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IX*—RATIONAL AUTHORITY AND SOCIAL POWER: TOWARDS A TRULY SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

by Miranda Fricker

ABSTRACT This paper explores the relation between rational authority and social power, proceeding by way of a philosophical genealogy derived from Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature*. The position advocated avoids the errors both of the 'traditionalist' (who regards the socio-political as irrelevant to epistemology) and of the 'reductivist' (who regards reason as just another form of social power). The argument is that a norm of credibility governs epistemic practice in the state of nature, which, when socially manifested, is likely to imitate the structures of social power. A phenomenon of *epistemic injustice* is explained, and the politicizing implication for epistemology educed.

I

Knowledge is a collective good. In securing our knowledge we rely upon others, and we cannot dispense with that reliance. That means that the relations in which we have and hold our knowledge have a moral character, and the word I use to indicate that moral relation is *trust*—Steven Shapin.¹

The relations of trust which Shapin speaks of here have a political character as well as a moral one. Their political character derives from the fact that epistemic subjects are socially constituted individuals who stand in relations of power. Through his study of seventeenth-century gentlemanly culture (particularly as manifested in the person of Robert Boyle), Shapin investigates a historical phase of the connection between trust and social power. I propose to explore the relation between rational authority and social power, proceeding not by way of history but primarily by way of a philosophical genealogy. I end with a suggestion about what that genealogy reveals about the relation between knowledge and power.

1. *A Social History of Truth—Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1994) p. xxv. I am grateful to John Dupré for suggesting Shapin's book to me.

*Meeting of the Aristotelian Society, held in Senate House, University of London, on Monday, 23rd February, 1998 at 8.15 p.m.

In epistemology it can too often seem as if a concern with truth and rationality were wholly disconnected from any concern with power and the social identities of the participants in epistemic practices. For the most part the tradition provides us with a clinically asocial conception of the knowing subject, with the result that epistemology tends to proceed as if socio-political considerations were utterly irrelevant to it. At another extreme, there are many 'end-of-epistemology' and postmodernist theorists (treated either as an occult tendency or as the new orthodoxy—depending on the company one keeps) who tell us to abandon reason and truth as universal norms on the grounds that they are mere functions of power as it is played out in the drama of epistemic practice. Whereas on the traditionalist view social power is seen as wholly *irrelevant* to the rational, on the postmodernist view reason tends to be *reduced* to social power. One might venture a diagnosis: that both the traditionalist and reductivist camps make the same mistake of thinking it is an all or nothing situation, so that if social power is involved in rational proceedings in any but the most superficial of ways, then it is all up with rationality. (The respective mindsets of two people engaged in a heated argument about whether or not *God is dead* are very much closer together than either is to that of the person trapped in the middle wishing they could all find a different way of talking.)

These characterizations of traditionalist and reductivist extremes are somewhat artificial, of course, although I think they are not quite caricatures. They serve to delineate two contrasting and equally mistaken conceptions of how rational authority and social power are related. I shall present a different conception of the relation, which explains, firstly, why socio-political matters are a proper concern in epistemology; and, secondly, why the very possibility of bringing a politicized critical perspective to bear requires that rational authority and social power be firmly distinguished. The first point is addressed to those who are inclined towards the position I have called traditionalist; the second to those inclined towards the position I have characterized as reductivist. My final remarks about the relation between knowledge and social power may be more disruptive to traditionalism, while still supplying no grist to the reductivist mill.

II

Who knows? Reductivism about reason stands or falls with the question whether there can be a characterization of rational authority which is genuinely independent of social power. If we want to see at what point and in what way social power enters into epistemic practice, and if we want to see to what extent it *must* enter in, then it will be a useful heuristic to imagine a minimal epistemic practice in a situation that is minimally social. In *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, Edward Craig presents a philosophical genealogy that provides a 'practical explication' of the concept of knowledge through an exploration of its fundamental role in our lives. His innovative account provides an excellent framework within which to pursue the question of how social power and rational authority are related.²

Craig's *practical* approach³ to explaining the concept of knowledge is not to explore in the abstract the meaning of the word 'know', as in the traditional epistemological project. Instead he imagines a minimal case of the actual situations in which we employ the concept—an epistemic 'state of nature' in which we must seek true beliefs in order to survive. By taking this approach, conducted from the perspective of the inquirer, he aims to identify those features of the concept of knowledge which crucially distinguish it from that of true belief:

We take some *prima facie* plausible hypothesis about what the concept of knowledge does for us, what its role in our life might be, and then ask what a concept having that role would be like, what conditions would govern its application.⁴

Craig suggests that human beings have a fundamental need to acquire true beliefs, for without an ability to acquire them we would surely perish. The point arises from the quite general thought that epistemic subjects are *agents*, whose attempts at causal intervention in the world can only be effective if they (to a

2. Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature—An Essay In Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990). The politicizing purpose for which I adapt Craig's framework is not Craig's.

3. Bernard Williams takes a similar approach in chapter 2 of *Descartes: The Project of Pure Enquiry* (London: Penguin, 1978); see especially pp. 37–41. And in *The Community of Knowledge* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986) Michael Welbourne places the 'commoning' of information at the centre of an account of knowledge.

4. Craig, *op. cit.* p. 2.

sufficient degree) form true beliefs about what will happen if... This basic need for truth drives our practice, leading us to seek out 'good informants'—people who will tell us the truth as to whether p —in order to multiply our epistemic resources. We inevitably develop a collective strategy such that the information available from the different vantage points of fellow inquirers is pooled. In this way we are driven towards an essentially co-operative practice that enables us to benefit not only from our own eyes and ears, but also from the eyes and ears of fellow inquirers.

That the minimal epistemic practice in the state of nature is co-operative gives it an ethical dimension. And Craig characterizes the relevant co-operative attitude by reference to our capacity for empathy and to 'the special flavour of situations in which human beings treat each other as subjects with a common purpose, rather than as objects from which services, in this case true belief, can be extracted'.⁵ But the trusting, co-operative attitude towards one's fellow inquirers can only serve its purpose if it is discriminating. There must be some public means of distinguishing good informants. Broadly (and introducing terms (i) and (ii) of my own), the good informant is distinguished by three features:

- i) competence
- ii) trustworthiness
- iii) indicator-properties.

What I call 'competence' is specified counterfactually in Craig's account, so that the good informant as to whether p must believe that p if p is the case, and not believe that p if $not-p$ is the case, across those possible worlds that are relevant to the predicament of the inquirer.⁶ I make 'trustworthiness' the name of Craig's requirement that '[c]hannels of communication between [informant and inquirer] . . . should be open'.⁷ This covers the informant's accessibility, speaking the same language, willingness to part with the information, and possession of a good track-record of non-deception (the paradigm counter-example being Matilda

5. op. cit. p. 36. The ethical point is connected with the distinction between a 'source of information' and an 'informant'; op. cit. chapter V.

6. This range of possible worlds is slightly narrower than that set by Nozick, because for those nearby possible worlds which the inquirer already knows are not the actual world, the fact that the potential informant would 'track' p in them is irrelevant; op. cit. pp. 20–23.

7. op. cit. p. 85.

who told such dreadful lies). One could of course add any number of other requirements, such as that the informant should convey the information in an organized, not too long-winded, not too technical form, etc. As Craig makes clear, quite what is required will vary from context to context. His concern, and the present concern, is with characterizing the prototypical case.

Indicator-properties are prototypically detectable by the inquirer, and indicate that the potential informant is 'likely to be right about *p*'.⁸ But someone's being 'right about *p*' can be ambiguous between their *believing* truly that *p* and their *telling* truly that *p*. Craig explains being 'right about *p*' simply in terms of having 'a true belief on the matter',⁹ so that the guarantee that the good informant tells one what she (truly) believes has to come from the independent requirement that 'channels of communication' be open. His account has it that, in my terms, the good informant must be recognizable as competent with respect to *p*, but need not be *recognizable* as trustworthy with respect to *p*. On this point I depart from Craig, however. For, surely, what the inquirer needs is someone he can pick out as likely to *tell* him truly whether *p*—someone likely to be able *and* willing to give him the information he wants. So the method of investigating knowledge from the inquirer's perspective should (or, at least, can) be taken to require that not only the informant's competence be recognizable, but also her trustworthiness. I therefore adapt the account accordingly:¹⁰ indicator-properties are such as to signal the presence of both competence and trustworthiness.

Knowledge, then, is enshrined in the figure of the good informant. Our concept of knowledge as distinct from mere true belief arises from the fundamental human imperative to identify people who will tell one the truth about *p*. It is important to appreciate that Craig is not suggesting that the requirement of being a good informant is to be slotted into a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge. On the contrary, his practical

8. op. cit. p. 85, and *passim*.

9. op. cit. p. 18–19, and *passim*.

10. Some of Craig's formulations encourage me in this. For instance: 'It is not just that we are looking for an informant who *will tell* us the truth about *p*; we also have to be able to pick him out, distinguish him from others to whom we would be less well advised to listen' (op. cit. p. 18; italics added). If we recognize that someone 'will tell us the truth', then we recognize not only that he has a true belief, but also that he can be trusted to impart it to us.

explication is intended as a methodological alternative to the project of analysis. (It is obvious that being a good informant cannot be a necessary condition for knowing, since we can readily think up examples where a person knows something but cannot constitute a good informant on the matter. Perhaps they have a track-record of lying, or error, or perhaps they have an evident motivation for deception.¹¹)

The good-informant account is offered as an account of the 'common core'¹² of the concept of knowledge, in order to bring to light the fundamental point that the concept has in our lives. Cases where we attribute knowledge whether *p* to people who nonetheless cannot qualify as good informants whether *p* present perfectly *bona fide* uses of the concept; but such uses are parasitic upon the prior practice of good-informing, which dramatizes the core of what it is to *know*.

III

Methodological note. It is at the best of times difficult to grasp the status of state-of-nature stories. They are notorious for providing a blank canvas onto which a philosopher may paint the image of his personal theoretical predilections; yet they also provide a unique format for identifying a starting point (say, a set of basic human needs) and telling a narrative story from which a theory may emerge. We tend to see plausibility as a welcome constraint on philosophical whim. But why we should want plausibility from a state-of-nature account of the provenance of a concept can seem puzzling. If 'plausible' means 'likely to be true', then it has an inappropriately empirical ring for a manifestly made-up story that is quite properly composed from the armchair.

The matter becomes clearer if we concentrate on the distinction between the historian's question 'how has X actually come about?' and the philosopher's modal question 'how is it possible that X has come about?'. Answers to the first are candidates for true explanations of X; answers to the second are candidates for providing philosophical *understanding* of X. The understanding will be brought by what we might call the *how-possibly?*

11. op. cit. p. 82.

12. op. cit. p. 88.

explanation. But, clearly, not any such explanation will bring philosophical understanding—it must be a good one to do that. And we tend to think that a good one is (at least) a plausible one. But if so then ‘plausible’ cannot in this context mean ‘likely to be true’, for most state-of-nature explanations would fail *that* test.

There are many and various things which determine whether a *how-possibly?* explanation is philosophically illuminating, but one thing we may want when we say we want plausibility is a certain relation between the *how-possibly?* explanation and actuality; between (if I may) genealogy and history. A good genealogical explanation of the concept of knowledge helps us understand how, and in what respects, our actual epistemic practices are the contingent social manifestations of our most basic epistemic predicament. So it helps us understand to what extent features of our actual practice are necessary, and to what extent they are contingent. This will in turn explain how some kinds of criticism of our practice are worth making, and how some are senseless. (In particular, it explains why some kinds of political criticism of the norms surrounding rational authority are worth making, and why others can never be genuinely political: where the norm in question is necessary, political criticism is at best futile.)

When we engage in genealogical story-telling, then, we give a *how-possibly?* explanation of something, designed to increase our understanding of it. The genius of using the state-of-nature format in the arena of epistemology is that it allows one to tell a narrative story about X (e.g. the concept ‘know’) even where we find it otherwise barely intelligible that there could have been a narrative development towards X.¹³ In such cases the state of nature is a unique heuristic device. It allows one to tell a story which is plausible (in the revised sense), philosophically illuminating, and yet quite false, known to be false, and perhaps even necessarily false (for instance, if the idea of a progression towards X were conceptually impossible).

Craig gives a state-of-nature explanation of a creature which progresses, provided it has sufficient intellectual capacity, from a purely subjective consciousness of ‘food, here, now’, towards a capacity for concepts as of an objective world, so that it comes to

13. This point was made by Bernard Williams in a lecture, ‘Truth and Truthfulness’, delivered to The London Consortium, Birkbeck College, London, May 1997.

distinguish food here, food soon, food over there, and so on. This capacity for conceptualization is explained by reference to the advantages that would accrue if it were able causally to interact with and manipulate the world to its own advantage.¹⁴ Now this transition from no capacity for conceptualization towards such a capacity is one which we do not normally know how to present as a *progression*. The capacity for conceptualization—for meaning—seems indivisible. Perhaps we are given a brilliantly suggestive metaphor—‘[l]ight dawns gradually over the whole’¹⁵—but we may still not feel that in itself this amounts to any explanation. By contrast, appeal to the state of nature offers a means of genuine explanation—*how-possibly?* explanation—which provides for philosophical understanding.

If Craig’s account shows that the fundamental human need to form a collective strategy for the pursuit of truth is a feature of any epistemic practice, then the implications which may be drawn from the basic features of that strategy are necessary¹⁶ features of epistemic practice. Next it will be suggested that some of these necessary features take on a distinctly political character as soon as we move away from the minimally social state of nature to the fully social setting in which epistemic practices are actually conducted.

IV

The social manifestation of the norm of credibility. The key requirements of the good informant (competence, trustworthiness, and indicator-properties) demonstrate that the notion of the good informant has external and internal aspects. There is the (external) requirement that the good informant tells one truly whether *p*, and there is the (internal) requirement that the inquirer is able to identify the informant as a good one. Competence and trustworthiness together supply the former; indicator-properties supply the latter.

It will be convenient to introduce two shorthand terms. Let it be that if someone is both competent and trustworthy, then she has

14. *op. cit.* p. 83.

15. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* §141.

16. Or almost necessary: ‘[State-of-nature] explanations work by identifying certain human needs and arguing that the practices are a necessary (or at the least a highly appropriate) response to them...’ (*op. cit.* p. 89; italics added). In addition, we should perhaps make explicit the proviso that the epistemic practices under consideration are those that would be recognizably human ones.

rational authority. And let it be that someone who possesses indicator-properties has *credibility*. (Someone who has both rational authority and credibility is a good informant.) The fact that the concept of the good informant has this structure immediately raises the possibility of two sorts of mismatch between rational authority and credibility. There is the possibility of someone's being rationally authoritative without being recognized as such; and there is the possibility of someone's seeming to be rationally authoritative when she is not. The latter possibility will be called *mere credibility*.

Either kind of mismatch may come about as a result of the fact that credibility is only defeasibly correlated with rational authority: its presence does not guarantee rational authority; its absence does not guarantee lack of it. Even in the state of nature there will be occasions when someone who has rational authority with respect to a question lacks credibility nonetheless. The person who has a track-record of failing to tell between the poisonous and the non-poisonous red berries, but who recently learned the secret of distinguishing them, will not gain credibility with respect to red-berry-edibility until he has established a reformed track-record. If, on the other hand, someone is falsely reputed to have a good track-record of distinguishing the berries, then she has *mere credibility* regarding red-berry-edibility. More sinisterly, someone might be *merely credible* as a result of deliberately feigning the indicator-properties—perhaps she spread the false rumour of her red-berry expertise. In the social world (as in the state of nature) knowledge provides a means to gaining certain things one might need or want. For instance, it serves entry into many jobs, especially lucrative or prestigious ones. If knowledge is in this sense a power, then so is the mere appearance of knowledge. So there is a direct motivation (depending upon how grave the risk of being found out) for imposture: for someone's pretending to know when he doesn't.¹⁷

These ways in which rational authority and credibility can come apart illustrate that any practice of good-informing is both innocently fallible and vulnerable to deliberate individual corruption. Neither of these will be the chief concern here, however.

17. I thank Adam Morton for this point, made when I presented an earlier version of this paper at the Departmental Seminar at the University of Bristol. I am indebted to all those present on that occasion for helpful discussion.

The chief concern will be with a tendency for corruption that is equally inherent in epistemic practice, but which is political and structural in character. It need not grow from any deliberate manipulation of the norms governing the practice.

To bring out the political dimension, a distinction must first be made between indicator-properties as they have so far been discussed, which are such that they do in fact reliably indicate rational authority; and what we might call *working-indicator-properties*, which are those properties actually used in a given practice to indicate rational authority, and which may or may not be so reliable. The norm of credibility governs who is picked out as a good informant: it tells us to attribute rational authority to all and only those potential informants who possess relevant indicator-properties. When that norm is socially manifested in a particular historical and cultural setting, it will guide practice so that rational authority is attributed to all and only those who possess the relevant working-indicator-properties. Further, a state-of-nature story need only mention indicator-properties that signal rational authority with respect to particular questions—whether *p*, whether *q*.... But in the social context our practice will include attributions of rational authority which are more general, and even completely non-specific in scope. (One example of a wholly non-specific credibility might be that which once accrued to people of noble birth—a credibility institutionalized in a form of government in which the authority of members of the Second House derives solely from their heredity.)

Craig is surely right to characterize the basic epistemic practice in the state of nature in terms of a certain co-operative ethic where, in treating each other as (potential) good informants, inquirers treat each other as ends-in-themselves rather than as mere means from which to acquire truths. But the co-operative ethic is likely to be compromised when epistemic practice is transplanted from the state of nature to the socially and politically complex setting in which we actually live. Only the minimal co-operative ethic is required to get epistemic practice off the ground; thereafter there is plenty of room for parasitic practices of misinformation, imposture, and the political kind of epistemic dysfunctionality whose possibility and structure I shall attempt to outline.

Recall the two components of rational authority—competence and trustworthiness—of which the good informant must bear the marks (sc. the working-indicator-properties sufficient for credibility). What relation might we expect these to bear to social power and powerlessness? Access to institutions of education is manifestly influenced by various dimensions of social power—nowadays principally class, and (through its connection with class) race. Crudely, you have to be rich to go to what tend to be considered the best schools; and the most over-stretched state schools tend to be in the most socially deprived areas. Does this system lead to corruption in the operation of the norm of credibility? The answer will depend on how far there is a phenomenon of credibility-overspill such that the property of having had a private education is taken to indicate more competence and/or more trustworthiness than is in fact due; and conversely for those who lack the property.

In a significant range of contexts, the position of powerlessness may place one under general suspicion of being motivated to deceive, in a way which the position of powerfulness does not. Further, powerlessness diminishes one's ability to protest one's trustworthiness—especially if it would be at the expense of the reputation of someone more powerful. In the state of nature we only have to entertain socio-politically neutral indicator-properties such as 'looking in the right direction'. But when considering epistemic practice in the social context, where perceptual knowledge is only one of the many kinds of information we trade in, there are many other working-indicator-properties of both competence and trustworthiness that will stand in need of ongoing critical assessment.

Things may be especially complicated if the knowledge that we seek is about contested social phenomena. If someone in a relevantly powerless position is asked for information on something apparently simple, such as 'what happened at the annual general meeting?', it may be that if she attempts to convey her perception of the interactions that went on in the meeting, she will find she lacks what Lorraine Code has suggestively named the 'rhetorical space' that her answer requires. In particular, if she needs to give an answer whose intelligibility depends on her interlocutor's appreciating a certain interpretive perspective on such things, she may find that her credibility goes missing when

that perspective is not forthcoming. Code quotes from Patricia Williams' account of attempting to make a complaint about a racist incident:

[Williams] observes: 'I could not but wonder... what it would take to make my experience verifiable. The testimony of an independent white bystander?' And she comments on 'how the blind application of principles of neutrality... acted either to make me look crazy or to make the reader participate in old habits of cultural bias'.¹⁸

The foregoing reflections might lead one to suspect that—as a countervailing force against the fundamental imperative to trade co-operatively in truths—there is likely to be some social pressure in the direction of the norm of credibility's favouring the powerful in its control over who is picked out as credible, and thus in who is picked out as a good informant. There is likely (at least in societies recognizably like ours) to be some social pressure on the norm of credibility to imitate the structures of social power. Where that imitation brings about a mismatch between rational authority and credibility—so that the powerful tend to be given *mere* credibility and/or the powerless tend to be wrongly denied credibility—we should acknowledge that there is a phenomenon of *epistemic injustice*.

That there is likely to be a corrupting sort of social pressure on the norm of credibility remains an empirical conjecture. Broadly speaking, it is a historical question; so perhaps it is to history we should look in support of the claim. Steven Shapin's account of the culture of gentlemanly veracity in seventeenth-century England provides a compelling historical illustration. In Shapin's study we see the requirements of the good informant made socially manifest in the person of the seventeenth-century gentleman. Shapin tells us that the gentleman was, quite literally, accorded privileged *competence*, even in matters of perception:

The first consideration implicated in the culture of gentlemanly veracity was rarely given explicit treatment in the practical ethical literature of early modern Europe. Nevertheless, it was an absolutely fundamental feature of the practical assessment of testimony, and one which might assist in discriminating the worth

18. Lorraine Code, *Rhetorical Spaces—essays on gendered locations* (London/NY: Routledge, 1995) p. 69. The quotation is from 'Incredulity, Experientialism, and the Politics of Knowledge', whose themes—and especially the discussion of how stereotyping affects credibility—are highly relevant to those discussed here.

of testimony from gentle and nongentle sources. This was the ascription to gentlemen of *perceptual competence*.¹⁹

Trustworthiness, too, is made socially concrete in the figure of the gentleman. He enjoyed the economic and social independence brought by social advantage, and this elevated social position meant he was generally free from the sorts of beholdenness that might be thought to, and might actually, provide motivations for deceiving others. Further, the question of non-deception was sured up by a code of gentlemanly honour. Not only did his social privilege mean he was seen to have little to gain from deception; it meant he stood to lose a great deal if he were seen to flout the code—a noble track-record was worth protecting.

It seems, then, that there was a time in England when being a gentleman was a key working-indicator-property of rational authority, not with respect to any particular question or range of questions, but generally. If being a gentleman was a positive indicator of rational authority; being nongentle and/or female was a negative indicator. Seventeenth-century women's economic and social dependence meant that their supposed lack of rational authority—like that of nongentle men—went for the most part without saying:

There were powerful institutions of exclusion that affected the cultural and political role of women, as well as of nongentle men. But precisely because those institutional systems were so effective, and because the justifications overwhelmingly picked out dependence as a disqualifying circumstance, the *literate culture* of early modern England was not nearly so significantly marked by identifications of gender disabilities as it was by commentary on 'ignobility,' 'servility,' and 'baseness'.²⁰

Not that Elizabethan versifiers were exactly silent on the subject:

A woman's face is full of wiles,
Her tears are like the crocadill...
Her tongue still chats of this and that,
Than aspen leaf it wags more fast;
And as she talks she knows not what,
There issues many a truthless blast.²¹

19. Shapin op. cit. p. 75; original italics.

20. op. cit. p. 88.

21. Humfrey Gifford, in Norman Ault ed. *Elizabethan Lyrics*, (NY: Capricorn Books, 1960); quoted in Shapin, op. cit. p. 89.

That was then; the pressures on the norm of credibility today are naturally quite different from those of the seventeenth-century. But the suggestion that there is likely to be some such pressure is general. In the present day, consider the effect of the relations of power surrounding (and partially constituting) gender which can lead to the withholding of credibility from, say, a woman putting her views at a professional meeting; or those surrounding class and race that may undermine the credibility of, say, a black person being questioned by the police. As Code says:

[T]he rhetorical spaces that a society legitimates generate presumptions of credibility and trust that attach differentially according to how speakers and interpreters are positioned within them.²²

V

Assessing epistemic practice: veritism and epistemic justice. I purport to have shown, adapting Craig's framework, that the norm of credibility is a fundamental norm of any epistemic practice. In the minimal practice in the state of nature, there is an overwhelming practical imperative to operate with working-indicator-properties that do reliably indicate rational authority, since there is an overwhelming imperative to trade in truths and not falsehoods. But once the practice is up and running, and once we transpose our story to the social world, other forces come into play to place pressure in the opposite direction. New forms of competition and self-interest mean that individuals and institutions have something to gain from seeming rationally authoritative when they are not, and from others' seeming not rationally authoritative when they are. But, more importantly, there is likely to be pressure on the norm of credibility itself to imitate structures of social power in such a way that the working-indicator-properties will tend to pick out the powerful and not the powerless. This will amount to an epistemic injustice to the extent that it also brings about a mismatch between credibility and rational authority. Where this sort of injustice has developed, the mechanism which enables us to discriminate good informants has deteriorated into a mechanism of (unfair) *epistemic discrimination*.

22. Code, *op. cit.* p. 60.

A perfect correlation between rational authority and credibility would be the mark not only of an epistemic practice successfully geared to truth, but also of a practice which is epistemically just. It is not surprising that this is so, for epistemic injustice will typically be obstructive to the achievement of truth. This casts a new and politicized light on what Alvin Goldman calls the 'veritistic' assessment of practices (assessment for truth).²³

Goldman has laudably drawn attention to the social practices whereby information is produced and disseminated. The project of theorizing about such practices he calls a project of 'social epistemology'. But what the foregoing considerations show is that social identity and relations of power are likely to be highly relevant to how 'verific' a given practice is. For every potential informant from whom a discriminatory set of indicator-properties (wrongly and wrongfully) withholds credibility, there are truths which could have and should have been transmitted, but were not. In such a case, the potential informant is epistemically discriminated against, and the injustice involves a veritistic failure.

It is wholly consonant with the good-informant account to think of epistemic practices as primarily assessable veritistically. The present point is that the veritist cannot ignore all matters political, because epistemic discrimination will be an important factor in how verific a given practice may be. Even leaving the aim of epistemic justice *qua* justice aside, if our only aim were truth, then typically a tendency towards epistemic discrimination should still be militated against.

To give a proper account of epistemic discrimination is too big a task for the present paper. But a brief comparison with discrimination in the arena of employment may be instructive. Sometimes a person's ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation etc. will be a relevant factor in how well she or he is likely to do a job. It will be a legitimate consideration. Possible examples are a person's gender in rape crisis counselling, or the ethnicity of a social worker in an ethnically specific community.

23. See, for example, Alvin Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge MA/London: Harvard University Press, 1986); and Alvin Goldman and James C. Cox 'Accuracy in Journalism: An Economic Approach' in Schmitt, Frederick F. ed. *Socializing Epistemology—The Social Dimensions of Knowledge* (Maryland/London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1994) pp. 189–215; also Goldman, *Knowledge In A Social World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Similarly, categories of social identity will sometimes be legitimately taken into account in determining whether someone is credible in a given case. That is, it will sometimes be legitimate for categories of social identity to be positive or negative working-indicator-properties. The property of being a practising Catholic may be a positive indicator-property for rational authority as to questions of Catholic teaching; or, the property of being poor may be a negative indicator-property for rational authority as to which private schools are considered the more academic. Sometimes we might seek knowledge of the nature of a certain kind of social experience itself (of being a single parent, of being super-rich), in which case a first resort must be to find someone who has had that experience. (This is the social analogue of the standard perceptual inquiry in the state of nature: ask someone who was there.)

When it comes to assessing an epistemic practice for discrimination, we must make judgements of relevance, just as we must in the employment context. If someone is deemed unsuitable for a job, or not credible with respect to some question, on the basis of *mere* social identity (i.e. without his identity having a relevant bearing on whether he would do the job well, or give true information as to whether *p*) then there is unfair discrimination.

The realization that any epistemic practice is characterized by a reliance on working-indicator-properties provides for two new ways of assessing epistemic practice. Firstly, it explains why veritistic assessment must be sensitive to the anti-verific effects which relations of power can have, via their possible influence upon the norm of credibility. Secondly, it introduces a political standard via the possibility of a distinctively epistemic variety of injustice, whereby some people are effectively denied and/or others given credibility owing to their mere social identity. When people suffer this sort of injustice, they are prevented from exercising their ability to participate in epistemic practice. They are wrongly disbarred from being valued *qua* knowers, and from reaping the practical advantages which that can bring. Epistemology will not be truly socialized until it has been appropriately politicized.

VI

Credibility at the core of what it is to 'know'. I said at the outset that the reductivist position stands or falls with the question whether we

can formulate a conception of rational authority which is independent of social power. The state-of-nature story does this: rational authority is just competence plus trustworthiness. Thus the good-informant approach to explicating the concept of knowledge demonstrates the falsity of the reductionist conception of reason as mere social power by another name. Indeed, insofar as the reductionist's ambitions may be to politicize epistemology, she should appreciate that the conceptual distinction between rational authority and credibility is positively confirmed whenever we bring a political perspective to bear. The possibility of identifying a given set of working-indicator-properties as discriminatory depends on being able to say that they manifest the norm of credibility so as to attribute rational authority where it should not, and/or withhold it where it should not. If rational authority were the same as the power to appear rationally authoritative, then there could be no genuine notion of discrimination, and the political perspective in epistemology would have been lost before it was won.

We are now in a position to see a sense in which the relation between *knowledge* and social power runs deep. Recall the position of women and nongentle men in seventeenth-century England. It seems they have no chance of credibility, and *pro tanto* they cannot qualify as good informants. We might say that their status as knowers is undermined by the relation which their social identities bear to the working-indicator-properties. Less-than-good informants can only be knowers parasitically, in virtue of the concept's having undergone a process which Craig calls 'objectivisation', whereby it acquires other uses owing to our having come to regard that which the concept picks out—knowledge—as independent of the practical context in which it arose.²⁴ Knowers are fundamentally participants in the spread of knowledge; less-than-good informants cannot play that core role.

The point must be handled with care. Of course women and nongentle men had knowledge; they had plenty. Lack of social power can never deprive one of *that* (sympathizers with reductionism, please note). Moreover, it would doubtless have been no secret that they could give much better information on many matters than some of the gentlemen they had to kow-tow to. The good-informant account is not at all in conflict with any of this; it

24. *op. cit.* pp. 88–97.

has our ordinary concept of knowledge as its object, and does not (could not possibly) change its extension. However, the very fact that it is indeed our ordinary concept whose core is explicated in terms of a practice of good-informing means that the political aspects of such a practice demand the attention of the epistemologist. The account shows that when structures of power influence working-indicator-properties so that some people are systematically denied credibility because of their mere social identity, then epistemic practice inflicts a kind of injustice which it is *intrinsically* prone to—for the norm from which the discrimination is likely to arise is a necessary one. But now the point is that when people are unjustly denied credibility, they are thereby unjustly denied the opportunity to participate in the spread of knowledge—the ‘original’ practice from which the concept of knowledge arises. This means that the epistemic injustice to which they are subject is not only a matter of their credibility being undermined, but also their status as knowers.

Because the dependence on credibility is established at the core of the concept of knowledge, questions of social power are shown to be profoundly relevant in epistemology. Equally, however—and precisely because the connection between knowledge and social power is established so far down—it cannot disturb our practice at ground level, which has us readily and rightly attribute knowledge (when we are in a position to do so) to those whose lack of credibility disqualifies them from acting as good informants.

VII

Conclusion. The foregoing considerations show, firstly, that the traditionalist is wrong to think of all things socio-political as mere external interferences in epistemic practice, and therefore wrong to think of them as irrelevant to epistemology. Secondly, they show that the reductivist is equally wrong: the very possibility of bringing a political perspective to bear on epistemic practice presupposes the distinction between rational authority and the power merely to seem rationally authoritative. Thirdly, they suggest that knowledge is connected at core—only at core—with structures of social power, through its necessary dependence on the norm of credibility. The ever-present risk that the norm of credibility will be socially manifested in a discriminatory manner

is not a political accident to be noted somewhere on the periphery of the epistemology of testimony. It amounts to a politicization of epistemology more generally, for the perpetual risk of epistemic injustice arises from the role which, at core, the concept of knowledge plays in our lives.²⁵

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25. I am grateful to Jennifer Hornsby for immensely helpful comments on an earlier draft.