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## **Scepticism And The Genealogy of Knowledge: Situating Epistemology In Time**

### **1. Dimensions of Socialization:**

We tend to think of the socialness of social epistemology largely in terms of a lateral expansion across social space. The expansion shifts the philosophical focus from the lone individual of so much traditional epistemology—the individual who wonders whether he knows this is really his hand before him, and so on—to his relations with his fellow subjects, his epistemic interactions with them, even his epistemic interdependence with them. The interest in epistemic interdependence brings divisions of epistemic labour centre-stage (as the explosion in the literature on testimony in recent years bears witness) and further establishes a recognized theoretical space for insights about how justification (for instance, justification for a scientific theory) can be dispersed across a whole epistemic community, with the consequence that it makes sense sometimes to regard that whole community as the subject of the knowledge, and perhaps no individual at all.<sup>1</sup> This kind of socialization of epistemology, then, brings with it a new, less individualistic conception of epistemic subjects. No longer conceived as lone individuals whose interactions with other individuals are epistemically incidental, we think of them as fundamentally, naturally, placed in relations of epistemic interdependence. Let us call this socialized conception of epistemic subjects, the Abstracted Social Conception. It marks the anti-individualist moment in epistemology.

The conception remains highly abstracted—appropriately for certain purposes. The social relations in which epistemic subjects are conceived as standing are relations between finite knowers and inquirers conceived as bearers of reasons, producers of evidence, seekers of information, conveyors of knowledge, and so on.

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<sup>1</sup> For an early case for the view that justification can be dispersed in the scientific community, see John Hardwig, 'Epistemic Dependence', *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985), 335-349. Lynn Hankinson Nelson has argued for the view that the scientific community is the subject of scientific knowledge. See her *Who Knows? From Quine to Feminist Empiricism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

These knowers and inquirers are not conceived as standing in relations of social identity and power. Categories of identity and power are only relevant for certain sorts of philosophical question, and those operating with the Abstracted Social Conception are not on the whole aiming to raise them. On the other hand, the Abstracted Social Conception doesn't easily allow such questions to come into view as genuinely epistemological questions, for issues involving identity and power tend to appear as issues for the sociology of knowledge alone so long as philosophy insists upon the Abstracted Social Conception. The two conceptions are not really all that far apart, however. A pregnant distinction that often features in the literature is that between layman and expert. One of the things that makes this distinction interesting is that it can be taken as a purely epistemic distinction, so that we conduct our debates about it in somewhat rationally idealized terms, yet it can also be taken as a distinction between two social identities where there are relations of power that hold between the two parties. A layperson's relationship to an expert does not have to involve any significant power relation, in the sense of a relationship of power that affects their interaction or impinges on the rationality of their exchange. As John Hardwig has pointed out, in very large and complex scientific projects where there is a marked division of epistemic labour among the contributing scientific communities, it makes sense to regard all the contributing individuals as at once experts vis-à-vis their own contribution and laypersons vis-à-vis the contributions of others.<sup>2</sup> In such a scenario, what relations of identity and power there may be between different groups of scientists may not give rise to any epistemologically compelling issues. But, then again, they might. In a scenario where one set of contributors happens to enjoy more professional esteem than others (perhaps, simply, they are operating under the auspices of an especially powerful institution) there could easily arise the sort of mingling of power with norms of inquiry that is not easy to disentangle. When this happens, it becomes part and parcel of the scientific inquirer's requisite epistemic virtues—possessed either by individuals or possibly only by the community—to reliably succeed in spotting research decisions that are too much driven by professional or institutional power. When social epistemologists talk of experts and laypersons, then, they are already flirting with a more fully socialized conception of epistemic subjects than the Abstracted Social Conception itself allows for.

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<sup>2</sup> Hardwig (1985).

If we want epistemology to account for the *human* epistemic predicament, then we need to have available a conception of epistemic subjects as required to overcome or negotiate certain entanglements of reason and power, because it is an essential feature of human inquirers that they operate in a context in which such entanglements can arise. We might call such a conception the Situated Social Conception, as it conceives epistemic subjects and their interactions as situated in a context of social identity and power.<sup>3</sup> For any given project in social epistemology, then, we need to be reflective about which conception of epistemic subjects suits our philosophical purposes—reflective, that is, about which degree of abstraction is appropriate for the issues we want to bring out. Simply sticking to the standard Abstracted Social Conception may occlude ethical and political aspects of epistemic practice that are worth our attention; then again, attempts to embrace a Situated Social Conception may be pointless if relations of identity and power are irrelevant to the issue we are pursuing. It's a judgement about horses for courses, so, as a matter of good philosophical method, we need to have the different options reflectively available to the philosophical imagination. The picture of epistemic subjects presented by the Situated Social Conception is less abstracted than that presented in the Abstracted Social Conception, but it is still an abstraction, as befits the philosophical purpose. It represents epistemic subjects not in their personal detail but as variously instantiating one or another (perhaps complex) social type. If the Abstracted Social Conception marks the moment of rebellion against excessive individualism in epistemology, then the Situated Social Conception marks the moment of rebellion against excessive rational idealization.

I have argued elsewhere for the importance of the Situated Social Conception for certain philosophical purposes, and in particular I have argued that there are issues of justice and injustice in our everyday epistemic interactions, notably testimonial interactions, which cannot come to light unless we adopt that more fully socialized

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<sup>3</sup> The idea of the socially situated subject is a cornerstone of feminist thinking in epistemology and philosophy of science, and the first use of the term that I am aware of is in Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14/3 (1988) 575-99; reprinted in Evelyn Fox Keller & Helen Longino (eds.) *Feminism and Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

conception.<sup>4</sup> For present purposes, however, the Abstracted Social Conception is appropriate, as my aim is to show how expanding not only across social space but also across *time* can be a powerful epistemological resource. We should distinguish between two sorts of temporal expansion: expansion across real time (including historical time), and expansion across the quasi-fictional time that is at work in genealogical method. I shall make a case for the philosophical fruitfulness of expanding over genealogical time, and my specific aim will be to show how the genealogical method can support and augment certain socializing arguments against scepticism. (The genealogical story I shall use is that given by Edward Craig in his book, *Knowledge and The State of Nature*—hence the appropriateness here of the Abstracted Social Conception, for in so far as there are any social types in the State of Nature, their social identities do not figure in the explanatory purpose that this genealogy aims to achieve.<sup>5</sup>) I shall make my case by reference to an argument recently put forward by Michael Williams, which employs a ‘default-and-challenge’ model of justification to make a diagnostic case against scepticism. And I will develop Craig’s ‘practical explication’ of the concept of knowledge in relation to three aspects of the default and challenge model—its admixture of internalist and externalist features; its contextualism; and its anti-sceptical impetus—and so augment the socialized anti-sceptical case mounted by Williams. I hope in this way to illustrate the philosophical usefulness of expanding epistemology not only laterally across the social space of other epistemic subjects, but also vertically in the temporal dimension.

## **2. Default-and-challenge: Socializing Justification**

In ‘Reconciling Responsibility and Reliability’<sup>6</sup>, Michael Williams explores the anti-sceptical impetus of a certain model of justification that is found in Robert Brandom’s

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<sup>4</sup> See my *Epistemic Injustice: Power and The Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Edward Craig, *Knowledge and the State of Nature. An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>6</sup> Michael Williams, ‘Reconciling Responsibility and Reliability’, *Philosophical Papers*, March 2008 [pp-pp?]. (Originally delivered as part of a Symposium on ‘Expanding

work under the name of ‘default-and-challenge’. It is an entitlement conception of justification, according to which we are entitled to assume our faculties are functioning correctly so long as there are no reasons to suspect otherwise. Williams’ paper has two aims. Firstly, he wants to ‘incorporate reliabilist insights within a fundamentally deontological framework’ [draft p.11], where the key reliabilist insight he has in mind is that many accounts of knowledge vastly over-intellectualize what it takes to know something, and simply do not square with the spontaneous and unreflective character of our most basic forms of knowledge, notably, perception. If there is to be a satisfactory responsibilism that presents a unified account of knowledge, it will have to avoid such intellectualism. And, secondly, he wants to show how such a responsibilism can, by the same token, deflect scepticism. The problems of intellectualism and sceptical challenge, he argues, have a common solution, for one and the same excessively internalist, mentalistic conception of justification is their common root.

Williams traces a dominant internalist conception of justification back to Chisholm, and the model he finds in Chisholm’s writing is one in which justification constitutes a kind of ‘positive authorization’ which, in Chisholm, is linked to a foundationalist structure with error-proof sensory experiences at the bottom, so that the whole structure is designed in the foundationalist style to stave off sceptical challenge. Looking to Sellars’ critical analysis of this sort of view and its dependence on notions of the Given, Williams argues that the positive authorization conception seriously exaggerates what is needed to vindicate the idea that epistemic subjects achieve justification by acting *in the light of* epistemic rules, as opposed to merely conforming to them. We can achieve a picture of subjects acting in the light of normative rules, without being compelled to add that rules should be construed as imperatival in form, or that justification flows upwards in the system from a foundation of error-proof self-addressed ‘reports’ of experience. Williams continues in the Sellarsian idiom by taking up a distinction Sellars makes between ‘ought-to-do’ rules, which are imperatival in form, and ‘ought-to-be’ rules, which are not. These so

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Epistemology’, APA Pacific Division Meeting, Spring 2007—the present paper grew out of my response as Commentator on that occasion.)

called ‘ought-to-be’ rules effectively set conditions of entitlement in the ‘default-and-challenge’ mould. In Williams’ example:

For me to see, and not merely think that I see, that there is a rabbit in the garden, all sorts of conditions *must be* met. Some concern me: I must be of sound mind, paying attention, capable of recognizing what is going on, and so forth. Others concern the object and its situation: the animal has to be a rabbit and not a stuffed toy, the light must be good enough to make out the shape of the dark patch in the middle of the lawn, and so on. If these conditions are not met, I won’t be in a position to see that there is a rabbit in the garden [draft p.16].

What default-and-challenge achieves for us is the desired admixture of internalist and externalist insights. In order to count as acting in the light of a rule (in order to count as epistemically justified) the well-trained subject might, depending on the context, need only to be counterfactually sensitive to lapses in the conditions required for taking the deliverances of her faculties for granted. As Williams puts it, ‘Our acceptance of an ought-to-be “rule” consists principally in our disposition to acknowledge the exceptions, and to respond appropriately’ [draft p.24]. In sum, the well-trained subject may take her sensory experiences at face value, so long as there are no reasons not to. In doing this she is following rules of justification, acting in the light of them but not self-consciously. Thus the externalist aspect of default-and-challenge that sets it apart from any positive authorization model. Yet, if appropriately challenged, she does have a standing obligation to produce a justification, and if she cannot, then she is revealed as lacking entitlement to her belief.<sup>7</sup> Thus the internalist aspect of default-and-challenge that qualifies Williams’s position as a form of responsibilism.

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<sup>7</sup> Note that Brandom himself is ready to go a step further in the externalist direction than Williams is willing to. In *Articulating Reasons* he embraces reliabilism’s ‘Founding Insight’ and allows that, for instance, an expert in distinguishing Toltec from Aztec potsherds can know whether a shard is one or the other even if she cannot say how she does it. Williams differs, thus maintaining a stronger internalism in his responsibilist position. (Robert Brandom, *Articulating Reasons* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) ch.3, esp. 98-99.)

Williams also argues that seeing justification as conforming to a default-and-challenge structure can help fend off scepticism. As ever, he distinguishes Agrippan from Cartesian forms of sceptical challenge. Agrippan scepticism imposes an endless demand for further justifications, so that it threatens to expose either regress or circularity in the series of justifications we may offer, or else a plain unjustified assumption somewhere in our reasoning. Cartesian scepticism effectively exploits issues of underdetermination by positing sceptical scenarios which he claims, for all we know, we might be in. Williams' focus is on the Agrippan style sceptic, and he argues that the Agrippan is committed to the familiar, mentalistic and so excessively internalist model of justification that conceives being guided by norms or rules as always a matter of self-conscious obedience to self-addressed imperatives—positive authorization. What the default-and-challenge model furnishes is an account of justification—entitlement—that makes no such requirement. By contrast, what default-and-challenge obliges the individual subject to do is something negative: don't take your experiences at face value if the default condition is lapsed. A subject who is entirely successful with respect to that negative task may well not be able to answer the Agrippan sceptic—but so much the worse for the sceptic. The standing obligation to come up with reasons when challenged only holds for challenges to which one's interlocutor is entitled. Introducing the term 'default-and-challenge', Brandom puts the point like this:

Claims such as 'There have been black dogs' and 'I have ten fingers' are ones to which interlocutors are treated as *prima facie* entitled. They are not immune to doubt in the form of questions about entitlement, but such questions themselves stand in need of some sort of warrant or justification. Entitlement is, to begin with, a social status that a performance or commitment has within a community... The model presented here has what might be called a *default and challenge structure of entitlement*.<sup>8</sup>

The Agrippan sceptic, then, is presenting unwarranted challenges, and so our failure to meet those challenges signifies nothing. The sceptic is thus revealed as missing the point, for she tries to compel the individual subject to dig deeper and

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); 177.

deeper into his individual epistemic resources, furnishing reason upon reason for his belief—but this is simply the wrong place to look for his status as justified in believing what he believes. The Agrippan demands to be shown a justificational stopping point somewhere in the depths of the individual subject, and her mistake is that justification is not to be found deep in the individual but rather on the surface of something irreducibly social, namely, the subject's ability to meet the challenges properly brought in that context by others in the epistemic community.

Williams focuses on the mentalistic nature and extreme internalism of the model of justification that both polarizes reliabilism and responsibilism and hands the sceptic a stick to beat us with. But I think we should most of all emphasize its individualism, for it is the individualism that underpins both the mentalistic and the extreme internalist character of the mistaken model of justification that Williams rightly diagnoses in the sceptic. Given a general assumption of epistemic individualism, one easily sees how it can seem natural to assume that the individual is the source of all justification for her belief, and that the place to look is (where else?) in her mental states. Thus the mentalism. Further, if even the subject herself cannot find a justification in her psychology, then how can she count as possessing a justification at all? Thus the extreme internalism. I think, then, that once we focus on the anti-sceptical energy that default-and-challenge clearly contains, we find that energy to be located most fundamentally in its sociality (and so, to relate back to the terminology I introduced earlier, in its implicit insistence on the Abstracted Social Conception of epistemic subjects). For it is the sociality that effects the crucial shift in rational obligation away from the individual alone and into the epistemic social body, to which the individual of course belongs. It is this natural division of justificatory labour that relieves the individual believer of the burden of accessing the kind of justification that the Agrippan sceptic demands.

The Agrippan, who presses and presses for evermore justifications, is thus revealed as making a profound mistake at both the level of epistemic practice and the level of epistemology. She fails to adhere to socially established norms of challenge, a mistaken practice that exposes her false theory of justification. But what of the Cartesian sceptic? Williams thinks the Cartesian, whose signature is of course the sort of madcap sceptical scenarios we all know and love, cannot be confined in the same



way. But why not? If the context sensitive norms of challenge can reveal Agrippan challenges as mistaken, then why not Cartesian challenges too? Now that we have identified the sociality of default-and-challenge as fuelling the anti-sceptical work, surely it is clear that the Cartesian invocation of sceptical scenarios is a style of challenge every bit as misguided as the Agrippan style?

Williams does not think the Cartesian is much affected by the sort of diagnostic argument recounted so far, but I think there is at least some mileage in it, for not only the Agrippan but the Cartesian too presses his case in a way that is not sanctioned by socially established norms of challenge, and his practice reflects his adherence to a false philosophy of justification. It is true, however, that this diagnosis on its own cannot be as satisfying as in the Agrippan case, because the Cartesian is so strongly distinguished by the particular sort of demand that he makes—demands for absolute certainty that crucially play on issues of underdetermination. Consequently, the socializing move that marks out default-and-challenge does not go to the heart of the matter as it does in the Agrippan case. (We can perhaps imagine a Cartesian sceptic a good deal less individualistic than that created by Descartes, who told us he couldn't care less whether the indubitability he demands comes from within the individual subject or from the social epistemic body, so long as the requisite certainty was achieved.)

In respect of the Cartesian sceptic, then, Williams looks to the central anti-sceptical argument of *Unnatural Doubts*<sup>9</sup>, namely, the argument that the Cartesian sceptic is committed to 'epistemological realism' and epistemological realism is false. The Cartesian sceptic's challenges concern something called 'knowledge of the external world' or 'empirical knowledge', as if these were respectable theoretical categories; but they are not. They are far too internally diverse to be so regarded, and in fact have no more integrity than a category such as 'knowledge of things done on a Tuesday'. Crucially, they are too internally diverse in terms of the kind of justification that is required—something we may express in terms of the default-and-challenge model by saying that the norms of challenge vary from context to context. The

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Williams, *Unnatural Doubts: Epistemological Realism and the Basis of Scepticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

Cartesian sceptic may possibly go in for his peculiar style of challenge in the strictly ‘epistemological context’, but not in other contexts. To do so would, as ever, constitute a mistake at the level of norms of default-and-challenge governing our epistemic practice, but more importantly perhaps, it would be an enactment of the false piece of theory that is epistemological realism. The Cartesian sceptic wants to move from (i) discovering that, in context C, knowledge is impossible, to (ii) discovering (in context C) that knowledge is impossible<sup>10</sup>, but if he can only make that move by way of the false doctrine of epistemological realism—a staging-post which would effectively privilege the so-called ‘epistemological context’ over all others—then the move is blocked and, *qua* sceptic, he is confined to the study. That is, his eccentric style of justificational challenge is confined to the context of inquiry that is peculiar to a certain style of epistemology.

Thus Williams’ fascinating anti-sceptical case. I have so far discussed (and slightly elaborated) the use he makes, in his recent paper, of default-and-challenge against Agrippan scepticism; and I have recalled (as he does) the contextualist position he argues for in *Unnatural Doubts*, where it functions as the antidote to the sceptic’s epistemological realism. My chief purpose here, however, is to make a case for the expansion of our philosophical conception of epistemic subjects and their activities along a certain temporal dimension, namely, the genealogical temporal dimension. So how might a genealogy of knowledge help bolster and augment Williams’ anti-sceptical case?

### **3. Expanding Along The Temporal Dimension—Genealogical Time**

In Edward Craig’s *Knowledge and The State of Nature* he gives what I’m calling a genealogical account of knowledge. That is, he tells a State of Nature story about why we have the concept of knowledge—a ‘practical explication’ of that concept. He envisages a minimally social epistemic community—an abstraction of any real human

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<sup>10</sup> This is how Brandom puts the issue in ‘Fighting Skepticism with Skepticism: Supervaluational Epistemology, Semantic Autonomy, and Natural Kind Skepticism’ in *Facta Philosophica*, Vol 2 No 2, 2000; 163-178. [Page ref.??]

community, though one that non-accidentally resembles what a real early human community might have been like in respect of its social simplicity and its hand-to-mouth relation to basic human needs and dangers. The basic epistemic needs that define the State of Nature are, first, the need for enough truths (and not too many falsehoods) for other sorts of basic needs—principally survival needs—to be met. A community that survives in the State of Nature must operate with sufficient truths to hunt and/or forage for food, take care of the young, avoid predators, deal with the dead, and so on. That first epistemic need immediately gives rise to a second: the need to realize the epistemic and practical advantages of pooling information. Why rely only on one's own eyes and ears when you can benefit from the eyes and ears of others? From where you're standing you may not be able to see if the predator is coming, but your colleague up the tree might, and this exemplifies the fundamental practical pressure to stand in co-operative epistemic relations with fellow inquirers. Finally, this second epistemic need spontaneously gives rise to a third: the need to distinguish good from bad informants, so that it is indeed information that gets shared and not misinformation or disinformation. Human beings, however described, are fallible—hence the risk of misinformation. And human beings in the State of Nature, as anywhere else, operate under pressures (such as competition for resources) that create motivations for deception—hence the risk of disinformation. Distinguishing good informants is indeed an essential fundamental capacity.

This trio of fundamental epistemic needs generates a certain point of view for our social epistemological project: the point of view of the inquirer. This is notably different from the point of view normally taken up in epistemology, namely that of the examiner; a point of view typified by the epistemologist's remove from the actual business of inquiry in order to debate about whether some candidate-knower really qualifies.<sup>11</sup> The particular need to distinguish a good informant as to a given question whether *p* is a need had only by someone who doesn't know whether *p* but wants to. Accordingly, as we construct the epistemic State of Nature, we find that ignorance and the desire to make it good with good information emerge as our basic epistemic state. In this sense, 'Who knows whether *p*?' is our most basic epistemological

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<sup>11</sup> This distinction was first made by Bernard Williams, as Craig notes. See Williams 'Deciding to Believe' in *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (1973); 146.

question, a question that pre-supposes the possibility of knowledge. How far this broad anti-sceptical presupposition has any argumentative power depends upon how convincing the overall story is in terms of its explanatory power. In so far as the State of Nature construction provides a convincing explanatory story about why we have, of necessity, the concept of knowledge, then so far may it turn out to give genuine independent support to the idea that sceptical questions are parasitic on there being a functional epistemic practice in which knowledge is possessed and, in particular, shared or ‘commoned’<sup>12</sup> in an epistemic community. (I shall return to this in section 3.3.)

So how does Craig’s genealogy explain the advent of the concept of knowledge? We have seen that the inquirer needs to distinguish good informants. A good informant is someone who: (1) is likely enough in the context to be right about whether *p*, (2) is communicatively available and open (including sincere), and (3) bears indicator properties so that you can reliably recognize that (1) and (2) are satisfied.<sup>13</sup> In Craig’s story, indicator properties will be a mixed bag, but might standardly include properties such as having been looking in the right direction, or having a good track record.<sup>14</sup> Craig’s thesis is that the constructed concept of the good informant constitutes the core of our actual concept of a knower. As we might put it, the status of being a knower starts life as the status of being a good informant. The two concepts are not co-extensive of course: there can be knowers who are not good informants, for instance because they lack the requisite indicator properties, or because the indicator properties (being only reliable) unluckily mislead on that occasion. But Craig’s proposal is that the functional origin of the concept of knowledge is to identify good informants, and thereafter the constraints of

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<sup>12</sup> This is Michael Welbourne’s term for it. See his *Knowledge* (Chesham, Bucks: Acumen, 2001) especially chapter 6; and *The Community of Knowledge* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1986).

<sup>13</sup> Here I paraphrase somewhat but intend to capture Craig’s conditions. For his own formulation, see *Knowledge and the State of Nature*, 85.

<sup>14</sup> Properties such as these bestow what Bernard Williams, in his genealogy of truthfulness (modelled closely on Craig’s genealogy of knowledge) calls ‘purely positional advantage’. See Williams, *Truth and Truthfulness: An Essay in Genealogy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); 42-43.

recognizability and communicative openness gradually become relaxed, so that we come to think of knowledge as something objective that another person can possess, even if we can't recognize it, or they aren't coming out with it.<sup>15</sup>

### **3.1 The Original Synthesis of Internalist and Externalist Insights:**

According to Craig's genealogy, then, we start to operate with the concept of knowledge, of necessity, because at the core of that concept is something that meets the absolutely basic epistemic need to pick out good informants. Now how does all this help the socializing anti-sceptical case that Williams builds on default-and-challenge? One of the key anti-sceptical features of default-and-challenge is that it achieves a desirable combination of internalist and externalist features. I think we can see how this is explained and so reinforced if we look closely enough at epistemic practices in the State of Nature. In the first instance, the practice of pooling information in the State of Nature figures people spotting others as good informants before asking them for information. But we can see how the basic need for good information also drives a modification of that practice; namely, asking candidate good informants for the information one wants, and then, after the fact of utterance, quizzing them a little as to their reasons. The capacity to give reasons for what one asserts is a supremely important indicator property, not discussed by Craig. The person who asserts but does not know may be suspiciously fuzzy on her reasons; the person who asserts what he knows to be false may be suspiciously unconvincing when he pretends to give his reasons for his pretend belief.

Being able to supply a justification when challenged is not a necessary condition of being a good informant. Rightly not, for what primarily matters to the inquirer is simply that the good informant comes out with the truth on demand; not that he comes out with his reasons as well. Given that the inquirer can spot a good

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<sup>15</sup> There are three key pressures that push the good informant's proto-knowledge towards the objectivized form it takes as, simply, knowledge. First, sometimes inquirers may not need to recognize any informant here and now, but only at some time in the future. Second, the inquirer may be aware that others are better able to pick up on certain indicator properties. And third, it may not matter to the informant that he himself acquires the information at all, as what may matter is simply that someone around here has got it. All three push the idea of knowledge in the direction of 'objectivization' and away from any dependence on immediate subjective availability to the inquirer.

informant to his own satisfaction, she will just take the information and not bother to quiz him further about his reasons. However, this basic practice established, we can immediately see how quickly an informant's capacity to give reasons assumes importance, for it is highly desirable in a good informant that he be able to produce reasons when challenged, owing to the fact that this may be by far the best indicator property available to the inquirer. The same point applies individualistically too, for inquirers in the State of Nature will often be relying on the deliverances of their own faculties, and are best construed as entitled to trust them unless they have some reason not to—a foggy day, a foggy memory.<sup>16</sup> (Here we glimpse the nascent default-and-challenge structure of justification emerging.) On these occasions, a certain challenge to self is in order, which amounts to a demand for an after-the-fact indicator property that one is likely enough in the context to be right about *p*. The ability to produce a satisfying reason is the prime case of such an indicator property.

The importance of this capacity to come out with reasons when challenged, combined with the fact that it is not one of the conditions of qualifying as a good informant, explains what underpins the desired admixture of internalist and externalist features that Williams aims to achieve in his responsibilist position. The picture in the State of Nature is fundamentally externalist—what matters is simply that good informants come out with the truth—but then we see very clearly the origin of internalist intuitions about knowledge. On the story I am urging here, we agree with Craig that the good informant's capacity to access his reasons is not at the core of the concept of knowledge; but, we add, it does feature in a layer of content that is close to core. It is not a merely peripheral feature, resulting from a mere contingency in how we operate with the concept. The importance of the capacity to produce reasons in support of what one believes flows immediately from the basic method of identifying good informants that constitutes the core. I think this is a good way of substantiating the two-sided thought that it is close to conceptually impossible that a human being who lacked the general capacity to come out with reasons for their beliefs could count as a knower (or even a believer); but being able to come out with one's reasons is not thereby a necessary condition of knowledge. This combining of externalist and internalist features of the practice of justification on the part of good informants in the

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<sup>16</sup> See Craig, 1990; 62-3.

State of Nature echoes and substantiates the internalist-externalist combination we find in default-and-challenge. On that model of justification, the subject can have knowledge even if she has taken the deliverances of her faculties entirely at face value and cannot produce any positive reason for her belief. If faced with an eccentric challenge, she may only be able to assert that it never occurred to her to wonder; she may even be a bit thrown by the fact of the challenge and by her own bewildered reaction. And yet, according to default-and-challenge, the fact that the default did indeed hold is sufficient. The kind of responsibilism Williams' arguments are designed to achieve, I think, is one that allows externalism vis-à-vis the question whether the default of entitlement holds, so that the subject need not at any point be reflectively aware that it holds; yet internalism when it comes to the subject's obligation to respond to contextually appropriate challenge. My suggestion has been that a responsibilism of that combinatory sort finds explanatory support in the genealogical approach.

### **3.2 Practical Origins of Contextualism:**

What about contextualism?—something that can be considered part and parcel of the default-and-challenge model of justification (but which Williams argues for independently in *Unnatural Doubts*?<sup>17</sup>). I suggest that this too finds significant origin in the State of Nature. We have seen that the inquirer is looking for someone who is, among other things, *likely enough in the context to be right as to whether p*. This presents an explicitly contextualist picture of its own, according to which what it takes to be a good informant—and so what it takes to play the social role at the core of knowing—alters from context to context. For instance, if the stakes are very high, the good informant will need to approach certainty, though always within the bounds of practicality; if they are not so high, she might count as likely enough to be right about *p* just by being reasonably sure; if they are lower still, or if perhaps there is a certain practical urgency and/or simply no one else to ask, then a 51% chance of her being right might even suffice. This contextualist picture—driven entirely by practical concerns—imposes certain constraints on the inquirer. If, in our imagined scenario, in

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<sup>17</sup> *Unnatural Doubts* was published prior to Brandom's *Making It Explicit* in which the default-and-challenge model is introduced. I thank Alessandra Tanesini for pointing out the significance of this.

which the inquirer has already asked a candidate good informant for information, the informant has told her something, and she is challenging him for his reasons, then her challenges must be appropriately geared to the context. She is looking for an after-the-fact-of-utterance indicator property, and this means that if she presses him for the sort of justification that exceeds the contextually required level of probability that he is right about  $p$ , then this marks a dysfunction in her epistemic conduct from her own point of view as an inquirer. At the extreme, she may be so busy pressing potential informants for reasons, that she gets attacked by the predator her erstwhile informant was trying to warn her about. Basic practical concerns generate the context-sensitive norms of default-and-challenge in the State of Nature, so that inquirers who demand reasons above and beyond those appropriate to the context are making a mistake at the level of the (emergent) norms of justification.

How does this natural contextualism relate to the contextualism argued for by Williams? On the face of it, they are not quite the same. Williams argues for contextualism primarily by invoking Wittgenstein's idea of hinge propositions, so that the chief argument is that all contexts of inquiry (except perhaps the epistemological context) require that certain things be taken for granted, as a matter of methodological necessity.<sup>18</sup> Talk of hinge propositions, and the different methodological disciplines of different contexts of inquiry can make it seem as if Williams' contextualism relates exclusively to more formally defined and/or institutionally organized forms of inquiry, paradigmatically academic disciplines such as 'science' or 'history'. But this is not so, for the notion of methodological necessity in play here is generic. Williams talks quite generally, for instance, of propositions' epistemic status being 'interest-relative'<sup>19</sup>; and explicitly applies his contextualism not only to 'highly organized forms of inquiry' but also to 'more informal, everyday settings':

I have introduced the idea of a proposition's being exempted from doubt as a matter of methodological necessity in connection with the disciplinary constraints that

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<sup>18</sup> I thank Duncan Pritchard for a comment that made me see the need to be specific about how the contextualism generated in the State of Nature relates to Williams' own.

<sup>19</sup> 'If a proposition's epistemic status is determined by the direction of inquiry, its status is interest-relative' (Unnatural Doubts; 124).



determine the general directions of highly organized forms of inquiry. But it is evident that something similar goes on in more informal, everyday settings. Asking some questions logically precludes asking others: all sorts of everyday certainties have to stand fast if we are to get on with life... We are therefore determined by Nature to hold certain things fast only in so far as we are naturally inclined to interest ourselves in matters requiring us to exempt them from doubt.<sup>20</sup>

It is this generic methodological insight that I have suggested we find already up and running in the State of Nature. Perhaps one could represent the State of Nature as supplying one and only one context of inquiry, namely the practical context of inquiry. I would not disagree with that in itself; but it would be arbitrary to insist on the integrity of something called ‘the practical context’ if that amounted to an insistence of lack of contextual differentiation within the practical. On the contrary, the State of Nature supplies a range of practical contexts, each of which has its own methodologically necessary certainties, as imposed by the contextually generated requisite level of probability that the informant is right about *p*. For example, if someone with a decent track record when it comes to taking care of the sick tells one that putting maggots on a festering wound is a good way of cleaning it and staving off gangrene, the practical exigencies of the context (one’s got to do *something*, there’s no obvious reason to distrust him, and so on) mean that being justified in believing him does not require ruling out, for instance, that he recently suffered a blow to the head that has scrambled all his proto-medical knowledge. If you are going to get on with taking care of your wound, then you simply have to take such distant possibilities for granted—as a matter of methodological necessity. I think this is enough to show that the practical pressures that generate contextualism in the State of Nature lend significant explanatory support to the contextualism that Williams embraces, even while we can also see that they might lend equal support to slightly different forms of contextualism. That is entirely as it should be, for the State of Nature scenario contains only the necessary features of our practices. We should not hope to find anything but the core of our actual justificatory practices there, and so should not hope to extrapolate anything more than a generic contextualist theoretical commitment.

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<sup>20</sup> Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*; 123.

### 3.3 The Un-Originality of Sceptical Challenge

In this exploration of the practical pressures that generate contextualism in the State of Nature, we already begin to see how the genealogy of knowledge provides independent support for the anti-sceptical purpose to which Williams puts his own contextualist position. There are no sceptics in the State of Nature—survival requires taking some people as knowing things one needs to know, and that entails accepting the possibility of knowledge. This underpins my earlier suggestion that Williams’ charge against the Agrippan sceptic—that he behaves in a contextually inappropriate way, where his conduct is driven by a mistaken theory of justification—does have some significant force against the Cartesian sceptic too. In the State of Nature, it doesn’t matter in which style sceptical challenges are made. The fact that any such challenges make demands that exceed what it takes for the informant to be likely enough in the context to be right about  $p$  means the sceptic will fail to identify good informants that are staring him in the face, and will be disadvantaged by it. This means that not only the Agrippan demand for ultimate justification but also the Cartesian demand for absolute certainty can only be a mistake. The Cartesian makes the selfsame two-fold mistake made by the Agrippan: a mistake at the level of norms of justification on the ground, driven by a mistake at the level of the philosophy of justification. In fact, our genealogical story most directly undermines scepticism of precisely the Cartesian sort, for the Cartesian’s trademark aim is to demonstrate that we cannot meet his demand for absolute certainty, and that demand is just what the natural contextualism generated in the State of Nature exposes as fatally misguided. The State of Nature, then, explains the commonsense idea that no one can *basically* be a sceptic. They must be inquirer first, and sceptic second; someone committed to the practical possibility of knowledge first, and committed to undermining that possibility second. This of course leaves room for the idea that there may yet be a context in which it *is* appropriate to mount sceptical challenges. We do not find such a context in the State of Nature, but there might yet be such.

This accommodating thought prompts exposure of the other respect in which we can see the genealogy of knowledge lending independent support to Williams’ anti-sceptical strategy. The point of extending our philosophical conception over the semi-fictional time in which genealogical narratives are set, is that it provides an

invaluable way of *relating* core features of a concept to non-core or peripheral features. I know of no other philosophical method that provides the opportunity to relate original, necessary features of a concept to less basic, more contingent—historically contingent—features.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, it delivers an entirely different image of concepts than that issued by the analytical method. The analytical ambition and attendant philosophical imagination generates an image of concepts as like molecules, ready for their different elemental components to be separated out by the philosopher acting in her capacity as conceptual chemist. Genealogical method, by contrast, brings with it an image of core and periphery, or kernel and outer layers—the kernel presents necessary features of the concept, and the outer layers increasingly contingent historical features. These layers may be separated out from the kernel by the philosopher acting in her capacity as something more like conceptual historian. The necessity of the core features stands or falls with how convincingly the story passes muster as a pure construction out of nothing but absolutely basic needs. If, however unwittingly, one includes a contingent feature in the State of Nature scenario, perhaps to suit one’s philosophical purpose, then, clearly, the story will not be convincing. No doubt every story of origins should be accompanied by something of a health warning, for it surely is all too easy to craft the State of Nature in one’s philosophically preferred image. As Foucault scoffingly warns us, echoing what he takes to be Nietzsche’s own warning about the philosopher’s fantasy of the origin:

History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells; and only a metaphysician would seek its soul in the distant ideality of the origin.<sup>22</sup>

But Foucault is wrong if he equates all origins stories with ahistorical fantasy. One of the great virtues of the State of Nature method is precisely its separation of features of a concept that bear the necessity of the origin, from features that are a contingent

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<sup>21</sup> Bernard Williams exploits this facility in *Truth and Truthfulness* by identifying in the State of Nature his two fundamental virtues of truth—Accuracy and Sincerity—and then going on to explore their contingent historical forms and significances.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, History’, *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction To Foucault’s Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (London: Penguin, 1984); 80.

matter of history. And it is entirely clear that the claim of necessity is grounded not on anything metaphysical, but rather on something fundamentally practical—the *practical human necessity* of the materials used to construct the State of Nature scenario. If we find there is nothing in the posited original human need to pool information that strikes us as merely contingent—if, that is, we cannot make sense of the idea that there could be a recognizably human society absent this most basic form of epistemic co-operation—then the idea that identifying good informants comprises the kernel of the concept of knowledge has significant force. The relevant counter-claim that with concepts, all is history and nothing origin, is quixotic prejudice.

Craig's State of Nature story reveals that if there is a context of inquiry in which sceptical challenges are appropriate, still there are nonesuch in the State of Nature. And from this we have drawn the inference that sceptics must be inquirers first and sceptics second (or, *basically* inquirers, and sceptics only superficially). This, in its own right, blocks the sceptic's colonizing move from (i) discovering that, in context C, knowledge is impossible, to (ii) discovering (in context C) that knowledge is impossible. What blocks scepticism, then, is not only the falsity of epistemological realism, but also the *genealogical primacy* of practical, knowledge-permitting, contexts of inquiry. These knowledge-permitting contexts are the contexts in which the core of the concept of knowledge is dramatized in practices of good informing. In this sense, knowledge-permitting contexts figure at the core of the concept of knowledge; indeed they exhaust it, for there are no other contexts in the State of Nature. Thus the possibility of knowledge is prior to the possibility of sceptical challenge in the special sense that can only be supplied by imaginatively stretching our concepts of knowledge and justification across genealogical time: even the sceptic cannot escape the cognitive functionality of the origin, for that scenario is still with us, at the core of what it is for us to know.

As in Williams' irenic anti-sceptical strategy, this may still leave some room for a confined practice of sceptical challenge—it is only in the State of Nature that sceptics are, so to speak, extinct. In the real-time practices of default-and-challenge there may possibly remain a context in which sceptical challenge is appropriate, so that knowledge is not possible in that context. But such an 'epistemological context',

if there be such<sup>23</sup>, exploits only aspects of the concept of knowledge that are way out on the periphery. And our genealogy has exposed the extreme contingency of any such sceptical practice, so that the sceptic may at any time find that the locks to his comfortable study have been changed and that it is now being put to a different philosophical use. Thus genealogical time has implications for historical real time: while the diagnosis of the sceptical urge goes deep in philosophy, our genealogy of knowledge reveals that the question of the propriety of sceptical challenge does not go deep. It simply rests on how much nurturance we continue to give to the context of inquiry in which sceptical challenge is deemed appropriate. That is, it rests on something social within the philosophical community: namely, how far we continue to respond to sceptical challenge in the epistemological context as justified challenge; or, putting it another way, how far we continue to sustain the ‘epistemological context’. Perhaps only a satisfactory theoretical diagnosis can entitle us to ignore sceptical challenge; and that may ultimately be something that Williams’s arguments help to achieve. For my part, I have tried to show that the genealogical approach contributes an independent diagnostic strategy, which can be seen to support and substantiate the main strands of Williams’ anti-sceptical case, and also to provide its own distinctive style of directly anti-sceptical argument. Most generally, I hope to have shown how social epistemology may be fruitfully expanded not only across social space but also across time.

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<sup>23</sup> ‘Epistemological context’ seems too generous a category, precisely because there are already approaches to epistemology that pre-empt, or at least do not invite, sceptical challenge.