

Who knows? Who's asking?

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Understanding Epistemic Injustice – Bristol – 2014

1 Overview

Some thoughts about the relation between two ideas:

- social inequalities have epistemic consequences (incl. injustices)
- the function of the concept of knowledge is to track good informants

2 Epistemic inequality

Familiar idea: social inequalities are rife and extend to the epistemic realm:

- information is shared within privileged classes only;
- oppressed groups are denied access to education, are treated as being more gullible, having more manipulable beliefs;
- they are more prone to attempts to dupe;
- they are condescended to;
- they are given different justifications;
- they are presented the same facts in different ways.

Fricker: social inequalities can lead to *testimonial injustice* — folks are not given due credence.

My interest: (not so much in how we treat informants/testifiers) the way social inequalities affect informants' behaviour.

3 Function of the concept of knowledge

3.1 Basic story

Craig – “To put it briefly and roughly, the concept of knowledge is used to flag approved sources of information”

In fact, ‘knower’ marks good informants not simply sources of information.

Having such a concept which does this is important:

- an informant is more convenient than a ‘mere’ source of information;
- there is a special psychology involved in team-work in a community.

So, Tracking good informants is the core of our concept. But, who counts as a good informant is subjectively very sensitive to needs and interests of individuals.

3.2 Objectivisation

Craig thinks there is pressure towards an objectivised notion.

To aid communication, e.g., to properly deal with third party recommendations of informants, we need the notion to be standardised.

All this is going to edge us towards the idea of someone who is a good informant as to whether p whatever the particular circumstances of the inquirer, whatever rewards and penalties hang over him and whatever his attitude to them.

So – Craig thinks – the concept of knowledge we have is an objectivised one; the very notion of a good informant has been objectivised; ‘S knows, even if they are too far away to serve as my informant.’

4 Informants & inequality

Consider X:

- X is an informant who systematically treats members of different classes in different ways and the way they behave as an informant.
- X is more forthcoming to some groups. To the same groups X is more actively helpful and sympathetic.
- X’s deceptive tendencies pattern the other way.

- Even when feeling benevolent, X's expectations of the capacities of members of certain groups are such that the information they provide is less rich — in the worst cases, it is as if the information is pitched at a child. Think also mansplaining.
- In short, X surely counts as good informant concerning whether p for some groups, and not others — in a subjectivised sense at least

5 Theory of knowledge

5.1 A question

So, suppose tracking good informants is the core of the concept of knowledge.

And, who counts as a good informant for you, in some sense, seems to depend on your social context — how that person will perform as an informant *for you* given your gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etcetera.

Is that one of the subjective personal interests which there is reason to think has been objectivised out of our concept?

5.2 No?

If no, then who knows plausibly depends on who is asking.

(Say something about MacFarlane if there is time: knowledge is a relation whose extension varies with perspective / context of assessment.)

5.3 Yes?

If yes, then there seems to be an injustice built into the very concept of knowledge.

It doesn't perform its core function as well for some groups as it does for others.

Both super interesting. Both want exploring further. Also, independent of how we settle the issue of what our concept is, we should ask how our concept should be — Any suggestions welcome.

6 Summary

- Social inequalities have epistemic effects
- These include effects for information gatherers — in particular whose testimony is a good source of information
- Either we reflect this in our understanding of knowledge, or else our understanding opens up and interesting new form of injustice.

7 Questions

Here I have noted a couple of particularly interesting questions/comments which came up in the discussion following the talk — there were some other which are not so easy to summarise here. I am very grateful for all comments.

1. What is the connection between my talk and the concept of expertise? This will be interesting to talk about as it is widely discussed in social philosophy — perhaps it faces similar issues.
2. What is the connection between my talk and respect? Does one respect people better – in some circles – by treating them with the prejudice that X exhibits?
3. There is stuff in Social and Feminist Epistemology which would suggest that there are benefits to the move to more objectivised notions which are worth sticking with regardless of shortcomings. (I'd be super interested in any suggestions of things to read in this vein)
4. Certain comments made clear that I needed to be clear that what brings the idea of epistemic *injustice* into my discussion is the connection between the the inequalities talked about and systemic and widespread prejudice, social injustice and stereotypes, etc..
5. One questioner asked 'Why not say our notion of knowledge is objectivised but useless to some groups?' I agree that this seems like something we might say — I'd be very interested to hear of any strong reasons to think that we ought to say this.