
Towards a Pragmatist Social Epistemology

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Abstract

Contemporary social epistemology is a monster with two heads. Analytic social epistemology is fundamentally an extension of individual epistemology to groups. Alvin Goldman is a leading figure of this branch. Its main opponent is Steve Fuller's epistemology of the social (which is not to be confused with sociology of science, even though it is at some point not so far from some principles of the 'strong programme' or from Latour's approach). Steve Fuller is a leading figure of this branch. Instead of concurring, the two instances of social epistemology, analytic and 'revisionist' (as it enthusiastically labels itself), have been getting apart with ever more resentment. Steve Fuller reproaches analytic social epistemology for being 'an unfulfilled promise.' Alvin Goldman blames the other faction for its anti-veritistic take. Another less common objection to analytic social epistemology could be made: it is not essentially social; or it is 'individual-social' rather than 'social-social' epistemology (in the words of Alexander Bird). Indeed – says the 'asocial challenge' (Kareem Khalifa), while it takes into account the social environment in which subjects know, veritistic social epistemology deals with social properties that are often rather irrelevant to the epistemic problems it raises. 'Constructivist' social epistemology may conversely be objected to be, if not fact-relativist, at least inconsistent in rejecting objective justifications on a (supposedly) objective basis.

Reconciling these approaches of social epistemology and overcoming their limits has been a task for many social epistemologists lately. Revisiting the question in a pragmatist way may provide a new take. Nevertheless, this reconstruction in social philosophy should probably be run along Peircean lines, instead of along the lines of Dewey's philosophy, which is too often regarded as a pragmatist panacea but actually provides but too weak and general considerations. Peirce may be viewed as one of the ancestors of contemporary social epistemology. His social conception of epistemology, broadly speaking, articulates a set of theses, which can be separated into the following points: 1) a theory of knowledge based on the inquiry of researchers; 2) a definition of truth and of reality as what obtains at the end of inquiry; 3) a description of the scientific method as intrinsically social; 4) a view of logic as intrinsically social; 5) the thesis that personal identity hides community; 6) an emphasis on instincts held to be naturally social. All these theses are entangled and constitute a (possibly consistent) theory of "logical socialism."

Peircian social epistemology, if systematically developed, could be worth investigating for the following reasons. It is veritistic and consists in a theory of truth whose definition essentially implies community. Such is the very essence of Peirce's pragmatism. Second, it not only deals with an abstract conception of community, but with actual societies. Such a point needs to be argued for, since the doxa often reads that "the science that de facto studies human beings' social relations, sociology, has remained an unmapped area in Peirce's

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otherwise so all-embracing purview of human intellectual endeavours” (Erkki Kilpinen). In fact, Peirce did consider sociology seriously, and a close look at his actual concerns shows that not only he conceived truth and inquiry as intrinsically social, but that such a conception is supported by a reflection on the actual social and economical theories of his time. Even more, the social (and ‘moral’) sciences are real parts of his so-called logical socialism. In other words, since the scientific world is tantamount to the social world in being ”like a colony of insects” (CP 7.87), Peirce thought it was necessary to study society and societies through specific sciences while constituting an epistemology, and was indeed involved in such a program.

Last but not least, Peircean pragmatism can lead to a view of institutions which is far from ‘useless’ and ‘conservative’ – a reproach addressed by Fuller to veritistic epistemology. Peirce has some fresh insights in epistemology of expertise when it comes to universities. His pragmatist conception of logic drives him to a certain conception of teaching, of the role of professors in society, and to certain views on what the institutions of knowledge should be. They provide at least a sketch of what could be, if not a conciliation of the various branches of social epistemology, at least a theory starting on what they have best.

Keywords: social epistemology, knowledge institutions, community, Peirce