

### The 5 Questions

1. Why were you initially drawn to social epistemology?

My answer to this question is a story, which begins when I was a student. I was instinctively drawn to what are now recognised as questions in social epistemology long before that category became, happily, available. What drew me in was an inchoate and troubled interest in the idea that there were all sorts of connections between social identity, power, and epistemic authority that were stubbornly difficult to articulate in the vernacular of Anglo-American philosophy. A sense that there was nonetheless surely something worth saying that might after all find expression in this idiom was what led me into any kind of research in philosophy.

As an MA student (on an interdisciplinary Women's Studies MA) I read some feminist philosophy. It was a revelation. These theorists were asking what struck me then, as now, to be entirely natural and compelling philosophical questions, yet questions I had never heard posed elsewhere. Questions such as, How does social power influence how we perceive and deal with each other as knowers and reasoners? How do gender, race and class affect epistemic authority? These and related questions were not of course expressed quite like that in those days. They were expressed rather in the terms proper to the feminist theory of the time, most of which drew on the only discourses in town that made questions of power seem remotely relevant to matters epistemic. These were principally Marxism (especially Lukàcs who emphasised the idea of an epistemically privileged 'standpoint' of the proletariat), postmodernism (and the 'Continental' philosophers that gave that *Zeitgeist* its philosophical articulation—Foucault, Deleuze, Derrida), and also psychoanalysis (especially Lacan, and the French feminist theorists who championed what came to be thought of as 'difference feminism', notably Irigaray). As a consequence, the sorts of questions that were floating around were: Is there a standpoint of women as there is a standpoint of the proletariat? Does this standpoint enjoy any kind of epistemic privilege? What is situated knowledge? Is reason a form of social power? Is the very idea of objectivity a sublimated assertion of power? Is reason masculine? Is language phallogocentric? and so forth.

I found myself in complete disagreement with answers to any of these questions that made one or other pseudo-radical move (as I saw it) that reduced reason to social power, or handed over human rational or linguistic capacities to an exclusively masculine psycho-sexual make-up. Reason was mine, reason was *ours*—with feminists like these, I wondered, who needs sexists? All this was a useful spur. I remained, however, in fascinated sympathy with the politicising spirit of these questions—in sympathy with the thought that at least some of them were questions worth asking, and that perhaps all of them could be asked in a form that rendered them deeply interesting. And some feminist philosophers *were* posing the questions in that way, developing new theoretical stances with inspiring lucidity and creativity. First, the question about reason and masculinity, for instance, makes perfect sense so long as we are talking about constructions or imaginings of reason—the history of philosophy, and the imaginary of philosophy, as these might be found to reflect wider social attitudes to gender. Further, the various related attempts to disrupt the over-confident, narrowly rationalistic sensibility so often found in philosophy came to

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seem profoundly sensible to me. (In the early nineties it was an almost exclusively feminist concern to argue that emotion and reason should not always be thought of as radically contrasting categories, and that emotions might at least sometimes have cognitive content. These days such an idea approximates an orthodoxy.) Finally, and concerning now the philosophical canon, the most basic driving intuition among feminist women in philosophy of that time was, I think, the idea that it can make a difference *who* is doing the philosophy. Here again, I think that is true. I mean, the sense in which it's true is completely obvious. Our discipline has a history, therefore it could have taken a different course. If it had been as female-dominated as it has *de facto* been male-dominated, it would very likely have been different. At least this is a perfectly coherent possibility. Yet even this much acknowledgement of contingency in intellectual activity is suppressed in so many philosophical conversations of the recognised kind—perhaps because the very thought threatens to undermine Anglo-American philosophy's self-conception as a universalistic discipline.

Of course our aim is and should be universalistic, if what that amounts to is a commitment to arguing for things on grounds that anyone could accept. That is a sound and supremely valuable Enlightenment ideal, and moreover a semi-realistic aim for those areas where it is sufficiently determinate *what* anyone could accept (though naturally there is room for disagreement about which areas these are). But philosophy as I encountered it in those days too often seemed to conflate this aspirational possibility with actuality, transmuting a democratic regulatory ideal into an unspoken affirmation of extant philosophy's universalist achievement. This narcissistic fantasy resulted in the silencing of a most important species of critical claim in philosophy: claims that some philosophical lines of thought reflected a particular point of view or background experience of the world just sounded like gibberish in the face of philosophy's self-image as a definitively universalistic enterprise. This fantasised ahistorical self-image deeply embedded in the philosophical psyche made it seem heretical (no, worse! it made it seem like one was 'missing the point') to protest as a student, 'I don't get it. If philosophy's so neutral, how come you're all men?'<sup>1</sup>

People talk about loving their subject. I love doing philosophy; though it's more a matter of not being able to help it. In particular, what I can't help is my fascination with philosophy's power of self-deception. (It must be hard, after all, being the discipline that remains after all the others have left home to become, variously, physics, biology, chemistry, history, literature, poetry... No wonder philosophy has a continuing identity crisis, a manifest need to explain itself to itself, to affirm what it is and what it can do—witness recent outpourings of metaphilosophy.) Perhaps that's good. Perhaps it shows that despite being so incredibly old, philosophy is actually still in its adolescence, with plenty of future ahead of it in which to blossom and own itself. (Maybe, like Orlando, it will turn out less stably gendered than expected too. Time will tell.) I am getting a little loose-tongued here. Certainly I am generalising—of course not all Anglo-American philosophy is as I am describing it etc. etc; and it's our intellectual culture more than the published literature that is on the couch, a set of assumptions about what we really think we're doing when we teach our students how to muster another counter-example. Still my therapeutic

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<sup>1</sup> Not all, but still today a great majority. For recent figures in the UK, see *Women in Philosophy in the UK: A report by the British Philosophical Association and the Society for Women in Philosophy UK*, authored by Helen Beebe and Jenny Saul (Sept 2011).

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diagnosis is that philosophy's tendency to self-deception is no fleeting complex, but rather a condition that characterises the tradition in virtue of two of its most essential features. For the discipline stands permanently under tension: the tension created by its definitive universalist aspiration on the one hand, and the awkward fact against which that aspiration must continuously strain, namely the fact of philosophy's historical situatedness.

Here's another way of putting it. I did Philosophy and French as an undergraduate, and the contrast with literature allowed me even then to sense that the philosophy I was being educated in had somehow repressed the knowledge that it's a text. Why? Perhaps the knowledge would threaten to reveal that, like all texts, philosophy has an implied reader. This risky truth threatens to reveal an implied reader who is not the boasted universal 'anyone' after all. Philosophy's concerns might be revealed as universal merely in form, concealing a shamefully parochial content. There should be no shame in being parochial in that sense; but still, my impression then was that this was a manifest truth that philosophy found threatening. Texts are situated in history, and there's something deep in the psyche of Anglo-American philosophy that is still in denial about having a history, or at least about some of the implications of having a history. One way of talking about what the advent of feminist philosophy signified is to say that feminists asked philosophy to confront the fact that it is a text, so that the uninvited figures of author, narrator, implied reader and real reader all crowd into the space in which we are trained to pretend need make room only for a rational being or two.

Insofar as philosophy generates or aims at knowledge, then all of the above not only tells a story that happens to explain why I was personally drawn to social epistemology. Much more importantly the story points to twin questions that together constitute a central project in social epistemology: How is philosophical knowledge generated, and how far are the current practices both effective and fair? I don't know the answer to these questions, but I look at the gender figures, reflect on the drastically monotone ethnicity of our profession, and it is immediately obvious that things aren't nearly as different from when I was a student as I find myself imagining them to be. In this I catch myself in the grip of the very self-deceptive fantasy I have attributed to our discipline (philosophy as floating free from the circumstances of its production). No surprise there. It is the nature of the beast. The continuing narrowness of the philosophical population is something for which I must own my part in the collective professional responsibility, and while there are still no instant remedies, there are more things we can do inasmuch as the climate is more receptive to concerns about implicit bias. Probably the most important measures are practical-institutional—measures to counter implicit bias in how we perceive and assess each other (anonymising CVs, getting training in how to use terms of praise that are thoroughly non-gendered as we write letters of reference, keeping an eye on whether it is really necessary to have an all-male line-up at a conference—sometimes it might be, but usually it is not).<sup>2</sup> But some of the things we can do concern the content of the philosophy that gets written, and that has implications for how we might continue to develop the remit of social epistemology: Doing social epistemology in a way that draws attention to the contingencies and possible injustices in what is recognised as knowledge, or as rational, or as interesting, as a strong argument, or a significant counter-example, represents a tiny but real impetus in a progressive direction. Or so I would like to believe. In any case, a fascination with such

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<sup>2</sup> For concrete suggestions as well as the diagnosis, see Beebe and Saul (2011).

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possibilities is what drew me to social epistemology, and what keeps me doing it.

2. What are your main contributions to the field of social epistemology?

I hope to have said something useful about the significant overlap between epistemology and ethics. This overlap was the subject matter of my work on epistemic injustice. It concerns possibilities for people to wrong each other specifically as epistemic subjects: a hearer may wrong a speaker, for instance, by allowing prejudice to depress the level of credibility given (testimonial injustice); or, alternatively, people may be structurally wronged as epistemic subjects by being prevented from participating fully in those practices through which shared meanings form and gain collective currency (hermeneutical marginalisation), where this generates an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences (hermeneutical injustice). I suppose my hope is that in opening up the theoretical space of epistemic injustice I might have made certain philosophical thoughts more articulable for those who want to pursue further possibilities.

In effect I hope therefore to have integrated certain politicising insights into epistemology in a way that implicitly makes plain that they belong there. In particular I think this has illustrated how it can pay philosophical dividends to look at our epistemic practices from the point of view of those on the losing end. More generally, I hope to have advanced the idea that one useful sense of ‘social’ in social epistemology implies a lot more than just doing epistemology in a way that has more than one individual in its purview. Rather the ‘social’ in social epistemology can usefully be a fully socialised conception of the epistemic subject: someone necessarily functioning under the constraints of relations of power and identity. But this more fully socialised conception needs to situate epistemic subjects in time too, so that certain essentially diachronic aspects of epistemic practices may come to light. (I believe, for instance, that we cannot properly understand the value of knowledge without taking a diachronic view of our strategies for reliably achieving and retaining truths.) What the label ‘social epistemology’ primarily signals is a liberation from the default of atemporal individualism that pervades so much philosophy. This liberation means that social epistemology can account for those collective strategies for achieving and sharing knowledge which are so basic in human life and which are necessarily extended in time.

3. What is the proper role of social epistemology in relation to other disciplines?

Different kinds of social epistemology can help forge links with neighbouring disciplines—common questions, common methods, more of a shared critical repertoire. Just as formal social epistemology and empirical social epistemology help cultivate positive intellectual relations with psychology and the social sciences, my hope would be that the kind of social epistemology I do might also help forge links with neighbouring humanities such as history, literature, and also law.

One of the ways that social epistemology can do this—though I would emphasize this is not the only way—is to adopt an aim that is normally the province of literature: that of being well observed. The writer who is a perceptive observer of human life produces works that are truthful in the imaginative sense of being true to life. Might this not be a proper aim of at least some

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kinds of philosophy? If so, we should ask what methods might facilitate such work. Our default method is conceptual analysis. But it should not be a default if that means adopting it unthinkingly, for it is far more limiting to the philosophical enterprise than we normally allow. First there is the relatively obvious thought that if the concept or practice that we want to explain is a family concept in the Wittgensteinian sense, then manifestly any attempt at analysis is doomed to failure (though we may learn something along the way). But what is far less obvious is that there might be cases—perhaps many cases—of concepts or practices that do permit of analysis, but whose most characteristic and explanatorily fundamental features are not quite necessary conditions. Such important features cannot therefore earn a place in our definition. Where this is so, the strict definition of the concept or practice will not give a full description of the basic or paradigm case. And so when we do, finally, end the trial by counter-example, at last to stand back and view the residue of our clever inquisition, what we find is something significantly lesser than the thing we hoped to understand. Granted, what is distilled will be an essence of sorts, but an essence composed of elements jointly sufficient only for some highly atypical cases of the phenomenon we had wanted to illuminate.

If, on the other hand, we reflect more explicitly than we normally do upon what sort of philosophical understanding we want to achieve, then we may be able to develop alternatives to conceptual analysis that may serve us better on some occasions. One kind of possibility here is State of Nature explanations, a sub-class of genealogical explanations (the sub-class that does posit an original position whose features are thereby argued to be necessary to the concept or practice we are aiming to explain). This method seems to me a very natural one to use in social epistemology, not least in the obvious sense that a characteristic feature of the State of Nature is that it contains more than one person.

But this is not the only method. A closely related but perhaps less cumbersome approach is simply to let the social imagination go to work a little more than usual: try out a hypothesis about what elements of a given concept or practice are plausibly basic in the here and now. (This is actually what most State of Nature stories effectively do too, only their narrative form makes for confusion about whether or how far one is making an *as-if* or imaginary historical claim, a real historical claim, or an immediately synchronic claim about the present content of the concept or the function of the practice. This muddies the waters in a way that is often unhelpful.) Once one has hazarded the hypothesis, which should be suitably informed by a sense of the point and purpose of the concept or practice in question, then one can go on to test out how far that basic practice is explanatorily prior to other, less basic versions of the practice. Either the account will cohere and stabilise or it won't.

This is not as alien a philosophical method as it may at first sound when it is stated quite so explicitly. Such a method is at least partially on display, for example, in P. F. Strawson's approach to explaining the stability of moral responsibility in relation to the apparent threat of determinism. What is most basic, he asserts, in our practices of holding each other responsible (and so presuming each other free in the requisite sense) is the operation of the human 'reactive attitudes'. They are fundamental to a recognisably human mode of interaction, and are in that sense necessary (one might say, original).<sup>3</sup> This assertion about our paradigmatic practice of

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<sup>3</sup> P. F. Strawson, 'Freedom and Resentment', in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974).

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holding each other responsible can then be tested out in relation to other, perhaps secondary, aspects of that practice—such as what goes on in situations where we find ourselves suspending the reactive attitudes (they suspend themselves), to be replaced by the resulting ‘objective attitude’, which has one withdraw from the fray of participation to simply manage others’ behaviour. If the picture overall holds together, and especially if there are useful explanatory relations that emerge as holding between the purported primary and secondary aspects of the practice, then the account may stabilise. None of this need involve any search for necessary and sufficient conditions, and it may be that looking for stable accounts that furnish explanatory relations within and between our various practices constitutes a philosophical method that is better suited to some subject matters, and better suited, I surmise, to creating philosophy that is truthful.

The focus on what is human, and a certain faith in our powers of observation and judgements about what is explanatorily basic in human life, would help make philosophy more of the humanistic discipline it deserves to be.<sup>4</sup> This would re-connect it with its humanistic neighbours who, at present, talk amongst themselves while philosophy limits its own horizons by conversing too exclusively with the sciences.

#### 4. What have been the most significant advances in social epistemology?

To show that epistemology is not exhausted by attention to individuals, or even relations between individuals as such. More generally, and in relation to my personal intellectual priorities, what I find most significant is the breadth of reference that social epistemology has effectively achieved, spanning formal epistemology, some of feminist epistemology, and as I will suggest below, collective epistemology. I think that the category ‘social epistemology’ is incredibly progressive in this way, and it has allowed more different voices to become intelligible to one another.

#### 5. What are the most important open problems in social epistemology and what are the prospects for progress?

Let me point not to individual open problems (of which there are surely many—in fact, aren’t they all open? Even the original social epistemological questions such as the epistemology of testimony remain stubbornly open.). Let me point instead to a new and burgeoning area: the epistemology of collectives. The reason why I feel this is such a promising and open field is chiefly its promise of making connections with political philosophy.

This is because political philosophy is interested in the proper institutionalisation of power, and institutional bodies are vitally important as collective epistemic subjects. Employers, juries, governments... all such bodies perform epistemic tasks that are of the utmost importance in social life, so that the propriety or impropriety, functionality or dysfunctionality, of real epistemic processes in institutions needs to be attended to and understood. But that is not just a question of theorising ideal epistemic practices. The power relations and vested interests at work in the economy of credibility also mean that we need to understand not only what ideal collective

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<sup>4</sup> In this connection, see Bernard Williams ‘Philosophy As A Humanistic Discipline’, in his posthumous collection of the same name, ed. A. W. Moore (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006).

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epistemic practices are like, but (perhaps first) what the salient risks of dysfunctionality are. How are our epistemic practices most likely to go wrong in the real world of institutional interactions? We need some social epistemology that is informed by the *realpolitik* of collective epistemic practices in a way that connects with political philosophy. One sort of connection might be this: if, for instance, citizens suffer epistemic injustices at the hands of a complaints panel, a police force, or an employer, this undermines their power to contest, and reveals them as dominated. On some conceptions at least, this compromises their political freedom.<sup>5</sup>

In political philosophy there is a useful distinction between ideal theory and non-ideal theory. I tend to think that in social epistemology what we need is a healthy dose of non-ideal theory. We need more often to inflect our theories with a realistic sense of how things tend to go wrong, and in particular how they create unfair advantage and disadvantage. Only once that picture of things is achieved might it become clearer what ameliorative measures are required to stabilise our practices for the better. For this we could no doubt benefit from interdisciplinary help—from the sciences to determine what disadvantages occur, how much, and to whom; and also from neighbouring humanities to help us understand the significance for human beings of suffering such disadvantages. Modelling good institutional epistemic practices (such as sharing information, seeking advice, setting up authorities, dealing with disagreement) is something social epistemology should surely have a hand in. But it should do so, I believe, by paying special attention to risks of dysfunctionality first, remedy second. Philosophy has a tendency to characterise the ideal. By contrast I think it is useful to focus on failure, most especially on the kinds of failure that create disadvantage. A methodological commitment to the dysfunctional and the unfair promises a more truthful philosophy of the functional case.

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<sup>5</sup> I develop this idea in ‘Epistemic Justice as a Condition of Political Freedom’, *Synthese* (March 2013).