

Social Epistemology: Theory and Applications

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1. Mainstream Epistemology and Social Epistemology

Epistemology has had a strongly individualist orientation, at least since Descartes. Knowledge, for Descartes, starts with the fact of one's own thinking and with oneself as subject of that thinking. Whatever else can be known, it must be known by inference from one's own mental contents. Achieving such knowledge is an individual, rather than a collective, enterprise. Descartes's successors largely followed this lead, so the history of epistemology, down to our own time, has been a predominantly individualist affair.

There are scattered exceptions. A handful of historical epistemologists gave brief space to the question of knowing, or believing justifiably, based on the testimony of others. Testimony-based knowledge would be one step into a more social epistemology. Hume took it for granted that we regularly rely on the factual statements of others, and argued that it is reasonable to do so if we have adequate reasons for trusting the veracity of these sources. However, reasons for such trust, according to Hume, must rest on personal observations of people's veracity or reliability.¹ Thomas Reid took a different view. He claimed that our natural attitude of trusting others is reasonable even if we know little if anything about others' reliability. Testimony, at least sincere testimony, is always *prima facie* credible (Reid, 1970: 240–241). Here we have two philosophers of the 18th century both endorsing at least one element of what nowadays is called "social epistemology." But these points did not much occupy either Hume's or Reid's corpus of philosophical writing; nor were

¹ Hume wrote: "[T]here is no species of reasoning more common, more useful, and even necessary to human life, than that which is derived from the testimony of men, and the reports of eye-witnesses and spectators. . . [O]ur assurance in any argument of this kind is derived from no other principle than our observation of the veracity of human testimony, and of the usual conformity of facts to the reports of witnesses." (Hume 1972: 11)

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44 these passages much studied or cited by their contemporaries and
45 immediate successors.

46 Fast forward now to the second half of the 20th century. Here we
47 find intellectual currents pointing toward the socializing of epistem-
48 ology. Several of these movements, however, were centered outside of
49 philosophy and never adopted the label of “social epistemology,” or
50 adopted it only belatedly. I have in mind movements in the social
51 studies of science and cultural studies. In science studies, the most
52 influential figure was Thomas Kuhn, whose *Structure of Scientific*
53 *Revolutions* (Kuhn, 1962) was itself a revolution in the interpretation
54 of science. Kuhn influenced other investigators in the history and
55 sociology of science to view science as just another social institution,
56 not as a paragon of objective rationality, the stance that had been stan-
57 dard among positivist philosophers of science. According to Kuhn,
58 the replacement of one scientific paradigm by a rival does not occur
59 because the old paradigm is rationally overwhelmed by new evidence.
60 Rival paradigms, according to Kuhn, aren’t even (evidentially) “com-
61 mensurable.” It appeared, in other words, that Kuhn denied any
62 rational basis for scientific revolution. Instead, it has a social basis.
63 Although Kuhn’s precise commitments were ambiguous, many
64 thought that, according to Kuhn, paradigm change is just a matter
65 of “mob psychology” (Lakatos, 1970: 178). In the wake of Kuhn,
66 many historians and sociologists of science abandoned a rational per-
67 spective on science in favor of a sociological one. An earlier champion
68 of this idea was Ludwik Fleck (1979).

69 Kuhn also expressed doubt about *truth* as the goal of science, or at
70 least as an achievable goal, and other sociologists of science followed
71 suit. Thus, in the 1970s, the “strong programme” in the sociology of
72 science emerged, centered in Edinburgh, that sought to study science
73 without any assumption that science uses methods that are either
74 rational or superior avenues to truth. Indeed, along with postmodern
75 thinkers like Michel Foucault, many of these authors contended that
76 so-called scientific “facts” or “truths” are mere *social constructions*.
77 What happens in scientific laboratories isn’t the discovery of scientific
78 truths, but their creation or “fabrication.” Latour and Woolgar wrote:

79 [W]e do not conceive of scientists . . . as pulling back the curtain
80 on pre-given, but hitherto concealed truths. Rather, objects are
81 constituted through the artful creativity of scientists. (1986:
82 128–129)
83

84 So-called truth, facts, rationality – they are all a matter, not of mind-
85 independent, or society-independent nature, but of social negotiation
86 or politics.

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87 Most writers in sociology of science have shied away from calling
88 their enterprise “social epistemology,” but this *is* the label chosen
89 by Steve Fuller, both for the title of his first book (Fuller, 1988)
90 and for a journal he founded. Is this an apt label for this group of
91 ideas? Well, what is epistemology? It is typically defined as the
92 *theory of knowledge*. This invites the question: What is knowledge?
93 Mainstream epistemologists universally agree that knowledge
94 implies truth, that knowledge is factive. If your belief isn’t true, it
95 isn’t a piece of knowledge. Social constructivists, though they talk
96 about knowledge, are characteristically dismissive or disparaging of
97 truth. There are no facts, they maintain, only what is believed by
98 this or that individual or community. For social constructivists,
99 then, knowledge is simply what is believed, or at least what is com-
100 munally believed.

101 In my book on social epistemology, *Knowledge in a Social World*
102 (Goldman, 1999) I introduced a term to describe postmodernists
103 and social constructivists of the foregoing persuasion. I called them
104 *veriphobes*, because they display an aversion or abhorrence of truth.
105 (The prefix ‘veri’ in ‘veriphobe’ is derived from the Latin ‘veritas’.)
106 The affliction from which they suffer is called *veriphobia*. Let me
107 now introduce an obvious antonym of ‘veriphobia,’ viz., *veriphilia*.
108 Mainstream epistemologists are lovers of truth; at least they are com-
109 fortable doing epistemology with the truth concept in hand. No
110 doubt there are many philosophical problems concerning truth,
111 both logical and metaphysical. Still, traditional epistemologists (of
112 the last 50–60 years) help themselves to the assumption that some
113 propositions are true, others are false, and what makes them true or
114 false are (generally) mind-independent and community-independent
115 facts, which we may call “truth-makers.” The exact nature of truth-
116 makers is controversial, but their characteristic independence of
117 human construction or fabrication is taken as given.

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119

120 **2. Veriphobic Social Epistemology**

121

122 What would social epistemology consist in under the aegis of veri-
123 phobia and veriphilia respectively? Veriphobes, at least those
124 within the social studies of science camp, are usually interested in
125 explanation. They want to provide social explanations, whether his-
126 torical or sociological, of various knowledge-related episodes in
127 social life, especially in science. These are knowledge-related episodes
128 under *their* construal of ‘knowledge,’ which, as explained above,
129 comes to little more than *belief*, or *collective belief*. The proposed

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130 explanations would deliberately make no reference to any truth-
131 values of the beliefs in question. This was a core tenet of the strong
132 programme, as championed by Barry Barnes and David Bloor
133 (1982). They enunciated the “symmetry” principle, under which
134 the same types of causes would explain both true and false beliefs,
135 both rational and irrational beliefs.

136 Is a sociology of science that totally rejects truth really feasible? Do
137 veriphobes consistently adhere to such a project? No. An *explanation*
138 of any phenomenon – a genuine explanation, rather than a merely
139 putative one – must invoke events and processes that *truly* occurred,
140 and if it’s a causal explanation, it must be *true* that those events and
141 processes had a causal influence on the phenomenon to be explained.
142 This is tacitly appreciated by the relatively careful scientific work that
143 social constructivists conduct. They do minute observations of lab-
144 oratory life in all (or many) of its details. They do careful historical
145 work to unearth the causal factors that contributed to this or that
146 episode in the history of science. What makes sense of all this diligent
147 effort if not the goal of getting the story right, of telling it as it was,
148 i.e., of getting the *truth*? So, pervasive rejection of truth cannot
149 co-exist with their own scientific projects.

150 Here is a second familiar problem with the veriphobic rejection of
151 truth or factuality. Fact-constructivism runs into the obvious
152 problem that the world did not begin with us humans. The Big
153 Bang and the formation of the Earth occurred before we were
154 around. So how could *we* have constructed them? Bruno Latour
155 was ready to bite the bullet on this question, at least on one occasion.
156 When French sociologists working on the mummy of Ramses II, who
157 died in 1213 BC, concluded that Ramses probably died of tuberculo-
158 sis, Latour denied that this was possible. “How could he pass away
159 due to a bacillus discovered by Robert Koch in 1881?” As Latour
160 boldly put it, “Before Koch, the bacillus had no real existence.”²

161 If, as social constructivists say, a bacillus comes into existence when
162 the scientific community comes to believe in its existence, how is a
163 case to be handled in which scientists come to believe in a bacillus
164 (or other scientific posit) and later abandon this belief? Did the bacil-
165 lus exist for a while and then cease to exist? Or was its existence per-
166 manently assured because *at one time* the scientific community
167 believed in it? What about multiple scientific communities taking
168 different stances on the question? Does the consensus of a single com-
169 munity trump the counter-consensus of a second? Or do we have to
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171 ² See Boghossian (2006: 26), who cites a quotation of Latour by Alan
172 Sokal and Jean Bricment (1998: 96–97).

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173 count numbers of scientists? Under the latter scenario, if 273 bio-
174 chemists accept the existence of a certain bacillus and 271 are skepti-
175 cal, then it exists. And what if five biochemists lost in the woods and
176 presumed dead are now found to have survived, and all reject the
177 bacillus? Does this imply that it never existed in the first place?
178 These are among the conundrums that descend upon us if we
179 adopt the crazy position of fact-constructivism.

180 Rather less bizarre is a somewhat analogous view about rationality
181 or justification. Social constructivists are equally concerned to
182 dispute the objectivity of these notions. Suppose that two people –
183 say Galileo and Cardinal Bellarmine, his Vatican prosecutor – dis-
184 agree about whether the earth circles the sun. Each claims to be
185 justified in his belief and denies that the other is so justified.
186 Presumably, if they were pressed to spell out the detailed basis of
187 their justification, each might spell out a system of epistemic prin-
188 ciples, or rules of belief justification, that countenance the present
189 belief as justified. Although the two systems might overlap in some
190 of their principles, there would undoubtedly be differences among
191 them. Galileo's system would license belief in astronomical matters
192 based on what one sees when one looks through a telescope. It
193 might deny the evidential relevance to astronomy of what is found
194 in Holy Scripture. Cardinal Bellarmine's system would feature
195 opposing principles, principles that endorse the evidential relevance
196 (indeed, decisiveness) of Holy Scripture and dispute the evidential
197 relevance of telescopic observation to the properties of heavenly
198 bodies. So, which system of epistemic principles, or rules of justifica-
199 tion, is correct? More fundamentally, is there a matter of correctness,
200 or more or less correctness, in the matter of epistemic systems? Are
201 there facts of justification independent of what individuals or com-
202 munities say or think? This is a serious question for epistemology.

203 This problem of objective rationality or justifiedness is pressed by
204 Richard Rorty (1979). Rorty holds that there is no "objective" basis
205 for adopting one system, or set of epistemic standards, rather than
206 another (1979: 331). Galileo *created* the notion of "scientific
207 values," or standards, but the question of whether he was (objec-
208 tively) "rational" in doing so is out of place (1979: 331). Paul
209 Boghossian (2006) spells out Rorty's position in order to criticize
210 it. Construing Rorty as an epistemic relativist, he spells out the rela-
211 tivist thesis, offers an argument on behalf of the relativist, and then
212 critiques the position. The linchpin of the argument is that there is
213 no way for either Galileo or Cardinal Bellarmine to justify the accep-
214 tance of their respective epistemic systems. If either of those episte-
215 mic systems were objectively right, it should be possible to justify a

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216 belief in its rightness. Why can't a belief in its rightness be justified?
217 Because, argues the relativist (as Boghossian presents him), any jus-
218 tification would have to rest on an epistemic system, presumably
219 the *same* system that the protagonist begins with. But to defend a
220 system by appeal to itself is *circular*, and hence illegitimate.
221 According to the relativist, then, no such justification can be pro-
222 vided, and no such objective (or "absolute") fact of justification
223 obtains.

224 How successful is this argument for justificational relativism?
225 Boghossian offers several lines of criticism, which are too complex
226 to pursue here. I'll offer a different line of criticism. The relativist's
227 argument against the possibility of justifying one's own epistemic
228 system rests on the charge that it involves a kind of circularity –
229 not "premise circularity," in the language of epistemologists, but
230 "epistemic circularity" – plus the assumption that this kind of circu-
231 larity is a *bad* or *illegitimate* thing. Epistemic circularity can be illus-
232 trated in connection with inductive inference. Suppose someone asks
233 you to justify induction by showing that it is generally reliable, i.e., it
234 generally leads to true conclusions. You reply, "Well, I used induc-
235 tion on occasion O_1 and it led to a true conclusion; I used induction
236 on occasion O_2 and it again led to a true conclusion; and so forth.
237 Therefore [conclusion], induction generally leads to true conclusions
238 [to be interpreted as referring to past, present and future]." This
239 attempted justification *uses* induction to justify induction. That's an
240 instance of epistemic circularity, which is a bad thing according to
241 this relativist argument. What kind of "bad thing" is it, allegedly?
242 Presumably, it's bad as a tool of justification. If this is right, the rela-
243 tivist is assuming that there is some *fact of the matter* about the illegit-
244 imacy of certain patterns of inference. The relativist isn't entitled,
245 however, to appeal to any such justificational fact. Objective facts in
246 matters of justification are precisely what the relativist is denying!
247 So relativism about justificational facts is difficult to sustain and
248 hasn't yet been done successfully. I won't pursue further forays
249 into this territory.

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251

252 3. Veriphiliac Social Epistemology

253

254 By my lights, justification and rationality are trickier topics than
255 truth. So the style of objectivist social epistemology I have tried to
256 develop (especially in *Knowledge in a Social World*) emphasizes
257 truth over justification and rationality. I'll continue this emphasis
258 here, without for a moment denying that justification and rationality

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259 (including group rationality) are important and legitimate topics for
260 the field.

261 It is commonplace among (mainstream) epistemologists to say that
262 our twin intellectual goals are to obtain true belief and avoid false
263 belief (error). Instead of talking of “goals,” one can talk of “values.”
264 One might say that it is more valuable, from an intellectual point of
265 view, to have a true belief on some selected question than to have a
266 false belief. If the question is whether P or not-P is the case, and the
267 truth of the matter is P, then it’s better to believe P than to believe
268 not-P. Another stance one might take on the question of P versus
269 not-P is agnosticism, indecision, or withholding of judgment. On the
270 standard line, such an attitude would be of intermediate value
271 between believing a truth (P, in this case) and believing a falsehood
272 (not-P, in this case). If there are such attitudes as “degrees of belief”
273 (or degrees of confidence), we could extend these ideas and say that
274 believing P to degree .90 has more value than believing P to degree
275 .70. Thus, we have a ranking of possible attitudes toward a truth,
276 such that the highest degree of belief toward the truth (1.0, full belief)
277 has the greatest value, and every weaker degree of belief toward the
278 same truth has a lesser value (perhaps negative, beyond a certain point).

279 What kind of value is this? In *Knowledge in a Social World* I called
280 it *veritistic value*. ‘Veritistic’ connotes truth-centeredness, as opposed
281 to a concern with justification or rationality. The latter epistemic
282 notions express one or more different kinds of epistemic value,
283 where the precise connections to veritistic value are controversial.
284 In KSW, and in the remainder of my remarks here, I focus on veritistic
285 value, or notions closely affiliated with it.

286 How does veritistic value link up with *social* epistemology? There is
287 nothing social about a single agent having a true or false belief. Fair
288 enough; but a wide variety of social practices and institution can have
289 causal impacts, often immense causal influences, on the attitudes of indi-
290 viduals, tilting them either toward true beliefs or toward false ones.
291 Large sectors of social interchange involve the transmission of com-
292 munications – often embodying information, misinformation, partial
293 information. The practices of communication that take place in these
294 social networks can be studied from the vantage point of their impact
295 on the veritistic-value states of multiple individuals. This is how I con-
296 ceive of social epistemology, at least *veritistic* social epistemology.³

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298 ³ There is a clear parallel between the social “practices” of veritistic
299 social epistemology and the cognitive “processes” that play a pivotal role
300 in the reliabilist form of individual epistemology I have advocated. (See
301 especially Goldman, 1979, 1986.)

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302 “Sectors” of society might be divided into the (relatively) *private*
303 and the (relatively) *public*. Perhaps these can be arranged on a conti-
304 nuum. At one end is the purely private sector, featuring conversa-
305 tional practices in which individuals convey their beliefs to other
306 individuals (‘testimony’) or engage in argumentation to persuade
307 others of their views. At the other end of the continuum are highly
308 regulated public practices, for example, the carefully structured pro-
309 ceedings of a courtroom, where a judge oversees the speech of attor-
310 neys and witnesses, and controls the items of purported evidence that
311 are admitted into court. Somewhere between the ends of the conti-
312 nuum are the communications that occur in various electronic plat-
313 forms. Some facilitate individual-to-individual communication that
314 differs little from face-to-face communication. Other electronic plat-
315 forms feature more in the way of “supervisors” or “gatekeepers” of
316 communication. Other media, ranging from conventional newspa-
317 pers to weblogs, fall somewhere along the continuum. All of these
318 sectors involve “social” practices, in an inclusive sense of the term.

319 In the rest of this paper I’ll concentrate on what can reasonably be
320 considered “institutions” involving communication. In each such
321 institution, there are indefinitely many possible ways to structure
322 them, indefinitely many rules or procedures that might govern com-
323 municative exchange. Veritistic social epistemology is interested in
324 how to design rules or procedures that improve veritistic outcomes.
325 Like traditional epistemology generally, it is a normative enterprise,
326 not a purely descriptive or explanatory one, although it may require
327 layers of descriptive materials on which to base its normative
328 recommendations.

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331 **4. Laws of Speech and Legal Adjudication**

332

333 Ordinary statutes, constitutional provisions, common-law practices,
334 and judicial interpretations are obvious examples of institutions
335 that can produce better or worse veritistic outcomes. Some statutes,
336 judicial interpretations, etc. either constitute or have definite bearings
337 on government policies of speech and the press. One such example is
338 a ruling by Britain’s highest court, the Law Lords, concerning
339 British libel law (New York Times, October 12, 2006). Under
340 British libel law, newspapers being sued are required to prove the
341 truth of the allegations they print – the opposite of the situation in
342 the United States, where the burden of proof falls heavily on plain-
343 tiffs. According to many authorities, until now the odds of journal-
344 ists’ winning libel cases have been stacked against them. In the

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345 recent case that prompted the high court's ruling, the European
346 edition of the Wall Street Journal reported that Saudi Arabia was
347 monitoring bank accounts of prominent Saudi businesses and indi-
348 viduals to trace whether they were being used, possibly unwittingly,
349 to siphon money to terrorist groups. One of the businesses sued the
350 newspaper. The newspaper could not prove the truth of their alle-
351 gations because, in the nature of things, the existence of surveillance
352 by highly secretive Saudi authorities would have been impossible to
353 prove by evidence in open court. Still, the paper argued that the
354 article was in the public interest. The Law Lords agreed with this
355 contention. One member of the panel wrote: "It is no part of the
356 duty of the press to cooperate with any government . . . in order to
357 keep from the public information of public interest . . .". Several com-
358 mentators agreed that this decision should make it easier for newspa-
359 pers in the U.K. to publish serious stories where they cannot prove
360 that allegations are true, as long as articles are responsibly reported,
361 including the use of confidential sources.

362 What will be the veritistic outcomes of this change in judicial
363 policy? Before the policy change, so it is argued, stories were not
364 being printed – presumably true stories – because of constant fear
365 of lawsuits. Even people from abroad sued in English courts
366 because English judges were so sympathetic to libel plaintiffs. The
367 judges were presumably motivated to prevent false and defamatory
368 stories from being printed, thereby generating false beliefs. But the
369 result of favoring libel plaintiffs was to impede the publication of
370 true stories (in the public interest). The change in policy, therefore,
371 will arguably have positive veritistic consequences on balance.

372 The veritistic analysis of legal adjudication systems focuses on a
373 particular division of a legal system, the division responsible for
374 determining guilt or innocence, liability or non-liability, of defen-
375 dants. I shall assume that, when the law is sufficiently precise, and
376 the true facts of the case fall determinately on one side or other of
377 the law, then each charge brought against a defendant is either true
378 or false. Finally, I assume (for a defense, see *Knowledge in a Social*
379 *World*) that the principal aim of the adjudication arm of the law is
380 to reach accurate verdicts on the charges, given the law and the
381 genuine facts of the case. For any given adjudication system, then,
382 we can ask how well it succeeds in this veritistic task. How frequently
383 does it generate truths rather than falsehoods with respect to guilt or
384 innocence, liability or non-liability? We can also ask comparative
385 questions of the same sort. How reliable is one style of system as com-
386 pared to a different style of system, e.g., the adversary system of the
387 Anglo-American tradition as compared with the so-called

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388 “inquisitorial” system (a very bad label, of course) of the Continental
389 tradition? Getting more specific, we can ask how well some present
390 version of the Anglo-American system works as compared to a
391 version that would result if we tweaked its rules in various ways, for
392 example, by changing the jury-selection procedure, or the instructions
393 that judges give to jurors, or by changing some rule of evidence.
394 All this could be asked in the spirit of contemplating actual institutional
395 changes.

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397

398 **5. Problems with Forensic Laboratories: A Model** 399 **Case of Veritistic Social Epistemology**

400

401 Another institution whose proper function is to (help) obtain the
402 truth is forensic science. Unfortunately, several academic treatments
403 indicate that this function is not being well served by current practice.
404 Saks et al. (2001) report that erroneous and fraudulent expert evidence
405 from forensic scientists is one of the major causes, perhaps
406 the leading cause, of erroneous convictions of innocent persons.
407 One rogue scientist engaged in rampant falsification for 15 years,
408 and another faked more than 100 autopsies and falsified dozens of
409 toxicology and blood reports (Kelly and Wearne 1998; Koppl
410 2006). Shocking cases are found in more than one country.

411 Can the error rate from forensic laboratory reports be reduced?
412 This is a question of institutional (re-)design discussed by an economist,
413 Roger Koppl, who offers a theoretical analysis and an experimental
414 finding that supports this analysis. Finally, he offers a particular
415 suggestion for improving the veritistic properties of the
416 current system.

417 Koppl (2006) pinpoints the problem as the monopoly position
418 enjoyed by most forensic laboratories vis-à-vis the legal jurisdictions
419 that hire them. Each jurisdiction is served by one lab, and only that
420 lab delivers reports about crime scene evidence. A typical report
421 says whether or not there’s a match between an evidentiary item
422 from the crime scene and a trait of the defendant, e.g., a match
423 between a DNA sample found at the crime scene and the DNA
424 profile of the defendant. Knowing that prosecutors prefer messages
425 reporting a match, forensic workers have a bias toward reporting
426 matches. Koppl analyzes the situation by means of game-theoretic
427 models of epistemic systems. Each model contains one or
428 more senders who search a message space and deliver a message to
429 one or more receivers. In forensic science the receivers are jurors
430 who hear the message delivered via testimony in open court.

431 The jury then decides whether a fingerprint or some DNA sample
432 left at the crime scene belongs to the defendant. This is one input
433 into the jury's deliberation that culminates in a judgment of guilt
434 or innocence.

435 On the basis of a game-theoretic analysis, Koppl argues that in the
436 absence of competition with any other forensic lab, the bias toward
437 reporting matches will produce a high incidence of false information.
438 If competition were introduced into the institutional arrangement,
439 however, e.g., by having three forensic labs produce reports, this
440 competition would create new incentives, more unfavorable to the
441 transmission of false information. Koppl and colleagues performed
442 a gaming experiment designed to mimic the scenarios for forensic
443 laboratories. This experiment confirmed a change in behavior in
444 the predicted direction. The three-sender situation reduced the sys-
445 temic error rate by two-thirds (as compared with the one-sender situ-
446 ation). This is a fine example of what Koppl calls "epistemic systems
447 design," where we study the impact of system re-design on matters of
448 veracity. It contrasts with the standard question in economics that
449 focuses on the *efficiency* of institutional systems.

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452 **6. When Ignorance is Desirable: A Broadened Conception** 453 **of Veriphiliac Social Epistemology**

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455 I have discussed veritistic value in terms of a specific ordering of dox-
456 astic attitudes directed at a true proposition. According to this order,
457 higher strengths of belief in a true proposition always confer greater
458 veritistic value with respect to that proposition (or the question that
459 it answers). In different terminology, a state of being informed that
460 P is veritistically preferable to being uninformed that P (e.g., with-
461 holding judgment on P), which is veritistically preferable to being
462 misinformed that P (believing P where it's false).

463 Our illustrations make it clear that many social institutions have as
464 part of their goal or function to promote veritistically good states
465 among occupants of certain institutional roles (with respect to
466 selected questions). For example, legal proceedings have the goal of
467 promoting veritistically good states in the fact-finder with respect
468 to questions of guilt versus innocence. But not all institutions have
469 such a goal. In fact, there are cases in which an institution ought to
470 promote veritistically *bad* states in certain individuals or role-players.
471 Being informed is not always better than being uninformed or misin-
472 formed, at least for some people in some social settings (and some-
473 times in purely individual settings).

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474 What are some examples? One type of case arises from the desir-
475 ability of *privacy*. It is generally conceded that people have rights
476 or legitimate interests in keeping certain facts about themselves
477 private, which means keeping other people ignorant of those facts.
478 The relevant facts include their social security number, their cash
479 machine PIN, their medical records, what they do in their
480 bedroom, and so forth. If society ought to protect person's X's
481 privacy with respect to fact F, then society should take steps to
482 ensure that quite a few people other than X – most people, in fact –
483 are ignorant of F.

484 A more novel example involves elections and democratic insti-
485 tutions. The United States Supreme Court, in the name of the
486 First Amendment, has struck down efforts to restrict overall spending
487 on election campaigns. The idea is that voters have a right to vote for
488 their favored candidates not only by casting a ballot in the voting
489 booth but also by supporting those candidates' electoral campaigns
490 with dollars. The result, of course, is the corruption that ensues
491 when elected officials "pay off" those interest groups who donated
492 lots of money. Government is bought by the highest bidders. Of
493 course, politicians cannot deliver the goods to their campaign contri-
494 butors in so obvious a fashion. But there are plenty of opportunities to
495 deliver in more subtle, or deniable, ways.

496 What is to be done? One solution on which both liberal and conser-
497 vative reformers have converged is the "full information" idea.
498 Candidates are required to reveal who is bankrolling their campaigns,
499 and how much they are giving. If knowledge of the bankrollers is
500 shared with the public, the latter will theoretically be in a position
501 to be watchdogs on the winning candidates' conduct in office.

502 There is also a much less well-known idea, but (by my lights) more
503 promising. Why not require campaign contributions to be *anon-*
504 *ymous*? That way, with candidates not knowing who gave them a lot
505 of money, they won't be in a position to reward the contributors.
506 This has been proposed by Bruce Ackerman and Ian Ayres (2002).
507 Historically, Ackerman and Ayres point out, the secret ballot came
508 to America only during the late nineteenth century. Previously
509 voters cast their ballots in full view of the contesting parties, who
510 carefully monitored each decision. Within this framework, corrupt
511 vote buying was commonplace. The situation was transformed by
512 the secret ballot. Once a voter could promise to vote one way and actu-
513 ally vote another, it wasn't easy for him to sell his vote, because vote-
514 buyers could no longer verify the credibility of a voter's commitment.
515 Suddenly, a voter's promise to sell his vote for money became
516 worthless.

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517 Ackerman and Ayres use the same logic in dealing with campaign
518 contributions. They propose the “secret donation booth.” Contributors
519 will be barred from giving money directly to candidates. Instead they
520 must pass their checks through a blind trust. Candidates would get
521 access to the money deposited in their account with the blind trust, but
522 won’t be able to identify who provided the funds. Many people will, of
523 course, claim to have contributed vast sums, but none of them will be
524 able to prove it. Just as the secret voting booth disrupts vote buying
525 because candidates are uncertain how a citizen actually voted, anonymous
526 donations would disrupt influence peddling because candidates would be
527 uncertain whether givers actually gave what they say they gave.

528 There are many details that would have to be handled to make the
529 anonymity process work. Ackerman and Ayres haven’t sold their pro-
530 posal widely as of yet; to my knowledge, it hasn’t reached the
531 threshold of public discussion. For the sake of argument, however,
532 suppose it’s a good idea that would really work. It is then a case in
533 which ignorance by certain people, viz., political candidates, of
534 certain facts about others, viz., who has contributed to their cam-
535 paigns and who hasn’t, is an institutional desideratum. If
536 Ackerman and Ayres are right, it is preferable from the perspective
537 of democratic institutions that certain crucial role players, viz., candi-
538 dates for office, have veritistically inferior, not superior, positions
539 vis-à-vis certain propositions.

540 How is this relevant to social epistemology? A veritistic social epis-
541 temologist might reply as follows: “Such cases should be of no inter-
542 est to us, because these are cases where veritistic desiderata don’t kick
543 in. So we should simply ignore such cases.” But there’s another possi-
544 ble response, involving a non-trivial re-design of the foundations of
545 social epistemology.

546 Let us abandon the assumption that social epistemology (SE)
547 should evaluate all outcomes of interest in terms of the outcome
548 ranking discussed earlier. Under that old style of outcome ranking,
549 true belief is always superior to withholding of judgment, for any
550 given proposition. This ranking style is firmly tied to the notion of
551 “veritistic value.” We now propose, however, that SE not be
552 wedded to veritistic value. V-value could remain central to SE, just
553 not essential to it. In some institutional contexts, we might allow, it
554 is desirable to advocate a different informational policy, one that
555 cuts against true belief as the best condition for all parties, one that
556 views ignorance as preferable to knowledge for some individuals.
557 At least this would be the preferable ranking from a social or insti-
558 tutional perspective. This wouldn’t imply that the individuals
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560 themselves would prefer ignorance to being informed (on the matters
561 in question).⁴

562 Is this a tenable proposal for a conception of SE? What would then
563 distinguish SE from other parts of social philosophy or social theory?
564 Wouldn't the contemplated change divest the enterprise of its distinc-
565 tively epistemological dimension? What would it have in common with
566 epistemology as usually conceived? Isn't a preference for truth over
567 error or ignorance just built into the conception of the epistemic?

568 What is still distinctive to SE is the focus on what I'll call "veridoxic"
569 states as the states of interest. A veridoxic state is a state with two com-
570 ponents. The first component is a doxastic attitude, like belief, disbe-
571 lief, and withholding of judgment. The second component is a truth
572 value: either truth or falsity. So, each of the states described earlier
573 in our V-value scheme are veridoxic states. Under the new proposal,
574 SE would continue to focus on this class of states. The difference is
575 that the new proposal would no longer have us restrict attention to the
576 "canonical" ranking of veridoxic states associated with veritism.
577 It would not cling to the treatment of true belief as being superior to
578 false belief or withholding, from a social point of view (or even from
579 an individual point of view). We could distinguish this canonical
580 ranking from alternative rankings, where the latter rankings also
581 concern veridoxic states. By contrast with social constructivists and
582 other fact-relativists, we would insist that the propositional contents
583 of doxastic states are (typically) either true or false. We would not
584 insist, however, that SE take a purely truth preferring (i.e., true-belief
585 preferring) stance for all agents and all societal topics. The desirability
586 of privacy is a sign that no such stance is warranted. Numerous other
587 examples are readily produced. In time of war (just war, at any rate),
588 it isn't incumbent on a society to deliver military secrets to the
589 enemy. It's entirely legitimate to retain its secrets despite the fact
590 that successful secrecy entails ignorance on the part of others.

591 I can already hear the predictable complaints of my epistemologist
592 colleagues: "OK, it isn't good from the society's viewpoint to deliver
593 its military secrets to the enemy. And if that society's cause is just,
594 delivering military secrets to the enemy isn't good from the stand-
595 point of justice. Nonetheless, it's good *from an epistemic point of*
596 *view* to do so. Transmission of truths is always epistemically good,
597 at least truths of interest to the hearers or recipients. That's just the
598 distinctive nature of epistemology and the epistemic."
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601 ⁴ Sometimes even individuals have reasons to prefer ignorance to
602 knowledge. See the case described in note 4 below.

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603 What shall we say, then, about the following two cases, where ver-
604 itistic ends demand “anti-veritistic” means? Take Koppl’s example of
605 forensic laboratories and their relationships to courts. If Koppl’s pro-
606 posal were adopted of hiring multiple forensic laboratories to report
607 on the same items of evidence, it could be that it would deter
608 biased reporting for each laboratory to be ignorant of what the
609 other laboratories report. Only such ignorance can guarantee that
610 the laboratories not be complicit with one another. Notice,
611 however, that this ignorance is a means to achieve an ultimate state
612 of accurate judgment on the part of the fact-finder (the jury). So we
613 cannot say that our interest in the laboratories’ being ignorant of
614 one another’s reports is not of *social epistemological* interest, because
615 we certainly want to regard the forensic laboratory case as a specimen
616 problem for social epistemology.

617 Similarly, consider the desirability of journalists maintaining the
618 confidentiality of their sources. To maintain confidentiality is keep
619 the public ignorant of who these sources are. Could that possibly
620 be a socially good informational state? Certainly, it could be (and
621 probably is, in many cases). Moreover, it is socially good because of
622 the larger informational payoffs. If a source would decline to disclose
623 publicly important information to a reporter unless his identity is
624 kept confidential, then the public wouldn’t receive the information
625 in question. Surely the whole field of public information policy
626 deserves to be treated under the heading of social epistemology. If
627 keeping sources’ identities secret is an epistemically illicit act –
628 from the “get-go”, as it were – the social epistemology of this
629 subject will be unacceptably constrained or circumscribed.

630 Again, the response of (some) other epistemologists is predictable.
631 “We should distinguish *intrinsic* versus *instrumental* epistemic value.
632 A state of affairs is intrinsically valuable from an epistemic point of
633 view only if it has (positive) veritistic value, where true belief is
634 superior to ignorance, for example. But this doesn’t preclude the
635 possibility that a state of affairs have instrumentally (positive) episte-
636 mic value even by being a state of ignorance rather than true belief.
637 That’s still of interest to social epistemology, so long as the final
638 end which the ignorance promotes is a veritistically good state such
639 as knowledge or true belief.”

640 This is one route that social epistemology might take. But it doesn’t
641 strike me as the best route, certainly not a required route. Notice that
642 the sought-after states of knowledge (true belief) in the two cases just
643 cited – the forensic laboratories case and the confidential sources
644 case – are not sought after purely for their own sake. In each case,
645 there is a plausible further end beyond the sought-after veritistic

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646 states. In the forensic laboratories case, it is delivering justice with
647 respect to the criminal matters before the court. Justice is the final
648 end, and accurate judgment by the jury is a means to that end.
649 Similarly, the reason one wants vital information reported to the
650 public is so they can *act* in the public's interest. The sought-after knowl-
651 edge states are themselves not "final," intrinsic ends. So it doesn't seem
652 reasonable to admit these cases into the sphere of social epistemology
653 while excluding the campaign-donation anonymity proposal.

654 Let me try to clarify this proposal for a modified conception of
655 social epistemology by drawing an analogy with engineering. The
656 science (or art) of engineering isn't responsible for the aims that
657 various users might wish to achieve for a sought-after object or
658 system to be engineered. Most people who want a bridge to be built
659 would want the bridge to be very strong and capable of withstanding
660 as much weight as possible (relative to cost constraints). But there
661 might be exceptions. A small country surrounded by aggressive and
662 highly armed neighbors might prefer to have weak rather than
663 strong bridges built over the rivers that constitute their borders.
664 This might be seen as a means to keep invading tanks from getting
665 across the bridges. Weak bridges would conveniently collapse
666 under the weight of tanks. It would be a good engineering feat to
667 have bridges designed to withstand the weight of ordinary commer-
668 cial traffic but not tank traffic. In general, engineering deals with
669 the design and production of artifacts that meet specifications inde-
670 pendently arrived at. Engineering per se doesn't fix the desired spe-
671 cifications. Similarly, SE would not try to fix the specifications for
672 desirable veridoxic states. For some purposes, ignorance (on the
673 part of some) might be better than knowledge. SE is prepared to
674 work with all sorts of ranking specifications. But it aims to figure
675 out the social practices and institutional arrangements that promote
676 higher attainments on whatever veridoxic rankings are appropriate,
677 using normative considerations independent of SE per se.⁵

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681 ⁵ Notice that similar considerations apply to purely *individual* choice
682 situations. There are cases in which an individual might prefer being ignor-
683 ant to being knowledgeable, even when no "social" desiderata are in play.
684 For example, one might prefer to be ignorant of any intended messages
685 that a potential blackmailer might send him. If the agent doesn't receive
686 or learn of the blackmailer's message, he can't really be blackmailed (at
687 least if the potential blackmailer knows that the agent is ignorant). Thanks
688 to Holly Smith for this point and (Thomas Schelling's) example.

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