

Preface

When you think about thinking, what images come to mind? Perhaps Rodin's statue *The Thinker*, a genius like Einstein, or an old oil painting like that of the philosopher Kierkegaard, bent in concentration over his candlelit desk. In the popular imagination, thinking is almost always conceived of as a solitary pursuit, an act of deep engagement with one's own thoughts.

But if you think about, this is weird. Today, we might in fact say it is WEIRD: a strange quirk of Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). In many other parts of the world and times in history, reasoning has widely been assumed to have been much more socially embedded. Confucius, for instance, described himself as 'a transmitter, not a maker, believing in and loving the ancients'.¹ He saw his task as preserving the accumulated wisdom of the past, not making a great, new original contribution. Even naming the school he figureheads 'Confucianism' is misleading since in China it has never been known by an individual's name but as *Rujia*, or the school of the *ru* (a scholar or learned man). 'Confucianism' was a 16th century Jesuit missionary coinage, the work of the proto-WEIRDS.

Indian philosophy is also characterised by adherence to schools rooted in deep traditions rather than in individuals. For example, the 8th-9th century thinker Śaṅkara (or Śaṅkarācārya) is indubitably a foundational figure in Advaita Vedanta, but its adherents trace its roots much further back than this and grant no individual the status of a founder. To them it would perhaps be like insisting on referring to transcendental idealism rather than Kantianism on the grounds that Kant's philosophy built on many before him and so should not bear his name alone.

In oral traditions, the role of the individual is even less important. Usually no one has any idea who, if anyone, came up with the core ideas that comprise their philosophies. In any case, what matters is that generations have found them to be true.

¹ Analects, Book 7 Ch 2, in Legge (1893, p. 195).

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Yet in Western philosophy, reasoning has for many centuries been seen as a paradigmatically solitary activity. In Ancient Greece, Aristotle and Plato were already referring to certain ideas as those of named individuals, even though the culture also seemed to treat philosophy as something best done in a community. Plato had his Academy, Aristotle his Lyceum, and Epicurus his garden. In the centuries since, almost all the acknowledged great works of philosophy have been sole authored. You can count the exceptions on the fingers of one hand: Marx and Engels, Adorno and Horkheimer, Deleuze and Guattari. (We would now also add John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, but Taylor was not originally acknowledged as co-author, reflecting how until disturbingly recently the club of recognised solo thinkers has been male-only.)

And yet the social nature of thinking has been evident even in the individualistic West. In Europe and the Americas in the late 17th and 18th centuries people talked of ‘The Republic of Letters’ (*Respublica literaria*), a kind of long-distance intellectual community in which thinkers would discourse through letters. Descartes’ *Meditations*, for example, reads like the work of someone alone in his study, but it was published along with a selection of objections from critics to whom Descartes sent his manuscript, along with his replies. This virtual symposium is longer than the book itself.

Both Edinburgh and Paris in the 18th centuries were centres of the Enlightenment where salons and literary societies were the focus of intellectual life. Universities have continued to uphold the communal nature of thinking, with their conventions of conferences, seminars and peer review.

Yet for many decades in philosophy, the theory of knowledge (epistemology) barely even acknowledged the role of the social in the formation of knowledge. For instance, for a long time many philosophers sought to define knowledge as some version of Plato’s formulation *justified true belief*. That is to say, to know something is to have a belief that something is true, for that belief to be true, and for it to be properly justified. The key factors in this account are the knower (who has knowledge) and that thing in the world which the knowledge is of. There is no place in this account for the role played by the community of knowers.

The field of social epistemology opened up when a growing number of philosophers came to be dissatisfied with this. As one of the pioneers of social epistemology, Alvin Goldman, put it in an interview, ‘Historically, epistemology focused on how you can get the truth about the world. The question for social epistemology is something like, how does the social affect people’s attempts to get

the truth?’ (Baggini, 2008). This approach switches the focus in epistemology from definitions of what knowledge is to practical questions of what actually produces knowledge, and also the evaluative (‘normative’) questions of what we *should* count as knowledge.

If these issues ever appeared academic and remote, they certainly don’t today. In the year in which the lecture series this book is based on were given, questions about who controls truth and knowledge were centre stage. The then President of the United States, Donald Trump, repeatedly dismissed well-evidenced claims as ‘fake news’ while peddling lies and myths on the basis of little more than personal conviction and here-say. The Black Lives Matter movement showed how whole sections of society are repeatedly denied a voice, their testimony disbelieved or ignored, even when pleading ‘I can’t breathe’. From when the last of our talks was postponed due to the global coronavirus pandemic, large parts of the population dismissed scientific accounts of what was happening, with a sizeable minority claiming that the virus was a hoax and that vaccines were dangerous.

The contributions to this volume help us to make better sense of these and many other issues that confuse us, in an age when people increasingly don’t know who to believe, how to assess arguments or even if there is any such thing as truth.

Many of the contributors in this volume draw on JL Austin’s concept of a speech act. Austin’s central insight is that words do not only communicate information. In his terminology, words are only sometimes used in purely *locutionary* acts: ones that merely convey meaning. Words are also used in *illocutionary* acts, where the speaker intends to do or achieve something by speaking. For instance we might want to declare our love, make a request, give an instruction. Speech acts that actually result in a change in the world are *perlocutionary* acts, such as when you act on the basis of what I say.

I have to confess that although I’ve long found Austin’s concept of speech acts invaluable, I often struggle to remember to which kinds *locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary* refer. It doesn’t seem to matter, however, since the key insight is the simple one that we can do things with words. We can belittle and undermine people just as we can support and draw attention to them. We can discredit and we can give credibility. We can incite and we can calm down. You will come across numerous examples of such speech acts in several of the chapters to follow, demonstrating that how we speak really matters and that if free speech really means speech without any constraint, it can mean the freedom to do real harm.

Several chapters tackle a set of problems around what we might call epistemic authority. ('Epistemic' is an adjective meaning 'pertaining to knowledge'. So, for example, our 'epistemic goals' are what we want to achieve with regards to knowledge acquisition.) Why and how is it that some people's status as knowers is unjustly contested and their testimony is not believed? Several of our contributors refer back to the seminal work of Miranda Fricker on epistemic injustice: injustice that results from failures to communicate or attribute knowledge (Fricker, 2007). One such injustice she called 'testimonial injustice', which occurs when someone is unjustly ignored or not believed, because of an irrelevant factor such as their gender, race, or social class.

Another such injustice is hermeneutical injustice. Here, the injustice is a result of an inability to have the resources to properly understand what is happening and why it is unjust. For example, back in the 1960s women in the workplace were routinely the objects of unwanted sexual advances and even assaults. Many, perhaps most, women at the time thought they had to accept this as a fact of life: that is how men behaved. But in the 1970s the concept of 'sexual harassment' started to gain traction. Once familiar with this term, a woman could understand that what she had to endure was not natural or inevitable, it was an injustice.

These concepts play an important role in Jennifer Lackey's disturbing account of the role of confession in the criminal justice system. Confession is too often taken to be clinching evidence, but we know that confessions are often false, extracted by manipulative interrogation techniques. However, even when there is hard, forensic evidence that the confession must be false, judges and juries have often believed the confession, not the facts. This illustrates a peculiar form of testimonial injustice. Whereas usually the problem is that people are *not* believed, when people say negative things about themselves that fit negative stereotypes, they are believed too easily. Lackey's analysis of what is going here is a model of how philosophy can help us to understand important, real-life problems.

Katherine Jenkins also takes up Fricker's tools and puts them to important use. Jenkins argues that justice in cases of rape is hindered by three types of myth: that women routinely lie about rape, that in many rape cases the victim consented and only afterwards regretted it, and that women who are raped often bring it upon themselves. The problems here are not just that women are the victims of testimonial injustice. The structures of society also mean there are hermeneutical reasons why victims are not recognised. For instance, in England and Wales, marital rape was not even legally acknowledged

until 1991. That meant that legally speaking, rape within marriage was conceptually impossible. Also, myths that women often say no to sex when they mean yes, perpetuated in many forms of pornography, means that their 'no' is perversely taken to be consent.

Related themes concern Linda Alcoff, who writes of the epistemic injustices faced by survivors of sexual violence. Their testimony, she argues, is not only vital for achieving justice, it 'can provide information and analysis about the patterns that reveal the nature of the problem. In speaking publicly, victims enact resistance by defying the stigma of shame and the likelihood of presumptive disbelief'. One vital point Alcoff argues is that it is a mistake to focus on the consistency of first-person accounts as a hallmark of their reliability. In traumatic situations, people often fail to remember details that are incidental, such as the exact time of day or what they assailants were wearing. Yet a failure to recall such things is too often assumed to be some kind of sign that their memories of what really matters are unreliable.

Havi Carel and Ian Kidd deal with questions of epistemic injustice in the context of healthcare. Medicine has traditionally been very hierarchical, with consultant doctors as gods and nurses as angels. Patients have had little power in this. And yet patients have an intimate knowledge of their own experience which makes them vital witnesses in any medical diagnosis and treatment. Some of Carel and Kidd's stories about how patients have nonetheless been ignored or disbelieved are shocking. Carel's many years of work with medical professionals is helping to change this, showing once again how social epistemology is a discipline with real-world impact.

Carel and Kidd's work shows the dangers of limiting epistemic authority to those with recognised expertise. But in recent years we have also seen problems when experts are not properly respected, resulting in unsubstantiated crank theories being given more credence than well-evidenced ones. Alvin Goldman tackles this problem head-on, asking how we can spot experts. Goldman provides no easy answers. Putative experts are not always genuine, and genuine experts do make mistakes. Expertise always presents a dilemma for the non-expert: you have to use your own intelligence to decide who to believe, but you don't know enough about the subject to make that judgement without relying on trust to some degree.

As Peter Adamson shows, this problem may be quite new in Western philosophy, but it would have been very familiar to the philosophers of the medieval Islamic world. He argues that like Goldman, al-Ghazālī believed reliance on experts is unavoidable. But this does not mean we are 'doomed to follow authority

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uncritically'. Uncritical acceptance of authority, *taqlīd*, is to be avoided whenever possible. One way to do this is to 'work at improving our ability to recognize the expertise of other people, so that we may responsibly give those people our credence.' If we follow this advice, we will have no choice but to be 'fairly modest in our pretensions of certainty'.

Just as excess reliance on expertise is irrational, outright distrust of expertise is not entirely irrational. Many experts have disgraced themselves and there have particular concerns in recent years over scientific fraud. But why do scientists lie when their entire discipline is the pursuit of truth? Liam Kofi Bright questions the standard theory that dishonesty is motivated by the desire for esteem. While accepting this is often true, the problem is that this desire is also a positive motivator. To imagine science can work without any pride is naive, but pride can also lead people astray. As with Goldman, we are offered no easy answers. Philosophy often brings greater clarity to an issue, helping us to understand it better, but certainty about what is the case does not always follow.

However much we depend on experts, the need to think for ourselves is inescapable. Yet as Elizabeth Fricker (Miranda's big sister) considers, new technologies are giving us various opportunities to opt-out of doing so. Algorithms can pick films and music for us, and fill our grocery baskets. Fricker focuses on the ability of satnav to save us the effort of navigating ourselves. On the face of it this might look like just another labour-saving piece of technology. But Fricker believes we lose something valuable when we wilfully de-skill ourselves in such a way. She is no luddite and appreciates the same could be said for using washing machines or dishwashers. She navigates this tricky terrain with care and skill, never on philosophical auto-pilot.

The web is not only responsible for bringing sat nav to every smart phone, it is also accused of coarsening public discourse. How we talk to each other is not just important for civic harmony, it also affects our ability to communicate effectively and to learn from each other. Questions and problems relating to this concerned several of our contributors.

Alessandra Tanesini cautions against taking calls for greater civility in public debate at face value. British readers may remember a recent male prime minister telling a female opposition member of parliament to 'calm down, dear', borrowing an advertisement catchphrase. For many this was an all-too common example of powerful people (usually men) using pleas for politeness as a means of dismissing grievances that are justly deeply-felt and emotionally expressed.

Anger, argues Tanesini, is sometimes exactly what is needed not only to 'assert one's moral authority' but to convey important knowledge about the seriousness of a complaint.

Still, as Tanesini accepts, much rudeness in public discourse is unwarranted. Is the very nature of online communication really to blame? Sanford Goldberg thinks it is. Like Fricker, he is no Luddite and believes the internet has brought huge benefits. But certain structural features of online exchanges makes it inevitable that they are often 'unproductive and unhappy affairs'. In short, effective communication requires sensitivity to the exact purpose and nature of each individual contribution, and online it is just difficult to judge these. The paper presents a challenge to developers to help devise tools that can work round these seemingly intrinsic limitations.

Paul Giladi and Danielle Petherbridge's contribution also concerns the problems of just public discourse. Their subject is Jürgen Habermas's influential notion of communicative action, which sees the goal of public discourse to establish consensus and mutual understanding, all of which is critical for a functioning democracy. Giladi and Petherbridge tease out the vulnerabilities that are inherent in this form of discourse, all of which make it fragile and difficult to make work in the idealised form Habermas envisages.

One way in which we are all vulnerable is that we are open to manipulation. C. Thi Nguyen dissects one powerful tool of manipulators: providing the illusion of clarity. Mental clarity is of course something we rightly seek, and Nguyen's paper itself provides a great deal. But there is also a kind of bogus clarity, in which solutions and ideas are provided that free us from the trouble of grappling with real complexities and instead make things more manageable. Nguyen's argument is not just a useful way to understand conspiracy theorists and other malevolent manipulators, it also provides a warning against the seductions of standardised, precise measurements of performance in areas from healthcare to education.

You might worry that the manipulators are simply too powerful. Hasn't psychology demonstrated that human beings are stupid and gullible, led by their emotions and intuitions and not by their reason? Psychologist Hugo Mercier provides some reassurance for those who think human rationality has been debunked. He provides experimental evidence that human beings are actually very difficult to deceive. Nor are we as bad reasoners as received wisdom says. When we think collectively, with others, we actually get a lot right. We go wrong precisely when we head to our solitary garrets to think alone.

To have a psychologist in this collection should not be surprising. Philosophers are increasingly aware that many of the problems they

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address cannot be dealt with with the tools of philosophy alone. Social epistemologists in particular are aware that knowledge formation is a collective enterprise that should draw on relevant expertise wherever it is found and that work has to be done to get the facts right before we can start to reason. about them. Lani Watson has embraced this empirical and collaborative ethos in her work on the question of what counts as a question. The answer is both not as easy to arrive at as you might expect and at the same time almost obvious-sounding when it arrives. The paper is wonderful example of how philosophy can help us to question what we take for granted without always leading us into fantastical speculations.

The talks and this volume show how philosophy can be rigorous, accessible and of practical importance. I commend the essays that follow as demonstrations of as well as arguments about the social nature of knowledge formation.

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