Is Trust an Epistemological Notion?
Gloria Origgi

To cite this version:

HAL Id: ijn_00000653
https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_00000653
Submitted on 5 Dec 2005

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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 colonisation 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? Is it 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
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 social-historical 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 acts in the public and permanent exclusion of his own actions and decisions that seems difficult to reconcile with the autonomy of a rational agent. To what extent are these various approaches 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.

Verbal comprehension. This pragmatic form of epistemic trust calls, I will argue, for a non-reductionist account. Therefore—and this will be my second main claim—in no domain where the scientific enterprise relies on verbal communication can epistemic trust be fully accounted for in a reductionist way.

Non-epistemological approaches

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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 cooperation. As in the case of cooperation in 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 interpretative 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 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 of Tat,” Michel Blais has argued that such a game theoretic approach might be extended to trust within a scientific community. 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 defector from the community. This view has been criticised for placing excessive confidence in the reliability of the constraints. 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.
share with you. But this form of cooperation is of limited epistemological relevance. In the more epistemologically 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 re- integrate them? Would not this be costly enough to the perpetrators to deter scientists tempted to take their data? Ostracism of evidence-takers seems guided, 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 fit for that strategy makes sense if basically the same game with similar payoffs is played again and again and if, in this game, defection is advantageous unless it is sanctioned. In personal relationships, however, the goals of communication are extremely varied. Most of these goals—cooperation 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 more of a moral than of a strategic character. 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.” 11 In moral philosophy, trust is often analysed as a particular prior commitment to a relationship and not an inference that justifies the acquisition of knowledge through testimony. If A has reasons to believe that B has reasons to believe that p, then A has reasons to believe that p, even if the nature of A’s reasons is irreducibly different from that of B’s. As reasons to believe that p are based in her assessment of the “epistemic character” of B and in particular of his honesty and reliability. Moreover, A’s reasons to believe that p depend on his assessment of the evidence for or against p. 21 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, 22 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 form of rationalism. In this perspective, trusting others means having reliable criteria to assess their competence and trustworthiness. Five 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 perception and reasoning as proxies for one’s own. We use experts as “tools”, as we use a telescope to enhance our perception. 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 by market. But this provides me with no reason to put greater or lesser trust in the article published in these journals. Or I can be acquainted with your track records on a particular issue and judge that you have earned authority or, better, reputation on this issue. 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 vicious 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 he or 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." 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 justified in relying on these two sources of information if, or when, we have no better choice, but we are not justified 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. Here the analogy breaks: there are specific reasons, having to do with possible malfunctioning, but otherwise, their function is to make sense of what other adults would refer to in using the term and tactfully deferring to their authority.

Moreover, as Gibbard 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 acknowledge others' some fundamental authority because we cannot but accord others some fundamental authority." How do we determine which other people merit our trust? How do we decide whether we trust or mistrust someone, and how is this trust determined? Here the analogy breaks down. In contrast to our own cognitive mechanisms, other people’s influence has been pervasive in our social surroundings for a long time. Still, it has been maintained, for instance by Ruth Millikan26, that communication is a construction of such systems.

Of course, it is not within the scope of this essay to defend or reject this analogy. We know that the analogy breaks down a second time when we consider the conditions under which children can and cannot be trusted. That is, our children’s influence has been pervasive in our past, but not on the same level as adults’ influence. Here the analogy breaks down a third time, because children are the objects of our trust. For Burge and Coady base an a priori justification of trust in testimony on fundamental properties of language use, although different ones. For Burge it is what he sees as the purely preservative characteristic of successful linguistic communication that entitles us to rely on what others tell us. For Coady it is the mere truthfulness of testimony.

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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 (1995), 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 encoded 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 be contributions 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 cooperativeness 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.

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 trust 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 conversation 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.
Gloria Origgi

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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, 1-2, 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. 63-76, 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.


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


33 For the notion of “common ground” see D. Lewis [1983] “Languages and Language”, Philosophical Papers, vol. 1, Oxford University Press, pp. 163-188. The notion of “mutual cognitive environment” is developed in Sperber & Wilson (1986/95) cit.


* I am grateful to Dan Sperber for his helpful comments and detailed suggestions from the earliest formulation of this paper. Much of this work is indebted to his ideas on communication. A previous version of this paper has been presented at the workshop: Concept of Authority held in Rome, March 2004 at the Fondazione Olivetti. I would like to thank Pasquale Pasquino, who invited me, and all the participants for helpful comments.

Author’s Biography

Gloria Origgi is a philosopher at the Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris. Her research interests are philosophy of mind, epistemology and cognitive science as applied to new technologies. She is the author of Introduzione a Quine (2000). She has co-authored articles with Dan Sperber and has been translator and editor of Dan Sperber and Steven Pinker into Italian.