this is the point at which the true and the good come apart. When we are discussing good then it makes sense to have an interest both in the production of good outcomes and in various matters to do with the character of the agent, including the quality of his or her freedom, autonomy and integrity. There will be strong connections between the former and the latter, between consequences and virtue, between benevolence and duty, but, notoriously, there is the possibility

⁹ Goldman (1999), p. 191.

of disconnection, and much of the debate about this will turn upon such questions as whether autonomy and liberty are themselves non-instrumental goods and, if so, whether it makes sense to talk of maximising them. In the case of morality in general, we may say that a consequentialist must give an account of the apparent force of non-consequentialist goods or evaluative items (such as rights, obligations, virtues and so on), even if this account is a reductive one; but when we turn to truth the matter may appear in a different light. If our concern is with the maximising of truth, then what can be the point of an interest in the individual's creation of an intellectual world of their own (to take one understanding of intellectual autonomy to be sketched later)? This question is especially urgent if one rejects, as both Goldman and I do, the various relativisms about truth, and especially those that try to make of truth some sort of subjective preference, and if one recognises as well the depth and importance of the social dimension of knowledge.

Truth is, of course, a very special value, but its pursuit and embrace are surely part of ethics broadly understood; an ideal of truthfulness is as much a moral ideal as an ideal of peace, and a lie is usually an offence against both truth and justice. So I am suspicious of the idea that the true and the good might come apart in the way supposed. I think that W. K. Clifford was right to promote the idea (adapted from Locke) of 'an ethics of belief' though I do not in fact have a lot of sympathy with many of the forms this idea takes in Clifford's own writings. To be fair, there are some impressive insights in Clifford's work on this issue, some of which have a distinct anticipation of the concerns of 'social epistemology' and are worth quoting (at the risk of a brief digression):

And no one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns him alone. Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handed on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork. Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speech of his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live.¹⁰

Let me try to sharpen the difficulty I have introduced by sketching a concept of intellectual autonomy. My aim is to provide an understanding of intellectual autonomy that is significantly epistemic and consistent with the deep significance of the social dimension of knowledge, but which is also ethically significant in a way that casts doubt upon the adequacy of veritistic consequentialism. The sketch will invoke some of those epistemic values, other than truth, mentioned earlier.

¹⁰ Clifford (1999), pp. 73–74.

3. What is intellectual autonomy?

We might begin by breaking the topic up into its component elements. This may help us move beyond the Mackie-style analysis and yet still capture much of what is ordinarily understood in conversational contexts when people talk respectfully of intellectual autonomy. We shall also seek to find what might be legitimately recovered from the tradition that has produced the untenable picture discussed by Mackie. I will then explore the extent to which the values involved in a defensible version of intellectual autonomy pose a challenge to the terms of Goldman's social epistemology. To differentiate my target from that characterised by Mackie, I will talk of the autonomous thinker and intellectual autonomy rather than the autonomous knower and autonomous knowledge. There seem to be at least three such component elements that could be distinguished in an initial overview. These are:

- (1) Independence. This is what Mackie's extreme version has most in mind, though there are elements of (2) below as well. Independence, or at least non-dependence, is somewhat like the 'negative freedom', or freedom from interference, much discussed in political philosophy and given such currency by Isaiah Berlin. In saying this, I am merely invoking what seems a helpful analogy without meaning to endorse or contest the weight given to negative liberty by Berlin or others.
- (2) Self-creation. This seems to be a more positive idea than mere independence. Self-creation tends more in the direction at least of what is gestured at in political philosophy by the term 'positive freedom'. For we are interested here not so much in the individual's being free from the involvement of others in his thinking, but in his attempting to make a distinctive life of his (or her) own. In the context of the present discussion, we can see this as the creation of an individual's distinctive intellectual world. In *Testimony*, I spoke less strongly but in similar vein (and perhaps more defensibly) of the way that autonomy was connected with the control of one's intellectual circumstances.
- (3) Integrity. There is here a directly moral concern, though there are of course moral components in the earlier categories. In the matter of knowledge and belief, integrity is concerned with the idea of standing, and standing up, for truth.

Let me say something about each of these in turn. It will transpire, as might already have been suspected, that they overlap and connect in various ways. First of all, *independence*. Rather than construe this as total lack of dependence on the knowledge or belief states of others, we should rather view it as a freedom from certain characteristic defects that such dependence can foster. This takes two broad forms. The autonomous thinker is free of a certain sort of domination in her intellectual processes. This domination is one of the things that Enlightenment thinkers objected to in moral and political as well as intellectual environments. This style of objection was a commonplace of liberal and republican theory and polemics of the time. Naturally, one of the sources of dominance most complained of intellectually was that of the church, just as the dominating power of the monarchy was rejected in politics. The enforcement of intellectual conformity by power and hierarchy was

seen as a prime target of those who sought autonomy. We might think of this as domination from above. The second element in independence was a suspicion of domination from below, or the entrapment of intellectual freedom in the toils of pressures of a less deliberate and overt kind, such as intellectual fashion, rumour, superstition, gossip, and what the eighteenth century called ‘enthusiasm’ (i.e., roughly, the rush to belief fuelled by a heavy emotional investment in the belief’s being true). The autonomous thinker will not of course be like those model scientists of Karl Popper who spend all their time trying to falsify any result presented to them; the enterprise of science could not survive such unrealistic suspicion. But Popper is right to stress the significance of replication of results and of stringent testing. The autonomous thinker has a degree of scepticism and a tendency to test when in the presence of certain sorts of putative information. Dependency on the word of others is not eliminated by the presence of such a disposition since most particular scepticisms are resolved by processes of checking and falsifying that depend at certain points on the verifying observations and falsifying checks made by others. This will, of course, (as noted earlier) be problematic for the Mackie model of independence, since it is absurd to require that all these verifications and falsifications can only count for the autonomous thinker if they in turn are checked and verified by her, or are even open in principle to her doing so. But what is important is that the cognitive activities of the autonomous thinker are governed to some degree by these dispositions, and that she responds to information in a way that is alert to its pitfalls and its heritage. But what is this way? What more can be said about it? Well, one important feature of it is the fact that the independence in question is partially constituted by a certain mastery of subject matter. This consists in much more than the possession of lots of true beliefs in the area; it is connected rather with the cultivation of the sort of insight that Plato was interested in. Mastery of subject matter involves a secure grasp of the organising principles and structural features of an area of inquiry. This puts one in a position to exercise that grasp in this area and to some extent beyond it in deciding when to test and how to sift information provided by others. Such mastery does not come out of thin air or from one’s unaided efforts; it is dependent in both simple and complex ways upon the transmitted skills and information of others. But, once gained, it puts one in a position to stand aside from or against others in certain contexts and certain circumstances. Our dependence on recent and contemporary others is like our dependence upon tradition. Tradition was another of the inhibitions that Enlightenment thinkers rebelled against, and the mastery I speak of was one of the things enabling that rebellion. But it is in part by drawing upon tradition, or crucial elements within it, that the mastery in question is achieved.

We might add that the independence of contemporary scientists is hardly under serious threat, in most parts of the world, from religion or the state. The dominating pressures today are more likely to come from other institutions, such as business (via funding ties), or other social forces such as ambition and social status.

4. Intellectual self-creation

Our second category was *self-creation*. In moral and political philosophy, there are many unresolved controversies over the meaning of autonomy, but one common aspect of the discussions is a concern with the way in which autonomy involves, or is a condition for, self-creation.¹¹ The idea is that there is something about the living of a life that is enhanced or enriched or even made genuinely possible by the possession of autonomy, and that ‘something’ is to do with the individual’s role in being, in some sense, ‘the author’ of his life. Some also speak of autonomy as ensuring that a person’s life is lived from within¹² or as being intimately related to freedom from domination.¹³

We might wonder how seriously the metaphor of authorship should be taken. How is it that a life can be understood as equivalent to an artistic work such as a novel, or some other sort of narrative creation? One is never in control of one’s life in the way in which an author is in control of his imaginative creation—though one should not imagine that an author is *totally* in control of the creative process. There are undoubtedly some illusions in the idea of self-creation, since we have already been created by God or by personal and impersonal processes over which we have had no say. Furthermore, there are many aspects of how we develop that are always going to be beyond our control. We may be victims of accident or malevolence or just bad luck; we may be blessed by fortune or temperament or physique; we may lack anything approaching the skills that the metaphor of authorship conjures up. Nonetheless, in spite of these serious reservations about the metaphor, we may take from it the idea that the ideal of autonomy beckons us to take responsibility for shaping our lives to the degree that is possible for us. We can see readily enough what this can mean, and why it should be appealing, even though there are those to whom it does not appeal. But what does it mean in the intellectual order? What is it to shape one’s own intellectual world?

This recalls the point about the true and the good coming apart. One may shape a self and its world by selecting from goods such as health, pleasure, wealth, fame, love, service to others and so on, and different people will choose different balances of these in their lives. Different people will even choose differently within each category of goods—different pleasures, for instance, or different types of service to others. These are not simply empirical facts about how people actually choose, but partly normative observations about the legitimacy of certain ranges of choice. But how does this apply to the good of truth? Well, you may legitimately choose some things in preference to truth, in that you may choose kindness rather than truth in

¹¹ See, for example, Joseph Raz’s discussion in Raz (1986).

¹² Will Kymlicka, for instance, in discussing autonomy says that ‘no life goes better for being lived from the outside according to values the person doesn’t endorse . . . You can coerce someone into going to Church and making the right physical movements, but you won’t make someone’s life better that way’ (Kymlicka, 1989, p. 12).

¹³ Pettit (1997). Pettit thinks that autonomy is a richer ideal than the freedom of non-domination, but he thinks that ‘there can hardly be any meaningful form of self-mastery without non-domination’ (p. 82).

deciding not to pursue the truth about some matter because it may be hurtful or embarrassing. Or some people may choose a life in which the pursuit of truth does not loom as large as in other lives—the life of an athlete as contrasted with that of an intellectual. More interestingly, and more pertinent to intellectual autonomy, people may choose to order their intellectual lives and their horizons in very different ways. In terms of our earlier discussion of mastery, they will choose which skills of mastery of subject matter they will cultivate, since no one can cultivate all. This choice will be connected with what truths they regard as important, and this in turn will be connected not only with their interests, but with their interpretation of their true beliefs, the perspective they bring to their beliefs and the broader understanding they achieve as they acquire them.

In the matter of self-creation, the making of one's own intellectual world is something that will be differentially available to people depending upon their resources and abilities. Nevertheless, we may suppose that by sketching a somewhat ideal picture of what such a world would be like we may illuminate what is centrally involved for any degree of self-creative achievement. Many things will enter into the making of such a world that are straightforwardly 'veritistic', in the sense that the individual must take account of the evident facts in her changing environment revealed by her perceptions, the testimony of others and the other social processes to which she is exposed. Different people will take heed of different facts, of course, depending on location, attentiveness and interest, though there will be an overlap in intellectual worlds just as there is an overlap in visual fields. But the question is whether there can be something that is epistemically valuable in the freedom to shape one's own intellectual life. And surely there is.

Perhaps we can get at it by considering Goldman's treatment of education. In his final chapter, he criticises various extravagant postmodernist positions that seek to undermine the educational ideal of teaching truths by relativising truth to cultures. Though extravagant, they are common enough, and defective in the way Goldman argues. (They are also dangerous and self-defeating, I would add, because the effort to help the oppressed and disadvantaged by resort to cultural relativism about truth and values merely plays into the hands of the powerful whose false beliefs and defective values are insulated from critical reach behind the curtain of their 'local knowledge'.) Nonetheless, these theorists amidst their confusions are edging their way towards a point of some interest. This point is that, in addition to the aim of increasing the true propositions that an individual holds and the amount of truth believed in the community at large, we also have a significant interest in the way these truths are held and the variety of those ways. It is part of our interest in truth that people should hold to the truth in a certain fashion, and this fashion itself implies a certain pluralism of outlook. This may seem strange if our picture of education is like the one that the postmodernists are anxious to reject and which consists of the idea of the mere movement of truths from one head to another. It will seem equally, if not more, strange if our idea of education is the mere achievement of community consensus. But the aim of education (in part) is that the educated should be brought into a diverse and interactive community of understanding. The idea of understanding is here very important, for it indicates a way in which truths are held, integrated and

projected that contrasts with the mere acceptance of propositions as true. Of course, I cannot even accept a proposition as true unless I understand it in some minimal way, otherwise in repeating it for an audience I am merely parroting the words. There are circumstances in which such uncomprehending repetition may be useful to others, just as any of us can learn from a recording machine, or even occasionally a parrot. Indeed, there can even be circumstances in which I am moved to repeat a sentence I have heard, but not understood, by the reasonable belief that it expresses a truth, though what truth I do not know. But our interest in and connection to truth is normally mediated through understanding, and there are degrees and kinds of understanding.

Beyond the minimum required for understanding the sentence uttered (and just how much this involves is a vague and shifting baseline) there is a range of informational richness that we access as our understanding grows about what is involved in the truth expressed. Sometimes this comes from theory, sometimes from experience, sometimes from history, sometimes from imagination. At or near the maximum, understanding becomes dignified with the epithet ‘wisdom’; the remote aim, or ideal, of education. It is captured in the title of a well known Australian novel by Miles Franklin about the author’s own education (made into a charming film) ‘The Getting of Wisdom’.

This process of understanding involves crucial elements of evaluation, interpretation and perspective. Evaluation is involved because, for one thing, truths vary enormously in importance, and this fact is itself important to grasp. J. L. Austin famously quipped that he wasn’t sure whether importance was important but truth certainly was.¹⁴ Austin no doubt provides a useful caution against metaphysical pomposity, but his remark is profoundly misleading if taken further than that. The epistemic task is misdescribed if veritistic maximisation concentrates only on quantity of truth and not quality. Goldman does not discuss this issue at any length, though he recognises its significance in several places. In one place, he discusses the role of interests in determining veritistic value,¹⁵ and discusses (briefly) institutional interests and then three types of individual interests, one occurrent and two dispositional. This is connected with the role he assigns to questions and answers in the veritistic program. In the discussion of education, he says that a ‘case might certainly be made for the greater veritistic significance of more important truths, but it is difficult to construct a satisfactory and precise measure of importance’.¹⁶ No doubt it is, but an emphasis on important truths is crucial to education and to the pursuit of truth more generally. What is important is clearly related to interests of individuals and groups, but it is not exhausted by the interests they actually have or would have if matters were drawn to their attention. Importance is a very difficult notion to explicate; but one thing that seems clear is that whether certain truths matter is something that is not exhausted by what interests people happen to have, since it

¹⁴ Austin (1979), p. 271.

¹⁵ Goldman (1999), pp. 94–96.

¹⁶ Goldman (1999), p. 369.

can be determinative of what interests they ought to have. The capacity to assess importance is one of the skills that education aims to inculcate, and it is one of the attributes of intellectual autonomy. I am happy to say that truth plays a role in the articulation and assessment of the interests and values that underpin importance. It is also the case, however, that these values and interests can introduce a significant element of variability and pluralism into the picture. If education seeks to develop the individual's capacities for grasping what is or is not important in the investigation of reality, then we do not need the follies of postmodernism or other forms of what Goldman calls (in a happy phrase) 'veriphobia' to suggest that the educator's task, even in the early stages of education, is as much concerned with the way in which the student grasps truths as with the truths grasped (and their quantity). If we ignore this interpretive dimension we risk creating a population of the well informed but uneducated.

The concept of interpretation is important here, and it is interesting that there is no mention of it at all in Goldman's index. The word occurs occasionally in the text but its absence from the index is indicative of the fact that it is not treated as a topic. I do not mean to focus on the interpretation of language—though it is not irrelevant to my concern—but rather on the element of interpretation of one's own beliefs and those of others which remains a feature of an individual's intellectual world, even when questions of straightforward truth are taken as settled. For there are not merely inherently ambiguous figures in our visual world—as was so interestingly dramatised by Wittgenstein's use of the 'duck-rabbit' and other figures in connection with his discussion of 'seeing as'—but also in the world of thought. How 'inherently' ambiguous these objects of our thought are is another question, but that many of them are open to diverse interpretations can hardly be denied. Perhaps, in some cases, this is because there is 'no fact of the matter', as there seems to be no fact of the matter whether the drawing *is* a duck or a rabbit. For other cases, we (many of us) would be reluctant to hold this resolute indeterminacy. The contrast of theistic and non-theistic interpretations of the world may provide a case in which some people make sense of the world and their experience of it in terms of God and God's action while others can make nothing of this at all. This profound divergence seems to turn on a matter of fact that we do not have the capacities to determine decisively—though there are proponents of each interpretation who think we do, just as there are those (on both sides of the religious fence) who think that theistic claims raise no issue of fact at all.

Quite apart from the fact that (1) truth is sometimes beyond our powers to determine, and (2) there are matters for which truth seems the appropriate ideal but in which confidence that anyone has the truth is surely, in a certain sense, misplaced (for example, philosophy, or parts of it), there is also the important fact that what truths one has a secure hold upon can be reinterpreted, sometimes dramatically, in the light of new truths. They may then turn out to have been partial truths or superficial truths. In some respects our search for truth has always struck me as being like someone trying to work out a jigsaw puzzle with an indefinitely large number of pieces. He has lots of pieces lying about and every now and then new ones appear from a tube in the wall. He puts together a lot of the pieces in a way that shows a

picture, and he is constantly under the impression that now he has, or soon will have, the whole picture, but it is of course only a small segment of the whole huge picture. Every now and then, as new pieces are fitted, the player realises that his or her interpretation of the picture is seriously at fault. It is not that the pieces have been fitted together wrongly; their fit is fine, ‘correspondence with reality’ has been achieved. But the correspondence is not quite what it seemed; a wider perspective requires a difference of interpretation. The dog is indeed chasing the child who has dropped the stolen apple while his companion can be seen viewing things with fear from high in the apple tree, BUT this scene is a painting within the larger reality of the puzzle and this is revealed by the correct assemblage of more pieces. The autonomous thinker is one who grasps the fragility of knowledge, as implied by this parable, and incorporates it into her perspective on truth.¹⁷

To sum up this section on intellectual self-creation, let me try to draw the different strands of our discussion together. The idea of self-creation poses particular challenges when applied to the intellectual order partly because we are not at liberty to make up truths. But we can decide what intellectual priorities we will pursue. We can ‘author’ our intellectual life and hence structure to some degree our intellectual world by determining what masteries we will seek to achieve, what importance we will give to different facts and intellectual projects and hence what place in our intellectual economy different truths will have. The uncertainties endemic to the intellectual life, combined with the imaginative and interpretative possibilities these allow for, will make a space for individual thinkers to create their own intellectual worlds.

5. The role of integrity

Finally, let me turn to my third element: integrity. This is a much debated notion in moral philosophy, and I do not propose to solve the various problems raised by that debate, but one thing that seems involved in integrity, and relevant to my theme, is the idea that a person’s life should aim to achieve a certain sustained integration, or wholeness, of values, projects and ideals. It is this integration that allows us to rely upon such people for steadfast performance according to certain lights. We know of Archbishop Tutu, for instance, that he is unlikely to be turned from a life of service to the poor and persecuted of South Africa by inducements of wealth and public honour. When we speak of integrity, we normally mean to refer to the integration of good values and projects, but there is no doubt a negative version of integrity in the pursuit of evil (recall Graham Greene’s description of Ho Chi Minh as being ‘as pure as Lucifer’). Someone for whom truth is a crucial value for their integrity is strongly inclined to stand up for truth, to make their personal concern

¹⁷ I do not mean to suggest that Goldman wants to deny the uncertainties that beset our intellectual endeavours. He is clearly aware that truth is often difficult to attain, that well supported beliefs are revisable and that many intellectual practices yield only uncertain conclusions. The issue is rather what one makes of these facts in the overall theory of intellectual autonomy and its relation to knowledge.

for truth a vital element in the way they live as well as think. Such a person may well stand for the truth even in circumstances where this stance has counter-productive consequences in terms of the increasing of true beliefs. This can easily happen where I am very likely to be disbelieved; perhaps the truth is so contrary to received views that its statement is likely to fix others in their false beliefs. Nonetheless, my truthful integrity may dictate steadfast commitment to the unfashionable truth, for I have internalised an ideal of the truthful life. Perhaps in the long run the truth will prevail more generally, but there can be no guarantee of this, and I am not acting with a view to maximising the veritistic outcomes, but merely because it is overwhelmingly important for me to maintain the truth. I think it obvious that we value people with this sort of epistemic character regardless of its contribution to veritistic maximisation.

At this point, it may be objected that intellectual integrity is no doubt a good thing, but it is not the same as intellectual autonomy, nor even a component part of it. It is clearly not the same; but I have not argued that it is. I am committed, however, to the view that intellectual integrity is a component in intellectual autonomy. A similar connection seems to me also to hold of moral autonomy and moral integrity. How can such connections be demonstrated? The answer lies in the fact that genuine intellectual autonomy requires the sort of integrity discussed above. The capacity to author your own intellectual world is closely linked to achieving a certain firmness in integrating intellectual values, projects and ideals into your personality. Just as you need a certain sort of character to achieve autonomy generally, so too certain intellectual traits are required for intellectual autonomy. These include the integrity I have sketched.

This raises the question of how value-loaded the idea of intellectual autonomy should be. Could someone be autonomous who is concerned wholly with trivial truths and has no sense of perspective? If we concentrate just on the idea of being the author of one's world then it might seem that the answer must be 'yes'. Similarly for autonomy generally. There is no restriction on the sort of world authored as long as it is one's own. But the plausibility of this suggestion is superficial. We do not want to insist that all autonomous lives must be morally similar, nor that no one is morally autonomous unless they are moral exemplars. This would be like the insistence of those theorists of positive liberty who claim that no one is really free unless they are morally good. Nonetheless, like independence, autonomy needs a certain degree of structure. We do not want to say that someone is not independent unless they are independently doing good, but equally we would hardly label someone independent who timorously spent their lives alone indoors with a lifetime supply of food. In the intellectual order, someone who achieves intellectual independence by isolating themselves from cognitive contact with others and makes their own intellectual world out of a few trivial facts, such as counting the changing pattern of shadows on their wall over a lifetime, could only with sarcasm be described as intellectually autonomous. Just as doodling on a page doesn't make you a literary author, so these unstructured, insufficiently controlled or significant activities cannot make you the author of your life.

This portrait of intellectual autonomy is incomplete, but it serves to underline the

concerns expressed earlier about the consequentialist structure of Goldman's social epistemology. We could put the point by saying (a) that the veritistic project, seen as aiming at a maximisation of outcomes, raises the prospect that our social practices might create the optimum amount of true beliefs (weak knowledge) but not the optimum amount of knowledge (strong knowledge), and (b) that the creation of epistemic virtue and character might be regarded as a crucial role for at least some epistemic institutions, and that this role may put certain checks upon maximising their veritistic outcomes.

One response that is clearly available to friends of maximising is to see autonomy as the best (or contributing to the best) truth-producing strategy. This is not indeed plausible in the short term or in every individual case, just as it is not plausible in these respects for the connection between moral autonomy and maximising morally good outcomes. But it might be argued, in the manner of one strand in Mill's discussion of freedom of thought and expression, that independent thinking and the creation of an intellectual world of one's own eventually contribute to maximising veritistic outcomes. Like so many consequentialist claims of this sort, the thesis seems to elude proof or refutation. Certainly, if the cultivation of epistemic autonomy tended to diminish seriously our stock of communally possessed truths, this would count against the pursuit of such cultivation. This danger can be dismissed because intellectual virtue has an intrinsic connection with gaining truth. But the connection is not such that it will support the maximisation project in the way suggested. That project remains a kind of dream.¹⁸

Another strategy would be to set aside questions of intellectual autonomy as matters not raising strictly epistemological issues.¹⁹ Our concern for cognitive autonomy is part of our concern for moral autonomy, and this may be sufficiently important to trump epistemic considerations. If our concern is solely with social epistemology we shall be veritistic maximisers, but this concern may be constrained by our wider interest in moral matters, such as autonomy. It may be that this is only a verbal issue. The veritistic imperative to maximise true beliefs may be seen as either or both epistemic or moral, and the same may be true of the imperative for intellectual autonomy. What is undeniable is that we have a legitimate interest in both increasing the stock of truths believed in the community and in the intellectual autonomy of the truth seekers themselves. It seems to me both natural and reasonable to treat these interests under the heading of epistemology, and to be aware of ways in which

¹⁸ Goldman touches upon such matters in his discussion of free speech (see Chapter 7), though he is there concerned with a certain sort of political question related to, but not the same as, the question that concerns me.

¹⁹ This strategy is also suggested by some comments of Goldman. He says for example: 'There are many alleged justifications for free speech doctrines. The truth-acquisition role is only one candidate among many. It is no part of this chapter's purpose to survey or evaluate the numerous rationales that have been offered for freedom of speech. To the extent that veritistic considerations are deployed to defend freedom of speech, so our reflections overlap with free speech theory. But entirely different grounds are also offered for restricting state interference in speech, for example, to promote participation in self-governance or to enhance autonomy or self-fulfilment. These grounds could outweigh veritistic considerations' (Goldman, 1999, p. 191).

they might conflict. But however we choose to describe them, we must recognise their significance and the connections between them when we seek to chart the domain of knowledge.

I conclude that, understood in the way sketched above, intellectual autonomy is both a worthy and challenging epistemological ideal. It is, moreover, an ideal the pursuit and cultivation of which can be consistent with the profound nature of our dependence upon testimony.

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