Is Trust an Epistemological Notion?
Gloria Origgi

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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 others’ 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
verbal comprehension. This pragmatic form of epistemic trust calls, I will argue, for a non-reductivist 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 reductivist 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 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.

Shapin's historical 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 kind of relativism 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 of rational argument. In social theory, trust is frequently treated as a form of rational choice to pursue ongoing cooperation. "In moral philosophy, trust is seen as a key component of the authority relationship, in which a person deems it justified to demand justification of the thing she is being asked to do or to believe as a condition of her doing or believing." 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 is quite poor, and my comprehension of its physiological function is hopelessly metaphysical.

Is this sort of deference ever justified in some relevant sense, and should epistemology pay attention to it? If 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 adequate account of the epistemic function of testimony on beliefs. 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 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. 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 cheat from the community. This view has been criticised for placing excessive confidence in the reliability of the constraints.
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.” In moral philosophy, trust is often analysed as a particular prior commitment to a relationship and not an aspect of the cooperative behaviour of the parties. This prior commitment is not obviously purposive. 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, defection. The nature of trust of interest to epistemology? Does it help capture the fundamental role of trust in the acquisition of vicarious knowledge? Epistemic trust is trust, on the one hand, in the goodwill of others, and, on the other hand, in their competence. The moral notion of trust is of clear relevance to assessing goodwill, in particular in enduring personal relationships, but it seems of no relevance to the assessment of competence. Trusting the other party’s willingness to take into account my own interest, either for the sake of our future relation, or simply out of an affective attitude, doesn’t assure me that what I am obtaining is valuable information. The moral attitude of trust may yet influence the sharing of information in other ways. On the one hand, it may cause interlocutors to do their epistemic best. On the other hand, it may cause the morally trusting receiver of information to display a stance of epistemic trust for the sake of the relationship. She may then either lower her epistemic criteria for accepting a belief [my friend says he is too tired to go to the cinema, I would not have thought so, but I will believe him], or remain inwardly sceptical and possibly check what she has been told on the basis of independent evidence. Typical reactions are more of a moral than of a strategic character. Trust seems to be allocated in a manner that is too conservative and too morally, and psychologically rich to be well captured by game-theoretical modelling.

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EPISTEME would amount to a form of hyper-scepticism judgments. Granting no authority to ourselves as an extension of the necessary self-trust that standard move in contemporary epistemology. Reid's justification appeals to the wisdom and justifications for such authority and such trust. who trust fundamental authority do so without reasons to do so in each case, whereas people who trust derived authority attend to reductive and non-reductive notion of trust) is not involved in a form of "surrender of judgement." 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 of what another person says. To see whether this is indeed the case, we must consider 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 entitled, to quote Richard Foley, in epistemology? Moreover, as Glubb 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 ascribe 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 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. However, if we are justified in mistrusting others, then it is necessary for the stability of shared knowledge and competence in our social surroundings that we have a way of doing 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, provide justifications for such authority. Such trust is a form of hyper-scepticism. It was noticed by Ruth Millikan26, that communication is a form of cognition by proxy, and that we are as reliable, 27 as others are, in our own cognitive mechanisms. 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 of what another person says. To see whether this is indeed the case, we must consider 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 entitled, to quote Richard Foley, in epistemology?

In his famous 1975 article, "The Meaning of Meaning", Putnam pointed out that the use of language is intrinsically deferential. I do not need to be an expert chemist to use the word "aluminium"—even if I am not able to distinguish aluminium from steel—because the "distribution of linguistic labour" as Putnam calls it, links my use of this term to the relevant knowledge possessed by the metal experts in my linguistic community. Deference to "expert" is particularly manifest in language acquisition. A child may hear the word "bat" and start using it with little or no understanding of what bats are while still intending to refer to what adults around her would refer to in using the term and tactfully deferring to their authority.

But despite the degree of thought and reference should be distinguished from a more purely epistemic attitude of acceptance of statements. Still, viewing linguistic practices as intrinsically deferential to a semantic level goes well with seeing them as deferential at an epistemological level. It is no surprise, therefore, to see Tylor Burge argue that relying on interlocution is 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," which he calls the Acceptance Principle. Note that we do not use this principle as a justification according to Burge, but rather as a reason to accept information in the first place.

In his book Testimony, Anthony Coady explicates the Davidsonian Principle of Charity to derive an a priori justification of testimony. Language interpretation requires a massive attribution of trust to our interlocutors. Speaking the truth and sharing public meanings are so closely intertwined that the very existence of a public language would be impossible without a strong positive correlation between the sentences uttered in that language and the facts they represent. Even reductionist approaches to testimony presuppose the existence of a public so "experts," and therefore of at least some prior positive correlation between testimonies and their truth, since without such a correlation, there would be no language in the first place.

Burge and Coady base 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 is being said. Just as it is memory, he argues, understanding an utterance preserves without any addition 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 truthless use of speech. Burge's idea that comprehension is preservative has been questioned by Anne Bezuidenhout. It totally ignores empirical accounts of the process of comprehension: making sense of what other people say is an inferential interpretative process and not a mere decoding one. I will return to this point in the final section. Here I cannot discuss in detail Coady's insightful position. Let me just mention one possible objection. What is shared between speakers in a linguistic community is the shared knowledge possessed by the metal experts. Deference to "expert" is fully implemented. In his Davidsonian perspective, is a mass of true and trivial statements, as is indeed found in ordinary 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 can we account for such statements are true (and trivial) justify an individual's acceptance on trust and without examination of what she is told by specific interlocutors on specific topic?

A fine-grained analysis of what is at stake in the exchange of information seems needed for a better understanding of trust in knowledge acquisition. Many of the tensions that shape the debate on trust in epistemology might be
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 the 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 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 direction, 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 Grocean 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 that of Sperber and Wilson. Whatever their differences, they converge in what they are trying to say. 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 trustful meaning. Looking for an interpretation that fulfills her expectation of relevance, she understands that repairing her watch will take more time than she might have expected. For instance, if she might have expected the watch to be repaired the next day, she will understand the watchmaker as meaning that it will take several days. Why not understand him to mean that it will take an absurdly high amount of time, years for instance, since this would be even more relevant? It would be relevant only if true, otherwise it would be just a poor joke. Here relevance implies truth. 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 suggesting 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 may ready them for a fullfledged acceptance of the contents of this common ground, but this is not automatic. 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 antireductionist 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 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: 32].
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 an account of the 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].


31 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.


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