Is Trust an Epistemological Notion?
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Knowledge is a collective good. Only a small part of our knowledge of the world is generated by our own personal experience. Relying on what others say is one of the most fundamental ways to acquire knowledge, not only about the external world, but also about who we are, for instance about when and where we were born. To use Mary Douglas’ words: “Our colonization of each other’s minds is the price we pay for thought”.

Traditionally, epistemology had banned from genuine knowledge beliefs acquired by trusting others. Knowledge or rational belief, as opposed to opinion, should ultimately be based on individually held clear and distinct ideas (Descartes) or sense impressions (Locke) together with sound relations among these ideas. An individualistic stance has persisted in the contemporary debate, claiming that individually held reasons and individual cognitive states are the only ground of justification of our beliefs.

Nevertheless a number of social phenomena such as the role of expertise in public decisions within democratic societies, collaborative work in “Big Science” and in the Academe, or the informational explosion due to new media and technologies have forced at least a part of contemporary epistemology to incorporate sociological notions such as trust, deference and authority. A division of cognitive labour is now recognized as a property of every cultural system, science included.

Although there is widespread agreement that our epistemic dependence on other people’s knowledge is a key ingredient of our cognitive life, the role of trust in this dependence is much more open to debate. Is trust in epistemic authority—or “epistemic trust” for short—an epistemological notion in any sense, or is it simply a bridge concept that connects our epistemological concerns to moral issues?

Should we depict it in terms of the more familiar sociological notion of trust as a basis for cooperation? If epistemic trust and moral or social trust are different things, are they related, and how? It is obvious enough that people’s trust in the “cognitive order” of their society—what rules and principles govern the distribution of knowledge in society, who are the experts, why they should be believed— influences their trust in its social order and it is influenced by it.

Good illustration of this was provided by recent events involving governments’ invocation of intelligence expert’s dossiers on the alleged existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq to justify war, and the backlash of public opinion when this expertise proved unreliable and its political exploitation disingenuous. Still, while the existence of strong relations between moral/social and epistemic/cognitive notions of trust is not in doubt, their character has not been clearly elucidated.

To contribute to such an elucidation, I will review different approaches to epistemic authority, some that come from outside of philosophical epistemology, and others developed within epistemology itself. In looking at epistemological approaches, I will pay particular attention to the tension between reductionist vs. non-reductionist approaches to trust and testimonial knowledge. Unavoidably, the accounts I will give and the contrasts I will draw will be oversimplified. Still, I hope they will suffice to give plausibility to the first main claim of this article, namely that epistemic trust is illuminated by all these diverse approaches and fully accounted for by none of them, because it genuinely involves a variety of cognitive and social mechanisms that can be normatively evaluated from several points of view. I will then present what I believe is a neglected and poorly understood form of epistemic trust involved in the pragmatics of
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verbal comprehension. This pragmatic form of epistemic trust calls, I argue, for a non-redactorist account. Therefore—and this will be my second main claim—in no domain where the scientific authority relies on verbal communication can epistemic trust be fully accounted for in a reductionist way.

Non-epistemological approaches

Epistemic authority and trust are not just philosophical topics; they are important aspects of human social life. As such, they can, and indeed should, be studied as sociological phenomena. To give just one example, in his influential book, A Social History of Truth, Steven Shapin (1994) reconstructs the role of gentlemanly culture in determining credibility in the scientific practices of early modern science, in particular in the constitution of the British Royal Academy and its new experimental standards for scientific discourse. Trust and civility are inseparable concepts: they define a cultural system, that is, a set of presuppositions that guides “conversation” not just in its ordinary sense but also in the Latin sense of conversatio, that is, the art of conducting oneself in social interactions. In this cultural system, an honourable gentleman is precisely one who deserves to be trusted. Social practices of recognition, cultural heuristics and epistemic maxims are intertwined in the cultural constitution of any body of knowledge, science included. Shapin’s history of trust has the merit of embedding deference to epistemic authority in historical and practical contexts, in contrast to more abstract and formalized approaches to philosophy. His approach converges in this respect with sociological research (and in particular sociology of science) and, for that matter, sociological commonsense. In people’s ordinary dealings to the epistemic authority of others, epistemological, moral and cultural reasons are completely intertwined. The ethnomethodologist Harold Garfinkel nicely illustrated the difficulty of disentangling moral and cognitive trust when he suggested the following informal experiment: try to systematically distrust a friend’s or a relative’s everyday factual reports; she will find it an intolerable attack on her person and her moral integrity, and it will be hard to re-establish the relationship even after having been told of your hidden experimental agenda.

The sociological or historical perspective show that trust or authority are just historically situated social constructions that cannot be normatively evaluated outside of their social-historical context. Does it render irrelevant philosophical issues regarding the nature and rationality of trust? It is, of course, quite possible to acknowledge the truthfulness of the social-scientific approach without embracing the idea that relativism is a concept that is frequently associated with it.

From within philosophy itself, trust in epistemic authority is being approached from a variety of perspectives, and not just from a strictly epistemological one. After all, trust seems to be a crucial aspect of interpersonal relationships, of the social and political order, and of cooperation in general. Trust is seen as something that “is there” and calls for a definition. This is not to say that there is generally accepted definition of trust, far from it. In political philosophy, trust is standardly seen as a voluntary transfer of power to those who govern, a transfer that cannot be justified simply in terms of coercion or rational argument.1 In social theory, trust is frequently treated as a form of rational choice to pursue ongoing cooperation. “In moral philosophy, trust is often considered as a social virtue that cannot be reduced to strategic thinking.” All these different treatments attempt to capture the elusive idea of an intentional surrender of control on one’s own actions and decisions that seems difficult to reconcile with the autonomy of a rational agent. To what extent are these various approaches, considered as general to the study of trust in epistemic authority? I have no general answer to propose to this question, but I will briefly consider three of specific possible contributions, from political philosophy, from social theory, and from moral philosophy. Let me first, however, express a following cautionary remark. An unsuitable import of approaches to moral and social trust and authority into epistemology has failed to sharpen the notions of epistemic trust and authority and may have indeed contributed to their vagueness. “Trust” is sometimes being used with reference to the cooperation needed within the scientific enterprise, at other times with reference to the testimonial source of most of our ordinary beliefs, and at other times yet to refer to the unethical reliance of lay people on experts. Are we talking of the same thing in all three cases, or should we, to begin with, acknowledge that there are many varieties of trust in general, casting doubt on the possibility of a single integrated account? If we entertain the possibility that we may be talking, under the name of trust, about a variety of related but different attitudes, and if we adopt, at least for the time being, an arm more modest than that of developing a general theory of trust, we may be better placed to take advantage of a variety of perspectives.

Political philosophy is a source of insight for social epistemology. In political philosophy, trust is seen as a key component of the authority relation, in which a person desists from demanding justification of the thing she is being asked to do or to believe as a condition of her doing or believing. 2 Something of this kind seems at play when the lay person blindly defers to a recognised authority, be it an expert, a “wise man” (or woman), or a religious leader. We are all familiar with such cases of blind deference. They typically involve the acceptance of beliefs that are only partially understood. I believe my doctor who tells me that my level of cholesterol is too high, and I follow her prescription, even if my understanding of what cholesterol is quite poor, and my comprehension of its physiological function is hopelessly metaphysical. 3 Is this sort of deference ever justified in some relevant sense, and should epistemology pay attention to it? I think it should. The focus in the literature on testimony on beliefs the contents of which are perfectly clear but for which we lack direct evidence has contributed to giving an unrealistic picture of our dependence on socially distributed knowledge. It is as if the paradigmatic case of social transfer of knowledge were that found in the community of birdwatchers. Among birdwatchers, reports such as “A count of 32 Mediterranean Gulls was made on the Isle of Wight on the 7th” are within the scientific enterprise, they are believed without any further check, thanks to the strong mutual respect and sense of cooperation found in such communities. 4 However, in many social situations—including situations playing a major role in cultural transmission—the information exchanged is much less straightforward and raises problems not just of believability but also of comprehension. The interplay between believability and comprehension and the role of cooperation not just in epistemic but also in interepistemic guidance are, I suggest, important aspects of epistemic trust.

Social theory approaches to cooperation drawing on rational choice and on game theory are another source of insight for social epistemology. Communication is a form of cooperation. As in the case of cooperation in general, it raises the question of what causes communicators to cooperate when their interests might often be better served by defecting. In many cooperation games having the structure of an iterated prisoner’s dilemma, it has been shown 5 that a tit for tat strategy of one party makes defection less advantageous than cooperation for the other party (with generalisation to the many players case). In an article entitled “Epistemological Tit for Tat,” Michel Blais has argued that such a game theoretic approach might be extended to trust within a scientific community. 6 Scientists have an interest in reporting genuine observations and results, because the costs of uncooperative behaviour (i.e. cheating) is high, and typically consists in the public and permanent exclusion of the cheater from the community. This view has been criticised for placing excessive confidence in the reliability of the constraints. 7 Another possible line of criticism is to question the adequateness of the iterated game of Prisoner’s Dilemma to the case of science. Something like a tit for tat strategy may be at work in the decision of scientific teams working on the same issue to share or not to share results before publication: you don’t share with me, I don’t
share with you. But this form of cooperation is of limited epistemic relevance. In the more epistemically significant case of the publication of observations and results, the response to the production of false evidence is not symmetrical. It is not to produce false results in return until defectors fall back in line, it is to ostracize them. This response is not only qualitatively but also quantitatively asymmetrical, and costly not just to the defector, but also to the community at large. Why deprive the community forever from the input of competent scientists that have, typically, been carried away by their theoretical convictions, rather than punish them in proportion to the damage done and then reintegrate them? Would not this be costly enough to the perpetrators to deter scientists tempted to take their data? Objectivity of evidence-takers seems guarded, at least in part, by a sense of moral disgust among scientists who are eager to preserve their collective self-esteem and not just the epistemic value of their output.

While a game theoretical approach may provide partial insight in accounting for trust in scientific practice, its relevance to the understanding of trust in everyday face-to-face communication is dubious. In particular, a tit for tat strategy makes sense if basically, the same game with similar pay-offs is played again and again and if, in this game, defection is disadvantageous unless it is sanctioned. In personal relationships, however, the goals of communication are extremely varied. Most of these goals—coordination of action for instance—are better achieved through competent and honest communication. Given this, there is no systematic and obvious way of sanctioning someone who has, on a particular occasion, pursued his advantage by means of dishonest communication. Typical reactions are more of a moral than of a strategic character.”

Trust seems to be allocated in a manner that is too contextual and too morally and psychologically rich to be well captured by game-theoretical modelling.

Moral philosophy is a third source of insight on trust. It may appeal to the intuition that “trust is not the fact that one, after calculating the odds, feels no risk: it is feeling no risk without calculating the odds.”1 In moral philosophy, trust is often analysed as a particular prior commitment to a relationship and not an outcome of the cooperative behaviour of the parties. This prior commitment is not obviously purposeful. I do not trust others in order to gain from my interaction. Rather, the fact that I trust them gives me an expectation to gain from interacting with them in some occasions. According to Annette Baier, trust and distrust are feeling responses, not cognitive states, to how we take our situation to be: an accepted vulnerability to another’s possible, but not expected, bad intentions and competence, whereas B’s reasons to believe that p depend on his assessment of the evidence for or against p. Trust is thus a matter of assessing the moral and epistemic reliability of other people on a particular subject matter. Notice that, in this account, epistemology doesn’t reduce to ethics, nor the other way around. Rather, what is claimed is that epistemology should integrate some moral standards. Trust itself reduces to a mix of epistemic and moral reasons.

Other contemporary epistemologists, Alvin Goldman and Philip Kitcher in particular,2 develop a reductionist account of trust in which considerations of social factors contribute to reasons and justifications for holding beliefs. They integrate the kind of reasoning that justifies our trust in vicarious knowledge in an overall account of trust. The ethical and epistemic aspects of trust may be described as rationalism. In this perspective, trusting others means having reliable criteria to assess their competence and trustworthiness. Fine distinctions can be made among these criteria. People may have different reasons to allocate authority to others, all equally rational. A person may allocate contextual authority to people she judges happen to be in a better epistemic position to provide some specific information. In such a case, trusting others is a way of exploiting their expertise and reasoning as proxy for one’s own. We use experts as “tools”, as we use a telescope to enhance our vision. Understanding a social process of development and distribution of knowledge may give me indirect criteria for trusting specific...
sources. I may have a good understanding of the process of assessing and filtering information in peer reviewed journals and evidence about the quality of this process in different journals or even one itself, this should provide reasons to put more or less trust in the article published in these journals. Or I can be acquainted with your track record on a particular issue and judge that you have earned authority or, better, reputation on this issue.\textsuperscript{11} The analysis of such fine-grained criteria for the allocation of trust contributes to a better epistemological description and evaluation of various systems of distribution of knowledge (and also to the design of such systems).

It would be hard to dispute (except from a radical sceptic point of view) that we often have reasons to trust others on specific subject matters and that many of our beliefs are acquired through such reasoned trust, and justifiably so. But are vicarious beliefs generally based on such reasoned trust? And when they are not, can they nevertheless be justified? It is quite debatable whether it is ever rational to accept what another person says on the simple basis that she says it. Trust in such fundamental authority is similar to the acceptance of political authority, as standardly conceived, in that it involves a form of “surrender of judgement.”

The difference between derived and fundamental authority (and the associated reductive and non-reductive notion of trust) is not that rely on, or trust, and the other analogy breaks down. On the one hand, there are people who trust derived authority attend to reasons to do so in each case, whereas people who trust fundamental authority do so without attending to reasons. Proponents of the notion of fundamental authority, and of a non-reductive account of trust, on the other hand, have justification for such authority such that Reid’s justification appeals to the wisdom and beneficence of the “author of nature.” A standard move in contemporary epistemology to justify trust in fundamental authority is to view it as an extension of the necessary selftrust that we grant to our past, present and future judgements. Granting no authority to ourselves would amount to a form of hyper-scepticism, which we must about the very possibility of holding justified beliefs. But if we take our own past judgements as proxy for present ones on no other grounds than the fact that they are our judgements, couldn’t we accept other people’s judgements on similar grounds? Why should we be more entitled to quote Richard Foley, in epistemology?\textsuperscript{8}

Moreover, as Gillibard has argued, other people’s influence has been pervasive in our past, especially in our childhood. If we admit that our norms of reasoning today have been influenced by others, we cannot but accord legitimacy to this influence and should not exclude the legitimacy of possible influence of this kind in the future. Thus, he argues, “we must accept others some fundamental authority...”

How good is the analogy between the authority we grant our own cognitive mechanisms and the authority we grant others? Both our cognitive mechanisms and other people can—and often do—misinform us. So we may be justifiably in relying on these two source of information; or, when we have no better choice, but we are not justifiably in granting them absolute authority. So far the analogy holds. Our own cognitive mechanisms typically misinform us when they are malfunctioning, but otherwise, their function is to inform us; they are working for our own good, so to speak. When others misinform us, it may be that they are themselves mistaken and cognitively malfunctioning, or it may be that they are serving their interest at the expense of ours. How do we know, on which side the analogy breaks, is so specific reasons, having to do with possible future misinforming, or they are working for our own good, so to speak. When others misinform us, it may be that they are themselves mistaken and cognitively malfunctioning, or it may be that they are serving their interest at the expense of ours.

It is not as clear which side the analogy breaks down, so fundamental that we are entitled to “accept as true something that is presented as true and that is intelligible [to us] unless there are stronger reasons not to do so” (what he calls the Acceptance Principle). Note that we do not use this principle as a justification according to Burge, which is what he sees as the purely cognitive property of language use, although different ones: For Burge it is what he sees as the purely preservative character of successful linguistic communication that entitles us to rely on what “they” say. For Coady, he argues, understanding an utterance preserves any additional or transformation the content of the thought communicated, and this is what makes it unproblematically acceptable. For Coady the relevant property is that the very possibility of a common language and therefore of mutual understanding presupposes a generally useful form of speech. It is a form of cognition by proxy, and that we are as cognitively malfunctioning, or it may be that they are themselves mistaken and cognitively malfunctioning, or it may be that they are serving their interest at the expense of ours.

In his Davidsonian perspective, is a mass of true and trivial statements, as is indeed found in everyday communication. However, what an individual is told, and in particular the non-trivial statements she particularly cares about, is not a random sample of all statements. How then speak to each other in a way that is shared meanings, such as the content of the thought communicated, and this is what makes it unproblematically acceptable. For Coady the relevant property is that the very possibility of a common language and therefore of mutual understanding presupposes a generally useful form of speech. It is a form of cognition by proxy, and that we are as cognitively malfunctioning, or it may be that they are themselves mistaken and cognitively malfunctioning, or it may be that they are serving their interest at the expense of ours.

Belief and trust are intertwined: one cannot have trust in something without believing it. However, the question of how good the analogy between the authority we grant our own cognitive mechanisms and the authority we grant others is, is that there is a false analogy. Our own cognitive mechanisms may be that they are themselves mistaken and cognitively malfunctioning, or it may be that they are serving their interest at the expense of ours.
attenuated. I believe, by looking at the very nature of communication, without which the acquisition of vicarious knowledge would be impossible.

The pragmatics of trust

While epistemology has taken an interest in the empirical study of cognition, and social epistemology in the empirical study of knowledge institutions, very little attention has been paid to the empirical study of communication, even by those who, like Burge or Coody, give a central place to the nature of communication in their account of epistemic trust. The transfer of testimonial information is typically viewed as being achieved by means of a linguistic encoding by the speaker of her meaning and a decoding of that meaning by her audience. In fact, hardly anybody involved in the empirical study of comprehension accepts this “code model” of linguistic communication. Modern pragmatics, inspired by the work of the philosopher Paul Grice, takes for granted that comprehension is largely inferential. As argued by Sperber and Wilson (1993), a linguistic utterance is best viewed not as an encoding of the speaker’s meaning, but as a semantically rich piece of evidence from which this meaning can be inferred. The result of linguistic decoding is typically an ambiguous and gappy conceptual structure that vastly underdetermines its interpretation. Interpretation is based on this decoded conceptual structure taken together with contextual information and guided by maxims of conversation (according to Grice) or by expectations of relevance raised by the utterance itself (according to Sperber & Wilson).

According to Grice, successful communication involves cooperation among interlocutors. Their conversation must have a common goal (or at least a common ground), and their utterances must contribute to this common goal. Interlocutors should conform to maxims of conversation that guide their cooperation. Among these, there are maxims regarding truthfulness, and in particular the maxim “Do not say what you believe to be false,” which Grice viewed as the more important of all. A cooperative speaker will abide by the maxims and, in particular, will speak truthfully. Accepting such an account, one might view it as going a long way towards grounding epistemic trust. There is an objection: people can participate in conversation in bad faith, try to deceive their audience, and pretend to be cooperative when in fact they are not. Just as the fact that the maker of an assertion presents her assertion as true whether it is true or false and therefore cannot very well be believed just because she is making an assertion, a participant in a conversation cannot be believed just because she presents herself as cooperative and in particular as truthful. This objection is reasonable but it does not make the Gricean approach irrelevant to the study of trust. Grice is not claiming that interlocutors are always genuinely cooperative, and even less that they always follow the maxims (since overt violations of the maxims play a role in interpretation). What he is claiming is that the audience must presuppose that the speaker is cooperative and follows the maxims in order properly to infer her meaning, even if, in the process or later, they may be led to revise this presupposition. So, adopting a stance of trust in the cooperation and in particular in the truthfulness of the speaker is a constitutive part of the comprehension process. This stance of trust is adopted without any other reason than a desire to engage in communication and understand others. In this sense, it is a form of fundamental trust. However, this trust by default and for the sake of comprehension can very easily be rescinded when it comes not just to comprehending but to accepting the content communicated, or even in the process of comprehension.

Grice and Sperber (2002) have argued that the assumption that guides comprehension is not one of cooperativeness and truthfulness but one of relevance. According to Relevance Theory, every utterance conveys a presumption of its own relevance, and this is what guides the process of comprehension. More specifically, hearers seek an interpretation that meets the expectations of relevance raised by the utterance itself. That is, they adopt a stance of trust in the relevance of the speaker in order to understand her. When truthfulness is a condition for relevance, as it often is, hearers adopt a stance of trust in the speaker’s truthfulness too. To give just one illustration, consider the following utterance:

“Watchmaker to Mary: It will take some time to repair your watch.”

Literally understood, the watchmaker’s statement is a truism since repairing a watch is a process extended over time. If Mary was interpreting this utterance just on the basis of a presumption of truthfulness or of a Davidsonian principle of charity, she might be satisfied with its literal truth. However, understanding this as a truism is a minor point and it doesn’t mean that Mary takes the watchmaker to be committing himself not to the truth of any interpretation of “some time” in his utterance, but to the truth of the first interpretation that is relevant enough to be worth her attention. Having understood what the watchmaker means, she may then choose to question its truth, but still, she had to adopt a stance of trust in relevance, which involved a stance of trust in truthfulness as a subpart, in order to understand what her interlocutor meant.

This is not the place to discuss the merits of different pragmatic approaches such as that of Grice and that of Sperber and Wilson. Whatever their differences, they converge in arguing that a stance of trust that may be directly trust in truthfulness, or that may be trust in relevance which typically implies truthfulness) is an automatic part of the interpretation process. In engaging in conversation, and through this stance of trust, people develop a “common ground” or a “mutual cognitive environment.” They do so at least tentatively in the context, and for the sake of the verbal exchange and of social intercourse more generally. This might ready them for a fulfledged acceptance of the contents of this common program, and the stance of trust involved in communication is both fundamental and fragile, and can easily be withdrawn when it comes to accepting the content understood. Such an approach therefore meets the anti-reductionist requirement of “non gullibility” that is, the requirement that people should not automatically accept whatever their interlocutors say.

In young children, the stance of trust needed for comprehension may extend into a quasi-automatic acceptance. This may be a distinctive trait of a phase of cognitive development where language acquisition, language understanding and the acquisition of information about the world are wholly intertwined processes. Once, however, children master to a sufficient level the language spoken in their community and have refined their interpretive abilities, they may display a somewhat more sceptical attitude toward information that comes from others. This process doesn’t mean that they systematically start checking the truth or the probability of what they are told. Rather, what they become better at is checking the intentions of their interlocutors and the reasons they have to communicate with them. Thus they may start developing more fine grained heuristics for assessing credibility and trustworthiness.

A large part of our knowledge reaches us through communication and communication is a much more creative and richly interpretive process than is usually acknowledged. We do not just accept information, but we reconstruct in a manner relevant for us. Trusting other people is involved in the constructive process of understanding. There is no passive “blind trust.” There is no blind trust in communication in the same sense as there are no raw sense data in perception. A stance of trust, however, is part of the interpretive competence that grounds our capacities to understand, to learn how to communicate, and to cope with the complex social networks of knowledge that make us humans.
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Notes

2. The idea of a “division of cognitive labour” is due to Philip Kitcher. Cf. Kitcher [1993: ch.8]
3. The mutual dependence of trust in cognitive and social order has been especially stressed by Steven Shapin. “It is not the case that the moral order fails and then the cognitive order fails, or the reverse. They fail together, just as they stabilize together.” Cf. Shapin [1994:33]
11. I owe the example to Dan Sperber. The particular report quoted was taken from the web site of the British Trust for Ornithology (www.bto.org). The list of reports was dated April 8th 2004.
15. For an account of the asymmetry between games involved in communication and iterated Prisoner’s Dilemma games, see Sperber (2001) “An Evolutionary Perspective on Testimony and Argumentation” Philosophical Topics, 29, 162, pp. 401-413.
17. For the notion of “stance of trust” see Richard Holton (1994) “Deciding to Trust, Coming to Believe”, Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 72, pp. 637-65, although he employs it in a quite different way.
I gather in this perspective such different approaches as that of Philip Kitcher [1993; 1994] and Alvin Goldman [1999]. For a detailed analysis of these different positions, see A. Goldman, this volume.


The concept of “earned authority” is analysed in Kitcher [1992].


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Author’s Biography

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