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?

Is Trust an Epistemological Notion?
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. Societal 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 illustrating 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 empirical or historical perspective show that trust or authority are just historically situated social constructions that cannot be normatively evaluated outside of their historical-cultural 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 considered as a social value 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 to the problem of trust consistent? Is there a general consensus to the study of trust in epistemic authority? If 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 uncritical 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 epistemic 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 epistemic trust just as there are many varieties of truth in general, casting doubt on the claim that 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. 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 I understand what control cholesterol is quite poor, and my comprehension of its physiological role is hopelessly metaphorical. 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 belief 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 widespread, the social-scientific approach without embracing the kind of relativism that is frequently associated with it.

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 communicator to cooperate when their interests might often be better served by defecting. In many cooperation games having the structure of an iterated prisoners’ 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 cheater 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 topic 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 epistemological relevance. In the more epistemically significant case of the publication of observations and results, the response to the production of fake 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? Orascom of evidence-fakers seems misguided, 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 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 in 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.

Trust is not reduced to moral trust. Moreover, the moral notion of trust does not reduce to moral trust. Moreover, the moral notion of trust does not reduce to moral trust. Moreover, the moral notion of trust has developed in recent epistemology.

In this section, I have briefly examined various non-epistemological approaches to trust, and argued that while they all had something to contribute to our understanding of the notion, none provided a comprehensive account. I now turn to epistemological approaches.

Epistemological approaches

If I grant you epistemic authority because of independent reasons—which may be direct of indirect, moral or epistemic—I have to think that you are a reliable source of information, therefore, I am granting you derivative authority. Whereas, if I suspend my reasons in granting you authority and I am willing to accept whatever you say just because you believe it, then I am granting you fundamental authority. This distinction between derivative and fundamental authority reflects in the past the classical distinction in the philosophy of testimony between reductionists and antireductionists. Hume is the historical representative of the reductionist position: According to him, reliance on testimony is based on the same kind of inductive inference that justifies any other belief, that is, on the evidence of accused conformity of testimonies to facts. We rely on others because experience has shown them to be reliable, thus we have independent reasons to believe them. The non-reductionist view is historically represented by Thomas Reid, who considered the evidence of testimony as a fundamental category of evidence neither reducible to other forms of perceptual or inferential evidence nor justifiable in terms of them. As he famously wrote: “The wise and beneficent Author of nature, who intended that we should be social creatures, and that we should receive the greatest and most important part of our knowledge through testimony: If A has reasons to believe that B is correct in his affirmation of the fact that p, then A has reasons to believe that B, p, even if the nature of A’s reasons is irrefutably 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”.

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, 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. They 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.

This didn’t imply, according to him, a major departure from usual epistemological concerns. According to Hardwig others is normatively accountable in terms of a particular class of reasons 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 B, p, even if the nature of A’s reasons is irrefutably 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 it is obvious that B’s reasons to believe that B, p, even if the nature of A’s reasons is irrefutably 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. 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.

In moral philosophy, trust is often analysed as a particular prior commitment to a relationship and not an obvious way of gaining from the interaction. The prior commitment is not obvious or prior purpose. 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 Bayer, 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 intended, action, and a commitment to cooperation. Hence, trust is a disposition to confide in 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 other 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. Even in strong enduring personal relationships epistemic trust does not reduce to moral trust. Moreover, the less personal and enduring the relationship, the more limited is the relevance of the moral notion of trust to the epistemic notion.
sources. I may have a good understanding of the process of assessing and filtering information in peer reviewed journals and the process of assessing and filtering sources. I may have a good understanding of the process of assessing and filtering information as information from our senses. To avoid misinforming others or ourselves, we use a mechanism of verbal communication that entitles us to rely on what we hear. It is no surprise, therefore, to see Tylor Burge argue that relying on interlocution is such that the very possibility of a common language and therefore of at least some a priori 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 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 character of successful linguistic communication that entitles us to rely on what is said, whereas for Coady it is what he sees as the purely preservative character of the linguistic use of language that entitles us to rely on what is said. The difference between derived and fundamental trust, (and the associated reductive and non-reductive notion of trust) is that one grants authority to others without giving reasons to do so in each case, whereas people who trust fundamental authority do so without giving reasons to do so. Proponents of the notion of fundamental authority and of a non-reductive account of trust, on the other hand, provide justifications for their authority that could be found in oneself, or only less reliably. The analogy breaks down: there are reasons that do not apply to oneself. On the other hand, there is much more accumulated knowledge and competence in our social surroundings than inside us. There are therefore specific reasons to mistrust others that are not trustable, so that the very possibility of a common language and therefore of at least some a priori positive correlation between testimonies and their truth, since without such a correlation, there would be no language in the first place.

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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 Coddy, 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 even 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 cooperative 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.

The Gricean approach considered here (as discussed in the paper "Trust and Truthfulness in Communication" [Grice 1989]) has been criticized by several authors, including Sperber and Wilson (1986), who argue that the Gricean approach is too simplistic and that the concept of trust must be more complex. They therefore propose a more complex model of communication, which includes the concept of trust. In this model, trust is seen as a complex social process, which involves the construction of social networks of knowledge that make us trustworthy.

There is an objection: people cannot trust others blindly without any reason, otherwise they would be deceived. However, 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 cooperative 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.

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 to 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.


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].

For this definition of the authority relation, cf. R. Friedmann [1973], p. 77.


To exemplify the example of 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.

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.

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.


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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].


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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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.