

Scepticism And The Genealogy of Knowledge: Situating Epistemology In Time

1. Dimensions of Socialization

We tend to think of the socialness of social epistemology largely in terms of a lateral expansion across social space. The expansion shifts the philosophical focus from the lone individual of so much traditional epistemology—the individual who wonders whether he really knows this is his hand before him, and so on—to his relations with his fellow subjects, his epistemic interactions with them, even his epistemic interdependence with them. The interest in epistemic interdependence brings divisions of epistemic labour centre-stage (as the explosion in the literature on testimony in recent years bears witness) and further establishes a recognized theoretical space for insights about how justification (for instance, justification for a scientific theory) might be dispersed across a whole epistemic community, with the consequence that it makes sense sometimes to regard that whole community as the subject of the knowledge, and perhaps no individual at all.¹ This kind of socialization of epistemology, then, brings with it a new, less individualistic conception of epistemic subjects. No longer conceived as lone individuals whose interactions with other individuals are epistemically incidental, we think of them as fundamentally, naturally, placed in relations of epistemic interdependence. Let us call this socialized conception of epistemic subjects, the *Abstracted Social Conception*. It marks the anti-individualist moment in epistemology.

The conception is so labelled because it remains highly abstracted—appropriately for certain purposes. The social relations in which epistemic subjects are conceived as standing are relations between finite knowers and inquirers conceived as bearers of reasons, producers of evidence, seekers of information,

¹ For an early case for the view that justification can be dispersed in the scientific community, see John Hardwig, 'Epistemic Dependence', *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), 335-349. Lynn Hankinson Nelson has argued for the view that the scientific community is the subject of scientific knowledge. See her *Who Knows? From Quine to Feminist Empiricism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

conveyors of knowledge, and so on. But these knowers and inquirers are signally not conceived as standing in relations of social identity and power—the conception abstracts away from that grade of social detail. Imagine a painting that represents a plurality of figures engaged some form of interaction; but where the figures are painted in such a way that it leaves it indeterminate whether they are young, old, female, male, black, white, rich, poor, dominant or subordinate, and so on. The Abstracted Social Conception is like that, and so it does not raise the question (being unequipped to answer it) of how these social details might be affecting the interactions we see represented, or whether there are other kinds of interaction going on that relate specifically to identity and power. In order to be open to such questions, we need a conception that is more like a painting that represents figures in their full social colour; we need to make available a *Situated Social Conception* of the epistemic subject. It should not replace but rather complement the more abstracted conception, for both conceptions have a role. Categories of identity and power are only relevant for certain sorts of philosophical question, after all, and those operating with the Abstracted Social Conception are not on the whole aiming to raise them. (On a historical note, however, it must be said that the Abstracted Social Conception doesn't easily *allow* such questions to come into view as genuinely epistemological questions, so that questions involving identity and power have tended to appear as questions for the sociology of knowledge alone, which is at least part of the story why traditional epistemology remained so thoroughly asocial for so long.)

The two conceptions are not really all that far apart, however. A suggestive distinction often featured in the literature is that between layman and expert. One of the things that makes this distinction interesting is that it can be taken as a purely epistemic distinction, so that we conduct our debates about it in somewhat rationally idealized terms, yet it can also be taken as a distinction between two social identities where there are relations of power that hold between the two parties. A layperson's relationship to an expert does not of course have to involve any significant power relation, in the sense of a relationship of power that affects their interaction or impinges on the rationality of their exchange. As John Hardwig has pointed out, in very large and complex scientific projects where there is a marked division of epistemic labour among the contributing scientific communities, it makes sense to regard all the contributing individuals as at once experts vis-à-vis their own

contribution and laypersons vis-à-vis the contributions of others.² In such a scenario, what relations of identity and power there may be between different groups of scientists may not give rise to any epistemologically compelling issues. But, then again, they might. In a scenario where one set of contributors happens to enjoy more professional esteem than others (perhaps, simply, they are operating under the auspices of an especially powerful institution) there could easily arise the sort of mingling of power with norms of inquiry that is not easy to disentangle. When this happens, it becomes part and parcel of the scientific inquirer's requisite epistemic virtues—possessed either by individuals or possibly only by the community—to reliably succeed in spotting research decisions that are too much driven by professional or institutional power. When social epistemologists talk of experts and laypersons, then, they are already flirting with a more fully socialized conception of epistemic subjects than the Abstracted Social Conception itself allows for.

If we want epistemology to account for the *human* epistemic predicament, then we need to have available a conception of epistemic subjects as required to overcome or negotiate certain entanglements of reason and power, because it is an essential feature of human inquirers that they operate in a context in which such entanglements can arise. This is the source of the value of the Situated Social Conception, which conceives epistemic subjects and their interactions as situated in a context of social identity and power, and so makes visible the influence of these factors on our epistemic interactions. For any given project in social epistemology, then, we need to be reflective about which conception suits our philosophical purposes—reflective, that is, about which degree of abstraction is appropriate for the issues we want to bring out. Simply sticking to the standard Abstracted Social Conception may occlude ethical and political aspects of epistemic practice that are worth our attention; then again, sustaining a Situated Social Conception will be pointless if relations of identity and power are irrelevant to the issue we are pursuing. It's a judgement about horses for courses, so, as a matter of good philosophical method, we need to have the different options reflectively available to the philosophical imagination. The picture of epistemic subjects presented by the Situated Social Conception is less abstract than that presented in the Abstracted Social

² Hardwig (1985).

Conception, but it is still an abstraction, as befits the philosophical purpose. It represents epistemic subjects not in their personal detail—obviously not—but as variously instantiating one or another more or less complex social type. If the Abstracted Social Conception marks the moment of rebellion against excessive individualism in epistemology, the availability of the Situated Social Conception marks our graduation beyond the naivety of compulsory rational idealization.

I have argued elsewhere for the importance of the Situated Social Conception for certain philosophical purposes, and in particular I have argued that there are issues of justice and injustice in our everyday epistemic interactions—our testimonial interactions and our practices of social interpretation—which cannot come to light unless we adopt that more fully socialized conception.³ For present purposes, however, the Abstracted Social Conception is appropriate, as my aim is to show how expanding not only across social space but also across *time* can be a powerful epistemological resource. We should distinguish between two sorts of temporal expansion: expansion across real time (including historical time), and expansion across the quasi-fictional time that is at work in genealogical method. I shall make a case for the philosophical fruitfulness of expanding over genealogical time, and my specific aim will be to show how the genealogical method can support and augment certain socializing arguments against scepticism. The genealogical story I shall use is that given by Edward Craig in his book, *Knowledge and The State of Nature* (hence the appropriateness here of the Abstracted Social Conception, for in so far as there are any social types in the State of Nature, their social identities do not figure in the explanatory purpose that this particular genealogy aims to achieve).⁴

I shall make my case by reference to Michael Williams' diagnostic engagement with scepticism, in which he crucially employs a Default and Challenge model of justification. And I will develop three key aspects of Craig's 'practical explication' of the concept of knowledge so that they may be seen to resonate

³ See my *Epistemic Injustice: Power and The Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁴ Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature. An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

positively with Williams' epistemological picture: the admixture of internalist and externalist features (3.1); the proto-contextualism (3.2); and, finally, the distinctively genealogical anti-sceptical impetus (3.3). In this way I aim to support and augment the socialized anti-sceptical case mounted by Williams. I also aim thereby to illustrate the philosophical productiveness of expanding epistemology not only laterally across the social space of other epistemic subjects, but at the same time vertically in the temporal dimension.

2. Default and Challenge: Socializing Justification

In 'Responsibility and Reliability'⁵, Michael Williams explores the anti-sceptical impetus of a certain model of justification that is found in Robert Brandom's work under the name of Default and Challenge. It is an entitlement conception of justification, according to which we may assume our faculties are functioning correctly so long as there are no reasons to suspect otherwise. Williams' paper has two aims. Firstly, he aims to incorporate reliabilist insights within a fundamentally deontological framework, where the key reliabilist insight he has in mind is that many accounts of knowledge incorporate exaggerated, over-intellectualized conceptions of what it takes to be epistemically responsible, which simply do not square with the spontaneous and unreflective character of our most basic forms of knowledge, notably, perception. If there is to be a satisfactory responsibilism that presents a unified account of knowledge, it will have to avoid such intellectualism. And, secondly, he wants to show how such a responsibilism can, by the same token, deflect scepticism. The problems of intellectualism and sceptical challenge, he argues, have a common solution, for one and the same excessively internalist, mentalistic conception of justification is their common root.

⁵ Michael Williams, 'Responsibility and Reliability', *Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (March 2008); 1-26. (Originally delivered as part of a Symposium on 'Expanding Epistemology', with Guy Axtell and Robert Brandom, APA Pacific Division Meeting, Spring 2007—the present paper grew out of my response as Commentator on that occasion, and a version is published together with other papers from the symposium in the same journal issue; 27-50.)

Williams traces a dominant internalist conception of justification back to Chisholm, and the model he finds in Chisholm's writing is one in which justification constitutes a kind of 'positive authorization' which, in Chisholm, is linked to a foundationalist structure with error-proof sensory experiences at the bottom, so that the whole structure is designed in the foundationalist style to stave off sceptical challenge. Looking to Sellars' critical analysis of this sort of view and its dependence on notions of the Given, Williams argues that the positive authorization conception seriously exaggerates what is needed to vindicate the idea that epistemic subjects achieve justification by acting *in the light of* epistemic rules, as opposed to merely conforming to them. We can achieve a picture of subjects acting in the light of normative rules, without being compelled to add that rules should be construed as imperatival in form, or that justification flows upwards in the system from a foundation of error-proof self-addressed 'reports' of experience. Williams continues in the Sellarsian idiom by taking up a distinction Sellars makes between 'ought-to-do' rules, which are imperatival in form, and 'ought-to-be' rules, which are not. These so-called 'ought-to-be' rules effectively set conditions of entitlement in the Default and Challenge mould. In Williams' example:

For me to see, and not merely think that I see, that there is a rabbit in the garden, all sorts of conditions *must be* met. Some concern me: I must be of sound mind, paying attention, capable of recognizing what is going on, and so forth. Others concern the object and its situation: the animal has to be a rabbit and not a stuffed toy, the light must be good enough to make out the shape of the dark patch in the middle of the lawn, and so on. If these conditions are not met, I won't be in a position to see that there is a rabbit in the garden.⁶

What Default and Challenge achieves for us is the desired admixture of internalist and externalist insights. In order to count as acting in the light of a rule (in order to count as epistemically justified) the well-trained subject might, depending on the context, need only to be counterfactually sensitive to lapses in the conditions required for taking the deliverances of her faculties for granted. As Williams puts it,

⁶ 'Responsibility and Reliability'; 12-13.

‘Our acceptance of an ought-to-be “rule” consists principally in our disposition to acknowledge the exceptions, and to respond appropriately’.⁷ In sum, the well-trained subject may take her sensory experiences at face value, so long as there are no reasons not to. In doing this she is following rules of justification, acting in the light of them but not self-consciously. Thus the externalist aspect of Default and Challenge that sets it apart from any ‘positive authorization’ model. Yet if appropriately challenged, she does have a standing obligation to produce a justification, and if she cannot, then she is revealed as lacking entitlement to her belief.⁸ Thus the internalist aspect of Default and Challenge that qualifies Williams’ position as a form of responsibilism.

Williams also argues that seeing justification as conforming to a Default and Challenge structure can help fend off scepticism. He invokes the distinction between Agrippan and Cartesian forms of sceptical challenge. Agrippan scepticism imposes an endless demand for further justifications, so that it threatens to expose either regress or circularity in the series of justifications we may offer, or else a plain unjustified assumption somewhere in our reasoning. Cartesian scepticism is characterized as exploiting issues of underdetermination by positing sceptical scenarios which he claims, for all we know, we might be in.⁹ Williams’ focus, however, is on the Agrippan style sceptic, and he argues that the Agrippan is implicitly committed to the familiar, mentalistic and so excessively internalist model of justification that conceives being guided by norms or rules as always a matter of self-conscious obedience to self-addressed imperatives—positive authorization. What the Default and Challenge model furnishes is an account of justification—entitlement—that

⁷ ‘Responsibility and Reliability’; 21.

⁸ Note that Brandom himself is ready to go a step further in the externalist direction than Williams is willing to. In *Articulating Reasons* he embraces reliabilism’s ‘Founding Insight’ and allows that, for instance, an expert in distinguishing Toltec from Aztec potsherds can know whether a shard is one or the other even if she cannot say how she does it. Williams differs, and so maintains a stronger internalism in his responsibilist position. (Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) ch.3, esp. 98-99.)

⁹ This is the characterization of Cartesian scepticism that Williams has elsewhere argued to be the only one to furnish radical scepticism—the view that we have no justified beliefs. See, for instance, *Problems of Knowledge: a critical introduction to epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); 73-77.

makes no such requirement. By contrast, what Default and Challenge obliges the individual subject to do is something negative: don't take your experiences at face value if the default condition is lapsed. A subject who is entirely successful with respect to that negative task may well not be able to answer the Agrippan sceptic—but so much the worse for the sceptic. The standing obligation to come up with reasons when challenged only holds for challenges to which one's interlocutor is entitled. Brandom, introducing the label 'Default and Challenge', puts the point like this:

Claims such as 'There have been black dogs' and 'I have ten fingers' are ones to which interlocutors are treated as *prima facie* entitled. They are not immune to doubt in the form of questions about entitlement, but such questions themselves stand in need of some sort of warrant or justification. Entitlement is, to begin with, a social status that a performance or commitment has within a community... The model presented here has what might be called a *default and challenge structure* of entitlement.¹⁰

The Agrippan sceptic, then, is presenting inappropriate challenges, and so our failure to meet those challenges signifies nothing. The sceptic is thus revealed as missing the point, for she tries to compel the individual subject to dig deeper and deeper into his individual epistemic resources, furnishing reason upon reason for his belief—but this is simply the wrong place to look for his status as justified in believing what he believes. The Agrippan demands to be shown a justificational stopping point somewhere in the depths of the individual subject, and her mistake is that justification is not to be found deep in the individual but rather on the surface of something irreducibly social, namely, the subject's ability to meet the challenges properly brought in that context by others in the epistemic community.

Williams focuses on the mentalistic nature and extreme internalism of the model of justification that both polarizes reliabilism and responsibilism and hands the sceptic a stick to beat us with. But I think we should most of all emphasize its *individualism*, for it is the individualism that underpins both the mentalistic and the

¹⁰ Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); 177.

excessively internalist character of the mistaken model of justification that Williams rightly diagnoses in the sceptic. Given a general assumption of epistemic individualism, one easily sees how it can seem natural to assume that the individual is the source of all justification for her belief, and that the place to look is (where else?) in her mental states. Thus the mentalism. Further, if even the subject herself cannot find a justification in her psychology, then how can she count as possessing a justification at all? Thus the extreme internalism. I think, then, that once we focus on the anti-sceptical energy that Default and Challenge clearly contains, we find that energy to be derived most fundamentally from its *sociality* (and so, to relate back to the terminology I introduced earlier, from its implicit insistence on the Abstracted Social Conception of epistemic subjects). For it is the sociality that effects the crucial shift in rational obligation away from the lone individual and into the epistemic social body as a member of which the individual subject must function. It is of course individuals who bear the responsibility of justification for their beliefs, but the point is they can only live up to this responsibility in virtue of their participation in a social practice of proper challenge. (I alone bear the responsibility for paying my bills; but the question of what I owe is settled as a matter of social practice.) It is this social dispersal of justificatory labour that relieves the individual believer of the burden of accessing the kind of justification that the Agrippan sceptic demands.

The Agrippan, who presses and presses for ever more justifications, is thus revealed as making a profound mistake at both the level of epistemic practice and the level of epistemology. She fails to adhere to socially established norms of challenge, a mistaken practice that exposes her false theory of justification. But what of the Cartesian sceptic? Williams thinks the Cartesian, whose signature is of course the sort of madcap sceptical scenarios we all know and love, cannot be confined in the same way, but only indirectly ‘by way of showing how we can legitimately set sceptical problems aside’.¹¹ Why is this? If the context sensitive norms of challenge can reveal Agrippan challenges as mistaken, then why not Cartesian challenges too? Now that we have identified the sociality of Default and Challenge as fuelling the anti-sceptical work, is it not evident that the Cartesian invocation of sceptical scenarios is a style of challenge every bit as inappropriate as the Agrippan? The Cartesian too seems to

¹¹ ‘Responsibility and Reliability’; 26.

press his case to the individual knowledge-claimant in a way that is not sanctioned by socially established norms of Default and Challenge—the demand to rule out that one is a brain in a vat, or whatever it may be, is obviously outrageous. I think this does have some bite as an argument against the Cartesian. He too cannot just assume that his challenges are appropriate—on the face of it they certainly are not.

It remains true, however, that the Cartesian has another card up his sleeve that the Agrippan lacks, in as much as the Cartesian's challenge plays specifically on the idea of underdetermination in order to spook us with the possibility that our beliefs are not justified at all, on the grounds that they are no more justified than the alternative 'theories' of the world cooked up in the sceptical scenarios. This means the Cartesian can be construed as making a challenge not necessarily to the individual knower in any way that violates the insights of Default and Challenge, but rather as making a higher level challenge in respect of what we think we achieve by adhering to our precious norms of appropriate challenge—not knowledge, he exclaims, not even justified beliefs! Admittedly, then, revealing the Cartesian as having an excessively individualistic theory of justification that should be replaced by Default and Challenge still leaves the spooky radical sceptical possibility rather as it is, which is why other arguments (against 'epistemological realism' and for an antidote contextualism) need to be brought in. Nothing in Default and Challenge, after all, directly addresses issues of underdetermination; whereas, by contrast, the favourable identification of Default and Challenge as a rival account of justification reveals the Agrippan as entirely driven by the mistaken assumption that justification requires an individual capacity to respond to an indefinite series of challenges, without lapse into regress, assumption, or circularity. Even while I want to insist that the socializing move inherent in Default and Challenge does win a trick against the Cartesian sceptic, then, still it is clear that it cannot on its own beat the Cartesian's hand in the way it beats the Agrippan's.

Accordingly, in respect of the Cartesian challenge, Williams looks to the central anti-sceptical argument of *Unnatural Doubts*¹², namely, the argument that the

¹² Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

Cartesian sceptic is committed to epistemological realism and epistemological realism is false. The Cartesian sceptic's challenges concern something called 'knowledge of the external world' or 'empirical knowledge', as if these were respectable theoretical categories; but they are not. They are far too internally diverse to be so regarded, and in fact have no more integrity than a category such as 'knowledge of things done on a Wednesday'. Crucially, they are too internally diverse in terms of the kind of justification that is required—something we may express in terms of the Default and Challenge model by saying that the norms of appropriate challenge vary from context to context. The Cartesian sceptic may possibly go in for his peculiar style of challenge in the strictly 'epistemological context', but not in other contexts. To do so would, as ever, constitute a mistake at the level of norms of Default and Challenge governing our epistemic practice, but more importantly perhaps, it would be an enactment of the false piece of theory that is epistemological realism. The Cartesian sceptic wants to move from (i) discovering that, in context C, knowledge is impossible, to (ii) discovering (in context C) that knowledge is impossible¹³, but if he can only make that move by way of the false doctrine of epistemological realism—a staging-post which would effectively privilege the so-called 'epistemological context' over all others—then the move is blocked and, *qua* sceptic, he is confined to the study. That is, his eccentric style of justificational challenge is confined to the context of inquiry that is peculiar to a certain style of epistemology.

Thus Williams' fascinating anti-sceptical case. I have so far discussed (and slightly elaborated) the use he makes of Default and Challenge against scepticism in 'Responsibility and Reliability'; and I have recalled (as he does) the contextualist position he first argued for in *Unnatural Doubts*, where it functions as the antidote to the sceptic's epistemological realism. My chief purpose here, however, is to make a case for the expansion of our philosophical conception of epistemic subjects and their activities along a certain temporal dimension, namely, the genealogical temporal dimension. So how might a genealogy of knowledge help bolster and augment Williams' anti-sceptical case?

¹³ This is how Brandom puts the issue in 'Fighting Skepticism with Skepticism: Supervaluational Epistemology, Semantic Autonomy, and Natural Kind Skepticism' in *Facta Philosophica*, Vol 2 No 2, 2000; 163-178.

3. Expanding Along The Temporal Dimension—Genealogical Time

In Edward Craig's *Knowledge and The State of Nature* he gives what I'm calling a genealogical account of knowledge. That is, he tells a State of Nature story about why we have the concept of knowledge—a 'practical explication' of that concept. He envisages a minimally social epistemic community—an abstraction of any real human community, though one that non-accidentally resembles what a real early human community might have been like in respect of its social simplicity and its hand-to-mouth relation to basic human needs and dangers. The basic epistemic needs that define the State of Nature are, first, the need for enough truths (and not too many falsehoods) for other sorts of basic needs—principally survival needs—to be met. A community that survives in the State of Nature must operate with sufficient truths to hunt and/or forage for food, take care of the young, avoid predators, deal with the dead, and so on. That first epistemic need immediately gives rise to a second: the need to realize the epistemic and practical advantages of pooling information. Why rely only on one's own eyes and ears when you can benefit from the eyes and ears of others? From where you're standing you may not be able to see if the predator is coming, but that person up in the tree might, and this exemplifies the fundamental practical pressure to stand in co-operative epistemic relations with fellow inquirers. Finally, this second epistemic need spontaneously gives rise to a third: the need to distinguish good from bad informants, so that it is indeed information that gets shared and not misinformation or disinformation. Human beings, however described, are fallible—hence the risk of misinformation. And human beings in the State of Nature, as anywhere else, operate under pressures (such as competition for resources) that create motivations for deception—hence the risk of disinformation. Distinguishing good informants is indeed an essential capacity.

This trio of fundamental epistemic needs generates a certain point of view for our social epistemological project: the point of view of the inquirer. This is notably different from the point of view normally taken up in epistemology, namely that of the examiner; a point of view typified by the epistemologist's remove from the actual

business of inquiry in order to debate about whether some candidate knower really qualifies.¹⁴ The particular need to distinguish a good informant as to a given question whether p is a need had only by someone who doesn't know whether p but wants to. Accordingly, as we construct the epistemic State of Nature, we find that ignorance and the desire to make it good with good information emerge as our basic epistemic state. In this sense, 'Who knows whether p ?' is our most basic epistemological question, a question that presupposes the possibility of knowledge. How far this broad anti-sceptical presupposition has any argumentative force depends upon how convincing the overall story is in terms of its explanatory power. In so far as the State of Nature construction provides a convincing explanatory story about why we have, of necessity, the concept of knowledge, then so far may it turn out to give genuine independent support to the idea that sceptical questions are parasitic on there being a functional epistemic practice in which knowledge is possessed and, in particular, shared or 'commoned'¹⁵ in an epistemic community. (I shall return to this in section 3.3.)

So how does Craig's genealogy explain the advent of the concept of knowledge? We have seen that the inquirer needs to distinguish good informants. A good informant is someone who: (1) is likely enough in the context to be right about whether p , (2) is communicatively available and open (including sincere), and (3) bears indicator properties so that you can reliably recognize that (1) and (2) are satisfied.¹⁶ In Craig's story, indicator properties will be a mixed bag, but might standardly include properties such as having been looking in the right direction at the time, or having a good track record.¹⁷ Craig's thesis is that the constructed concept of

¹⁴ This distinction was first made by Bernard Williams, as Craig notes. See Williams 'Deciding to Believe' in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (1973); 146.

¹⁵ This is Michael Welbourne's term for it. See his *Knowledge* (Chesham, Bucks: Acumen, 2001), especially chapter 6.

¹⁶ Here I paraphrase somewhat but intend to capture Craig's conditions. For his own formulation, see *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, 85.

¹⁷ Properties such as these bestow what Bernard Williams, in his genealogy of truthfulness (modelled closely on Craig's genealogy of knowledge) calls 'purely positional advantage'. See Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); 42-43.

the good informant constitutes the core of our actual concept of a knower. As we might put it, the status of being a knower starts life as the status of being a good informant. The two concepts are not co-extensive of course: there can be knowers who are not good informants, for instance because they lack the requisite indicator properties, or because the indicator properties (being only reliable) unluckily mislead on that occasion. But Craig's proposal is that the functional origin of the concept of knowledge is to identify good informants; and that thereafter the constraints of recognizability and communicative openness gradually become relaxed, as certain more sophisticated uses we come to make of the concept (such as referring to knowers we cannot ourselves recognize) pressurize it in the direction of 'objectification'—that is, of referring to something that exists independently of our powers of recognition. Such pressures explain how we come to think of knowledge as something another person can possess, even if we can't recognize it, or they aren't coming out with it.¹⁸

3.1 The Original Synthesis of Internalist and Externalist Insights

According to Craig's genealogy, then, we start to operate with the concept of knowledge, of necessity, because at the core of that concept is something that meets the absolutely basic epistemic need to pick out good informants. Now how does all this help the socializing anti-sceptical case that Williams builds on Default and Challenge? One of the key anti-sceptical features of Default and Challenge is that it achieves a desirable combination of internalist and externalist features. I think we can see how this is explained and so reinforced if we look closely enough at epistemic practices in the State of Nature. In the first instance, the practice of pooling information in the State of Nature features people spotting others as good informants before asking them for information. But we can see how the basic need for good information also drives a modification of that practice; namely, asking candidate good

¹⁸ To be precise, there are three key pressures that push the good informant's proto-knowledge towards the objectivized form it takes as, simply, knowledge. First, sometimes inquirers may not need to recognize any informant here and now, but only at some point in the future. Second, the inquirer may be aware that there can be good informants whose indicator properties he is unable to detect. And third, it may not matter to the informant that he himself acquires the information at all, as what may matter is simply that someone around here has got it. All three push the idea of knowledge in the direction of 'objectivization' and away from any dependence on immediate subjective availability to the inquirer.

informants the question to which we want the answer, and then, once they have responded, quizzing them as to their reasons. The capacity to give reasons for what one asserts is a supremely important indicator property, not discussed by Craig. The person who asserts but does not know may be suspiciously fuzzy on her reasons; the person who asserts what he knows to be false may be suspiciously unconvincing when he presents purported reasons for his pretend belief. The ability to satisfy this kind of challenge is a key indicator property of good informants.

Being able to supply a justification when challenged is not, however, a necessary condition of being a good informant. Rightly not, for what primarily matters to the inquirer is simply that the good informant comes out with the truth on demand; not that he comes out with his reasons as well. Given that the inquirer can spot a good informant to her own satisfaction, she will just take the information and not bother to quiz him further about his reasons. However, this basic practice established, we can immediately see how quickly an informant's capacity to give reasons assumes importance, for it is highly desirable in a good informant that he be able to produce reasons when challenged, owing to the fact that this may be by far the best indicator property available to the inquirer. The same point applies individually too, for inquirers in the State of Nature will often be relying on the deliverances of their own faculties, and are best construed as entitled to trust them unless they have some reason not to—a foggy day; a foggy memory.¹⁹ (Here we glimpse the nascent Default and Challenge structure of justification emerging.) On these occasions, a certain challenge to self is in order, which amounts to a demand for an after-the-fact indicator property that one is likely enough in the context to be right about *p*. The ability to produce a satisfying reason is the prime case of such an indicator property.

The importance of this capacity to come out with reasons when appropriately challenged, combined with the fact that it is not one of the conditions of qualifying as a good informant, explains what underpins the desired admixture of internalist and externalist features that Williams aims to achieve. The picture in the State of Nature is fundamentally externalist—what matters is simply that good informants come out

¹⁹ See Craig, 1990; 62-3.

with the truth—but then we quickly come to see the origin of internalist intuitions about knowledge. On the story I am urging here, we agree with Craig that the good informant’s capacity to access his reasons is not at the core of the concept of knowledge. But, we add, nor is it a merely peripheral feature, resulting from some historical accident in how we use the concept. Rather, the capacity to access one’s reasons features in a layer of content that is close to the core of the concept of knowledge. The importance of the capacity to produce reasons in support of what one believes flows immediately from the basic method of identifying good informants that does constitute the core. I think this is a good way of substantiating the two-sided thought that it is close to conceptually impossible that a human being who lacked the general capacity to come out with reasons for her beliefs could count as a knower (or even a believer); but being able to come out with one’s reasons is not thereby required in every instance of knowledge, and so not a necessary condition.

This combining of externalist and internalist features of the practice of justification on the part of good informants in the State of Nature echoes and substantiates the internalist-externalist combination we find in Default and Challenge. On that model of justification, the subject can have knowledge even if she has taken the deliverances of her faculties entirely at face value and cannot produce any positive reason for her belief. If faced with an eccentric challenge, she may only be able to assert that it never occurred to her to wonder; she may even be a bit thrown by the fact of the challenge and by her own bewildered reaction. And yet, according to Default and Challenge, the fact that the default did indeed hold is sufficient. The kind of responsibilism Williams’ arguments are designed to achieve, I think, is one that allows externalism vis-à-vis the question whether the default of entitlement holds, so that there is no blanket requirement that the subject be reflectively aware that it holds; yet a modest internalist constraint when it comes to the subject’s obligation to respond to contextually appropriate challenges. My suggestion has been that a responsibilism of that combinatory sort finds explanatory support in the genealogical approach, owing to the non-core yet close-to-core role that an ability to produce reasons plays in the State of Nature.

3.2 Practical Origins of Contextualism

What about contextualism?—a basic version of which might be considered part and parcel of the Default and Challenge model of justification.²⁰ I suggest that this too finds an origin in the State of Nature. We have seen that the inquirer is looking for someone who is crucially *likely enough in the context to be right as to whether p*. This presents an explicitly contextualist picture of its own, according to which what it takes to be a good informant—what it takes to play the social role at the core of knowing—alters from context to context. For instance, if the stakes are very high, the good informant will be almost certainly right about *p*; if they are not so high, and/or if one needs to act sooner rather than later, she might count as likely enough to be right about *p* just by having a half-decent track record and being the only candidate good informant in the vicinity. The State of Nature, then, explicitly imposes the aspect of contextualism that Williams has elsewhere labelled ‘economic’:

If it is important to reach some decision, and if the costs of error are fairly low, or if we gain a lot by being right and lose little by being wrong, it is reasonable to take a relaxed attitude to justificational standards. If the costs of error are high, more demanding standards may be in order. The opportunity costs of further inquiry can also be relevant’.²¹

The proto-contextualism contained in the State of Nature not only signifies a constraint on who can be a good informant, it imposes a constraint on the inquirer too. If, in our imagined scenario in which the inquirer has already asked a candidate good informant for information, the informant has told her something, and she is challenging him for his reasons, then her challenges must be appropriately geared to the context. She is looking for an after-the-fact-of-utterance indicator property, and this means that if she were to press him for a justification that exceeded the contextually required level of probability, this would mark a dysfunction in her epistemic conduct from her own point of view as an inquirer. Basic practical concerns

²⁰ In *Unnatural Doubts* (1991) Williams argues for contextualism independently from considerations about Default and Challenge, since it pre-dates the publication of Brandom’s *Making It Explicit* (1994)—I thank Alessandra Tanesini for first pointing this out to me. In the later book, *Problems of Knowledge* (2001), we see the two in combination.

²¹ See *Problems of Knowledge* (2001); 161.

generate the context sensitive norms of Default and Challenge in the State of Nature, so that inquirers who demand reasons above and beyond those appropriate to the context are making a mistake at the level of the (emergent) norms of proper challenge. All in all, the State of Nature presents us with a range of practical contexts such that in some contexts the inquirer will demand very little by way of an informant's likelihood of being right, whereas in other contexts she will demand a good deal more, according to her practical needs and interests—according, that is, to what it takes for the informant to be likely enough in the context to be right about *p*.

This aspect of context is the only one we find explicitly stated in the formulation of our State of Nature scenario, as a condition of being a good informant, though the other determinants of epistemic context can be built in if one is so inclined. Besides the economic, Williams cites four other aspects of context: (1) the intelligibility of error—we cannot make sense of the possibility of error except against a backdrop of getting it right; (2) issues of methodological necessity—in order to pursue any question we must take some others for granted; (3) 'dialectical' issues—default entitlements are lost and gained according to the ongoing movement of evidence; and (4) 'situational' issues—claiming knowledge commits us to the objective well-groundedness of our beliefs (either a default entitlement holds or it doesn't). Taking as an example the issue of methodological necessity, people in the State of Nature definitively don't do history, so they don't have to set aside questions about the reality of time in order to do it; but they may well have to establish whether a certain water source is clean or not, and so they do have to set aside questions about the reality of the external world.

I believe something similar can easily be said in relation to the other aspects of context that Williams argues for, but I do not want to set much store by it. I dare say an advocate of another style of contextualism could construct a similar support in the State of Nature for his particular brand of the view too. Only the contextualism we find explicit in the formulation of the State of Nature scenario should define the proto-contextualism we regard as proper to it, and that is the condition of being a good informant that requires her to be likely enough in the context to be right about *p*. My point is that the practical pressures that generate this proto-contextualism lend genealogical explanatory support to the contextualism that Williams embraces, even

while we can see that they might also be able to support distinct forms of contextualism in which the ‘economic’ element was differently embedded. That is entirely as it should be, for the State of Nature scenario purports to contain only the necessary features of our practices. We should not try to find anything besides the core elements of our actual justificatory practices represented in the State of Nature scenario, and so should not hope to extrapolate anything more than a generic proto-contextualist commitment.

3.3 The Un-Originality of Sceptical Challenge

In this exploration of the practical pressures that generate contextualism in the State of Nature, we already begin to see how the genealogy of knowledge provides independent support for the anti-sceptical purpose to which Williams puts his own contextualist position. There are no sceptics in the State of Nature—survival requires taking some people as knowing things one needs to know, and that entails accepting the possibility of knowledge. This underpins my earlier suggestion that Williams’ charge against the Agrippan sceptic—that he behaves in a contextually inappropriate manner—does have some force of its own against the Cartesian sceptic. In the State of Nature, it doesn’t matter in which style sceptical challenges are made. The fact that any such challenges make demands that exceed what it takes for the informant to be likely enough in the context to be right about p means the sceptic will fail to identify good informants that are staring him in the face, and will lose out on knowledge as a result. This means that not only the Agrippan demand for ultimate justification but also the Cartesian demand that we meet the challenge of underdetermination can only be a mistake.²² The State of Nature, then, explains the commonsense idea that no one can *basically* be a sceptic. They must be inquirer first, and sceptic second; someone committed to the practical possibility of knowledge first, and committed to undermining that possibility second. This of course leaves room for the idea that there may yet be a context in which it *is* appropriate to mount sceptical challenges. The present argument shows only that there is no such context in the State of Nature.

²² Most directly of all, our genealogical story undermines Cartesian scepticism characterized in the traditional manner as a demand for absolute certainty, for that demand is most immediately what the proto-contextualism generated in the State of Nature exposes as fatally misguided, in as much as there is no practical context where a good informant would have to be absolutely certain in the requisite sense of indubitability. But the present focus is on the more potent interpretation of the Cartesian challenge as threatening radical scepticism.

This accommodating thought prompts exposure of the other respect in which we can see the genealogy of knowledge lending independent support to Williams' anti-sceptical strategy. The point of extending our philosophical conception over the semi-fictional time in which genealogical narratives are set, is that it provides an invaluable way of *relating* core features of a concept to non-core and peripheral features. I know of no other philosophical method that provides the opportunity to relate original, necessary features of a concept to less basic, more contingent—historically contingent—features.²³ Accordingly, it delivers an entirely different image of concepts than that issued by the analytical method. The analytical ambition and attendant philosophical imagination generates an image of concepts as like molecules, ready for their different elemental components to be separated out by the philosopher acting in his capacity as conceptual chemist. Genealogical method, by contrast, brings with it an image of core and periphery, or kernel and outer layers—the kernel presents necessary features of the concept, and the outer layers increasingly contingent historical features. These layers may be separated out from the kernel by the philosopher acting in his capacity as something more like conceptual historian. The necessity of the core features stands or falls with how convincingly the story passes muster as a pure construction out of nothing but absolutely basic needs. If, however unwittingly, one includes a contingent feature in the State of Nature scenario, perhaps to suit one's philosophical purpose, then, clearly, the story will lack force. No doubt every story of origins should be accompanied by something of a health warning, for it surely is all too easy to portray the State of Nature in one's philosophically preferred image. As Foucault scoffingly warns us, echoing what he takes to be Nietzsche's own warning about the philosopher's fantasy of the origin:

History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin.²⁴

²³ Bernard Williams exploits this facility in *Truth and Truthfulness* by identifying in the State of Nature his two fundamental virtues of truth—Accuracy and Sincerity—and then going on to explore their contingent historical forms and significances.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction To Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1984); 80.

But Foucault is wrong if he equates all origins stories with ahistorical fantasy. One of the great virtues of the State of Nature method is precisely its separation of features of a concept that bear the necessity of the origin, from features that are more or less contingent matters of history. Far from demanding some dubiously ‘metaphysical’ faith in the necessity of any given practice, it gives us a concrete way of assessing the plausibility of any such claim. When confronted with a genealogical claim that such-and-such a practice is humanly necessary or ‘original’, we must ask, Does this practice really qualify as an indispensable feature of human life? Is it really required to meet absolutely basic human needs? Can we not imagine a recognizably human society without it? Genealogical claims of necessity, then, are grounded not on dubiously ‘metaphysical’ ideas or articles of analytical faith, but rather on something fundamentally practical—the *practical human necessity* of the materials used to construct the State of Nature scenario. If we can find nothing contingent about the posited original human need to pool information—if, that is, we cannot make sense of the idea that there could be a recognizably human society absent this most basic form of epistemic co-operation—then the thesis that identifying good informants comprises the kernel of the concept of knowledge possesses significant force. Foucault seems to regard it as a misuse of the genealogical method ever to use it to identify human necessities. But if it were in the very nature of genealogical method that it could only properly be used to find contingency and never necessity, then it would be a lousy, because indiscriminating, method. Foucault’s blithely expressed wisdom that when it comes to concepts, all is history and nothing origin, is mere prejudice.

Craig’s State of Nature story reveals that if there is a context of inquiry in which sceptical challenges are appropriate, still there are nonesuch in the State of Nature. And from this we have drawn the inference that sceptics must be inquirers first and sceptics second (or, *basically* inquirers, and sceptics only superficially). This, in its own right, blocks the sceptic’s colonizing move from (i) discovering that, in context C, knowledge is impossible, to (ii) discovering (in context C) that knowledge is impossible. What blocks scepticism here is the *genealogical primacy* of practical, knowledge-permitting, contexts of inquiry. These knowledge-permitting contexts are

the contexts in which the core of the concept of knowledge is dramatized in practices of good informing. In this sense, knowledge-permitting contexts figure at the core of the concept of knowledge; indeed they exhaust it, for there are no other contexts in the State of Nature. Thus the possibility of knowledge is prior to the possibility of sceptical challenge in the special sense that can only be supplied by imaginatively stretching our concepts of knowledge and justification across genealogical time: even the sceptic cannot escape the cognitive functionality of the origin, for that scenario is still with us, still supplying the core of what it is for us to know.

As in Williams' irenic anti-sceptical strategy, this may still leave some room for a confined practice of sceptical challenge—it is only in the exclusively practical contexts provided by the State of Nature that sceptical challenge is obviously never a proper challenge. In the real-time practices of Default and Challenge there may possibly remain a context in which sceptical challenge is appropriate, so that knowledge is not possible in that context. But such an 'epistemological context', if there be such²⁵, exploits only aspects of the concept of knowledge that are way out on the periphery. And our genealogy has exposed the historical contingency of merely peripheral practices, so that the sceptic may at any time find the locks to his study have been changed and that it is now being put to a different philosophical use. In this way genealogical time has implications for historical time: while the diagnosis of the sceptical urge goes deep in philosophy, our genealogy of knowledge reveals that the question of the propriety of sceptical challenge does not go deep. It simply rests on how much nurturance we continue to give to the context of inquiry in which sceptical challenge is deemed appropriate. That is, it rests on something social within the philosophical community: namely, how far we continue to respond to sceptical challenge in the epistemological context as justified challenge, how long we continue to sustain something called the 'epistemological context'. Perhaps only a satisfactory theoretical diagnosis can catalyze and justify the historical shift that would render sceptical challenges inappropriate in all contexts; and that is surely something to which Williams' arguments make a significant contribution. For my part, I have tried

²⁵ 'Epistemological context' already seems too generous a category, precisely because there are already approaches (such as genealogical approaches) to epistemology that pre-empt, or at least do not invite, sceptical challenge.

to show that the genealogical approach contributes an independent diagnostic strategy, which can be seen to support and augment the main strands of Williams' anti-sceptical case, and also to provide its own distinctive style of directly anti-sceptical argument—one that affirms the genealogical primacy of knowledge-permitting contexts. Most generally, I hope to have thereby shown how social epistemology may be fruitfully expanded not only across social space but also across time.²⁶

Miranda Fricker
Birkbeck, University of London

²⁶ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at a conference on Social Epistemology held at the University of Stirling (2007), and I am grateful to all those present for their input, including Kathleen Lennon who responded. I also thank Duncan Pritchard for subsequent written comments.