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► **To cite this version:**

Gloria Origgi. Trust and Reputation. The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of Trust, 2020.
ijn_03046522

HAL Id: ijn_03046522

https://jeannicod.ccsd.cnrs.fr/ijn_03046522

Submitted on 8 Dec 2020

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Gloria Origgi

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Submitted for the Routledge Handbook of Trust and Philosophy

Ed by Judith Simon

Introduction

Trusting others is one of the most common epistemic practices to make sense of the world around us. Sometimes we have reasons to trust, sometimes not, and many times our main reason to trust is based on the *reputation* we attribute to our informants. The way we usually weight this reputation, how we select the “good informants”ⁱ, which of their properties we use as indicators of their trustworthiness and why our informants are responsive to our trustful attitude are rather complex matters that are discussed at length in this volume (see Faulkner, Goldberg – in this volume). Indicators of trustworthiness may be notoriously biased by our prejudices, they may be faked or manipulated by malevolent or just interested informants and change through time and space (see also Scheman – in this volume). In this chapter I will try to specify conditions of rational trust into our informants and their relations to the reputational cues that are spread throughout our cognitive environment.

Why we trust, how we trust, and when have we reasons to trust are features of our cognitive, social and emotional life that are highly dependent on how the informational landscape is organized around us through social institutions of knowledge, power relations, and systems of

acknowledging expertise, i.e., what Michel Foucault brilliantly defined as *The Order of Discourse* typical of every societyⁱⁱ. In my contribution I will focus on *epistemic trust*, i.e., the dimension of trust that has to do with our coming to believe through reliance on other people's testimony, yet many of the reflections on the relation between trust and reputation may be applied to the general case of interpersonal trust discussed in other chapters of this handbook. I will first introduce the debate around the notion of epistemic trust, then discuss the notion of reputation and finally list a number of mechanisms and heuristics that make us rely, more or less rationally, on the reputations of others.

Epistemic Trust

I was born in Milan on February 8th 1967. I believe this is true because the office of Vital Records in the Milan Municipal Building registered few days after that date the testimony of my father or my mother that I was indeed born on the 8th of February in a hospital in Milan, and delivered a birth certificate with this date on it. This fact concerns me, and of course I was present, but I can access it only through this complex, institution-mediated form of indirect testimony.

Or else: I know that smoking causes cancer, I have been told this and it was enough relevant information for me to make me quit cigarettes years ago. Moreover, information regarding the potential harm of smoking cigarettes is now mandatorily advertised on each pack of cigarettes in the European Union. I do not have the slightest idea of the physiological process that a smoker's body undergoes from inhaling smoke to developing a cellular process that ends in cancer. Nevertheless, the partial character of my understanding of what it really means that smoking

causes cancer does not refrain me to state it in conversations and to rule my behavior according to this belief. I trust the institutions that inform me on the potential harm of smoking if I have reasons to think that they are benevolent institutions that care about my health. Our cognitive life is pervaded with partially understood, poorly justified, beliefs. The greater part of our knowledge is acquired from other's people spoken or written words. The floating of other people's words in our minds is the price we pay for thinking. This epistemic dependence on other people's knowledge doesn't make us more gullible, rather it is an essential condition to be able to acquire knowledge from the external world.

Traditional epistemology warns us of the risks of uncritically relying on other people's authority in acquiring new beliefs. One could view the overall project of classical epistemology - from Plato to the contemporary rationalist perspectives on knowledge - as a normative enterprise aiming at protecting us from credulity and ill-founded opinions. The status of testimonial knowledge throughout the history of philosophy is ambivalent: sometimes it is considered as a sort of "minor" source of knowledge, linked to communication that had to be sustained by moral norms against lying in order to work among humans. In the Christian Medieval tradition, it is considered as an act of faith in the *auctoritas*, i.e., a different source of "knowledge" from that provided by a priori knowledge or by the senses.

Trust is an essential aspect of human cognitive and communicative interactions. Humans not only end up trusting one another much of the time but are also trustful and willing to believe one another to start with, and withdraw this basic trust only in circumstances where they have special reasons to be mistrustful.

There is a meager tradition in classical philosophy of testimony from the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid that has made the claim that humans are epistemically justified in believing what

other people say. Relying on other people's testimony is a necessary condition, although not a sufficient one, for epistemic trust. Epistemic trust involves a mutual relation between a trustor and a trustee, and a series of implicit and explicit mutual commitments that mere reliance does not require. The very idea of epistemic trust presupposes the acceptance of other people's testimony, although doesn't reduce to it: trusting other enriches the moral and interpersonal phenomenology of testimony by adding an emotional dimension to the relation between the trustor and the trustee and implies a mastery of the reputational cues that are distributed in the social institutions of knowledge. But let present first the philosophical debate around the reliability of testimony.

In classical epistemology, uncritical acceptance of the claims of others was often seen as a failure to meet rationality requirements imposed on genuine knowledge. Although testimony is considered an important issue by many philosophers, such as Augustin, Aquinas, Montaigne, Locke and many others, the rise of modern philosophy puts intellectual autonomy at the center of the epistemic enterprise, thus dismissing testimony as a path to knowledge that does not present the same warrants as clear and distinct ideas or sense impressions arrived at by oneself. This individualistic stance was clearly a reaction against the pervasive role in Scholasticism of arguments from authority. It persists in contemporary epistemology, where a common view, described as "reductivist" or "reductionist" holds that true beliefs acquired through testimony qualify as knowledge only if acceptance of the testimony is itself justified by other true beliefs acquired not through testimony but through perception or inference (see Fricker, 1995; Adler, 2002; van Cleve, 2006).

This reductionist view contrasts with an alternative 'anti-reductionist' approach, which treats trust in testimony as intrinsically justified (Hardwig, 1985; Coady, 1992; Foley, 1994).

According to Thomas Reid, who provided an early and influential articulation of this anti-reductionist view, humans not only trust what others tell them, but are also entitled to do so. They have been endowed by God with a disposition to speak the truth and a disposition to accept what other people tell them as true. Reid talks of two principles “that tally with each other”, the *Principle of Veracity* and the *Principle of Credulity* (Reid, 1764, § 24). We are entitled to trust others because others are naturally disposed to tell the truth. A more contemporary version of the argument invokes language (instead of God) as a *purely preservative* vehicle of information (Burge, 1995): we trust each other’s words because we share a communication system that preserves the truth. Cases of misuses of the system (for example, lying) are exceptions that we can deal with through other forms of social coordination (norms, sanctions, pragmatic rules of “good use” of language).

Although the debate between reductionists and anti-reductionists is still ongoing in contemporary epistemology (Lackey 2008; Goldberg 2010), the very *fact* that *epistemic reliance*ⁱⁱⁱ on others is a fundamental ingredient of our coming to know is now widely acknowledged in philosophy (see also Goldberg - in this volume). Contemporary philosophy has rehabilitated testimony as a source of knowledge and widened the debate on testimony and trust in knowledge. The affective dimension of trust as a fundamental *epistemic* need in our cognitive life, how this complex social-emotional attitude impacts our knowledge processes, the depth of interpersonal dimension of this relation are nowadays mainstream themes in social epistemology (see Faulkner, this volume) . To what extent our trust is justified? How the justification processes of assessing the reliability of a testimonial beliefs are not limited to the receiver’s cognitive systems but *extend* to the producer’s cognition? What is the creative role of the communication process in coming to believe the words of others? What is the role of trust and the expectations of trustworthiness it

elicits? These are still open issues in contemporary epistemology in order to make sense of the apparently contradictory notion of *epistemic trust*, that is, a fundamental epistemic attitude that is based on a deep cognitive and emotional vulnerability. How can we justify an epistemic attitude on the grounds of a vulnerable attitude such as trust? Epistemic trust makes us cognitively vulnerable because we trust others not only to empower our epistemic life, but to take critical decisions that are based on expertise (as for example when we go to the doctor) and to shape our political opinions that crucially involve expert knowledge we do not fully master.

The cognitive vulnerability that epistemic trusts involves makes of it a special epistemic attitude, in a sense, richer than reliance on testimony. Our trust is pervasive, we cannot decide if we want to “jump into” an epistemic trust relation or stay out of it: we are born immersed in an ocean of beliefs, half-truths, traditions, and chunks of knowledge that float around us and influence the very structure of our knowledge acquisition processes.

Yet, the fact that we navigate in an *information-dense* world in which knowledge of others is omnipresent in our making up our mind about *any* issue does not make us more gullible or lead us to a sort *mass irrationality* that inexorably drags us towards a *credulous society* of people who will believe just about anything, to use the phrase of Gérald Bronner, who, along with Cass Sunstein, depicts society in exactly these bleak and disparaging terms^{iv}. People develop strategies of *epistemic vigilance*^v to assess the sincerity of their informants, the credibility of the institutions that produce the “epistemic standards” and the chains of transmission of information that sustain the *coverage* of facts^{vi}. Factors affecting the acceptance or rejection of a piece of communicated information may have to do with the *source* of the information (*whom* to believe), with its *content* (*what* to believe), or else with the various *institutional designs* that sustain the credibility of information. Given the impossibility of directly checking the reliability of

information we receive, we rather are competent in an *indirect* epistemic vigilance, i.e., we check the reputations of those who inform us, their commitments towards us, how their reputations are constructed and maintained. In most situations, our epistemic conundrum is not about the *direct* reliability of our informants, but about the reliability of the *reputations* of our informants, their true or pretended authority, their certified expertise. The project of an *indirect epistemology*, or a *second order epistemology* that I pursue in my work on reputation aims at understanding the ways in which we reduce our *cognitive deficit* towards complex information by labeling the information through a variety of *reputational systems*. We do not trust directly our informants, we trust the reputations we are able to grasp about them, what we are told about them, or their particular status in an epistemic network. We place our trust in social information about our informants and it is at this social level of gathering information about them that we are epistemically vulnerable. Social information can be more or less reliable and depend of the reliability of the epistemic network in which it is embedded. Reputations spread around our social world, they recruit epistemic networks in order to signal the epistemic virtues of their bearers. They are not always reliable: the competences we need to acquire in order to distinguish between reliable and unreliable reputations and come to trust others through their reliable reputations are varied and depend more on our social cognition than on our analytical skills. I will now turn to the epistemic uses of reputation and how we come to trust “the order of knowledge” that is embedded in the various epistemic networks and institutions that organize our epistemic trust through a number of complex devices that rank and rate this knowledge.

Is reputation a reliable source of epistemic trust?

As the philosopher and economist Friedrich August von Hayek (1960) wrote: “Most of the advantages of social life, especially in its advanced forms, which we call *civilization*, rests on the fact that people benefit from knowledge they do not possess”. We do not possess knowledge that is possessed by other individuals or group in our society and thanks to a division of cognitive labour we may act as we possess that knowledge by trusting those who have it. Yet, most of the time, we do not acquire *knowledge* through others. We acquire social information that allows us to use a piece of knowledge held by others, to evaluate it, without knowing it directly. If I buy a bottle of wine by reading the social information that is printed on its label, I do not acquire direct knowledge on the taste of wine, but I can act as I knew it. I trust the social information that surrounds the bottle of wine, what is written on the label, what other people say of this wine, how experts and connoisseurs evaluate it. This form of epistemic trust is not blind trust. *Social information*, that is, reputation, is organized in various epistemic networks that go from informal gossip to formal ratings of expertise that orient us in choosing a doctor, a bottle of wine or a scientific claim published in some *peer-reviewed* journal. We can evaluate these networks in terms of their trustworthiness and put our trust in them in a reasoned way.

People, ideas and products have a *reputation*, that is, they crystallize around them a certain amount of social information that we may extract in order to evaluate them and trust them.

Reputation is a cloud of opinions that circulates according to its own laws, operating independently of the individual beliefs and intentions of those who hold and communicate the opinions in question. It is part of the *social track* that all our interactions leave in the mind of others. This fundamental *collateral information* that accompanies the lives of people, of things and ideas is becoming so crucial in information-dense societies like ours that the way in which other people *value* information is more informative about any content than information itself. If I

read a positive opinion about the French Prime Minister in a newspaper whom I value credible, my opinion *not* of the newspaper, *but* the Prime Minister will have more chances to be positive too. The social information about the newspaper influences the reputation of the Prime Minister. Reputations travel through epistemic networks, become representations of the credibility of a certain agent. They are *public representations*, i.e., they spread through a population through gossips and rumors and other, more controlled epistemic devices (such as rating and ranking systems). The publicity of reputations and their way of circulating in a population are an essential aspect of the epistemic use of reputation and its role in our trust in others. What makes reputations a fragile signal of the informational content they are attached to, is that they circulate, are communicated and may be modified by the very process of communication.

The *essentially* communicative nature of reputation is often disregarded in studies of the phenomenon. Yet reputation, far from being a simple opinion, is a public representation of what we believe to be the opinions of others. We may find ourselves expressing and conveying this *opinion about opinions* for all sorts of reasons, out of conformism or to appear in sync with the opinions of everyone else, or because we see a potential advantage in make it circulate, or else because we want to contribute to stabilize a certain reputation of an individual. There is a fundamental difference between a mere opinion and what we believe we *should* think of someone based on the opinion of those we consider more or less authoritative. Hence, reputation is a three-place relation that may be defined as follows:

A reputation is a relation between X (a person), Y (a target person, a target object) and an authority Z (the common sense, the group, another person, the institutional rankings, what I think I should think about others, ...). The way in which the authority Z evaluates Y influences X's evaluation of Y.

The definition tries to capture the idea that reputation is a social property that is mutually constructed by the perceiver, the perceived and the social context. Judgements of reputation involve always a “third party”: a community of peers, experts or acknowledged authorities that we defer to for our evaluations and formal rankings. Reputation is in the eyes of the others: we look at how others look at the target and defer, with complex cognitive strategies, to this social look.

Understanding the way in which this social information influences our trust may seem a hopeless intellectual enterprise. We all know how fragile reputations are, how often they are undeserved. As Iago replies to Cassio, who is desperate of having lost his reputation in the eyes of Othello, in a famous passage of Shakespeare’s masterpiece tragedy: *“Reputation is an idle and most false imposition, often got without merit and lost without deserving”*.^{vii}

It seems impossible to make sense of our trust in information on at least reasonable grounds without paying attention to the biased heuristics we use to evaluate the social information and to the systemic distortions of the reputational systems in which the information is embedded. My strong epistemological point here is that reputation is not just a collateral feature that we may consider or not in our epistemic practices. Without access to other people’s reputations and evaluations, without a mastery of the tools that crystallize collective evaluations, coming to know would be impossible. In societies where information grows, the role of reputational devices that filter information becomes ever more crucial. Accordingly, social uses of new technologies, such as social networks, are geared by our cognitive dispositions to look for other’s reputations and care about our own image at the same time. I am able to check the signals of the credibility of other’s reputation, but many times I simply accept their reputation out of a sort of “conformism”: e.g when I trust someone only because everybody in a certain circle that I wish to

belong to trust her. Thus, not only do I care about my own reputation of being a trustworthy person, I also care about being the kind of person who trust that kind of others. The management of reputation is a complex attitude that mixes rationality, social norms and many psychological and social biases. Yet, it is possible to pry apart epistemically sound ways of relying on reputations from the biases and prejudices that may influence the way in which we weight social information. Reputations may be more or less reliable and their epistemic reliability depends on many factors that we are going to explore in the following section.

How reputations circulate: Formal vs informal reputations

What are the signals of a reliable reputation? What are the reasonable heuristics? Which biases exist? I now turn to the assessment and reliability of reputations. People emit signals meant to convince others of the credibility of their reputations. Similarly, all things, objects, ideas, and indeed everything that points beyond appearances to hidden qualities, emit signals that inform us more or less credibly that these qualities really exist. These signals are then transformed by the communication processes in social information, that is, public representations that circulate about a item or a person.

There are at least two broad categories of reputations:

Informal reputations, i.e., all the socio-cognitive phenomena connected to the circulation of opinions: rumors, gossip, innuendo, indiscretions, informational cascades, and so forth.

Formal reputations, i.e., all the official devices for putting reputations into an “objective” format, such as rating and ranking systems, product labels, and informational hierarchies established e.g. by algorithms on the basis of internet searches.

Informal reputations have a very bad reputation themselves as being vehicles of falsities, tendentious information and, nowadays, *fake news*. Yet, this informal circulation of reputations is not completely uncontrolled. Its spreading follows some rules and it is continuously influenced by the (good or bad) intentions of the producers of information and the aims and stakes of the receivers of information. For example, evidence shows^{viii} that the spreading of false information on social networks in case of *extreme events* (earthquakes, terrorist attacks) is rapidly corrected by the users. In contrast, other kinds of news, whose relevance is less crucially related to their truth and more with the opinion and values they express, can circulate and enter into *informational cascades*, i.e., informational configurations that occur when a group of people accepts an opinion – or behaves as if it did – without any even indirect assessment of the epistemic quality of the information. As Clément (2012) explains: when other individuals, who have given no thought to the matter, parrot the opinion of that group, “[t]hey become in turn the heralds of that opinion. They don’t even have to believe in it. It suffices that they don’t question it publicly (for instance, from fear of losing the respect of their fellow group members) for other people who have been exposed to that rumor to believe it should be given credit”. That is to say that even in the case of informal reputations, we develop strategies of epistemic vigilance which are more or less reliable given the informational context. The amount of cognitive investment in a rational strategy of epistemic vigilance depends on many factors, as we will see in the next session, one of the most fundamental being a rapid assessment of the risks at stake in acquiring or neglecting a piece of information.

The case of *formal reputations* is much more complex. Why do we trust our doctor? Are we really sure that the climate is changing? What are in general the scientific theories that I should believe? Were there weapons of mass destruction in Iraq that influenced the decision to start the

invasion of Iraq in 2003? Should we trust *Google* in its capacity of delivering the appropriate result in an information query? All these questions can be answered if we consider two kinds of possible biases in regards to the information we have to trust: cognitive/emotional/cultural biases about who we think we *should* trust and structural/reputational biases that depend on the way in which the different formal reputational devices are designed.

How do we trust reputations?

What we know about others, how we judge people and things, always depends on *traditions* that are structured by *reputational devices* more or less adequate to the transmission of these traditions. It is through these devices that we learn to navigate in the world of social information, that is, as I said, the collateral information that each person, object, ideas emits each time it enters a social interaction. Without the *imprimatur* of presumably knowledgeable others upon a corpus of knowledge, this corpus would remain silent, impossible to decipher. Competent epistemic subjects should be capable of integrating these reputational devices in their search for information. In other words, we do not need to know the world in order to evaluate it.

Rather, we evaluate what other people say of the world in order to know it. Nowadays, classifications and indicators have invaded the cognitive, social, and political sphere. Schools, hospitals, businesses, states, fortunes, financial products, internet search results, academic publications (which should be the ultimate encapsulation of *objective* quality) are classified, organized, valued, and set in hierarchical relations to each other, as if their intrinsic value were no longer calculable without their being compared to one another. The objectivity of these rankings is a matter of public debate, a major issue in sociology of knowledge and a crucial aspect of our responsible civic participation to social life. A contributor to this volume, Onora O'Neill, has challenged the use of formal rankings in bioethics, and proposed trust as an ideal for

patient-physician relations, in contrast to that of promoting individual autonomy, arguing that efforts to achieve the latter have undermined the former (O'Neill 2002). If we are aware of a major bias that influences the way a specific rating device displays its results, we should be *epistemically responsible* and make people aware of that bias. For example, it took a political intervention to force the change from the first generation to the second generation of search engines in which paid inclusions and preferred placements had to be explicitly marked as such.^{ix} Although a unified theory of the reliability of reputational devices is far from being a reality in philosophy and social sciences, there are some dimensions along which we can try to assess the way reputational devices can be constructed and influence the perception of reputations. For example, *informational asymmetries*^x spread across different domains, from traditional domains of expertise like science, to the evaluation of some classes of products, like financial product or cultural ones. A simple law of reputation is the following: the greater the informational asymmetry the greater is the weight of reputation in evaluating information. Another dimension along which reputation may vary is the level of formalization of the reputational device: clearly, a ranking algorithm of a search engine is a more formalized ranking system than the three glasses system of rating wines of the wine guide *Gault-Millau*. The more a reputational device is formalized, the less the judgement is dependent on the weight of authorities, that is, the less is dependent of the judgements of other experts: the device becomes an authority itself. How can we trust formal reputations given that they may be so biased on many dimensions and given our biased judgements towards them? How can we distinguish cases in which we trust a reputation based on authority (because my professor tells me to trust it) or on the basis of an objective ranking that is constructed in order to maximize the epistemic quality of the information we end up accepting? Given that there is no general epistemological theory of

reputation that may answer these questions for all reputational devices, the best strategy is to “unpack” each device and see how the hierarchy of information is internally constructed.

Sometimes it is easy (like for example, unpacking the devices that establish academic rankings), sometimes it is very difficult or just impossible because of proprietary information (algorithms of search engines and other reputational devices on the web, or proprietary information of rating agencies). A fair society that fosters epistemic trust should encourage practices of transparency vis-à-vis the methods by which rankings are produced and maintained. Moreover, a diversity of ranking and rating systems would provide a better distribution of the epistemic labor and a more differentiated informational landscape in which people can orient their choices.

Trusting others is a fundamental cognitive and emotional activity that is deeply embedded in our social institutions and reflects layers of practices, traditions, and also prejudices. Understanding how our trust can be still reasonable through the use of reputations of others is a fundamental step towards the understanding of the interplay between the cognitive order and the social order of our societies.

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ⁱ On the concept of “good informant” see E. Craig (1990) where he argues that our very concept of knowledge originates from the basic epistemic need in the State of Nature of recognizing the good informants, i.e., those who are trustworthy and bear indicator properties of their trustworthiness.

ⁱⁱ Cf. Foucault (1971).

ⁱⁱⁱ On the notion of *epistemic reliance*, see Goldberg (2010).

^{iv} Cf. Sunstein (2012) ; Bronner (2013).

^v The view the humans are endowed of cognitive mechanisms of *epistemic vigilance* has been defended in Sperber *et al.* (2010).

^{vi} On the notion of *epistemic coverage* cf. Goldberg *ibidem*.

^{vii} Cf. W. Shakespeare *Othello*, Act 2, scene 3.

^{viii} Cf. Origgi; Bonnier (2013).

^{ix} Cf. Rogers (2007)

^x For this expression, see Karpik (2010)