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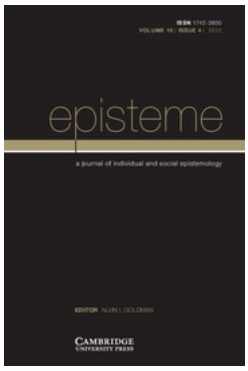

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Episteme / Volume 8 / Issue 01 / February 2011, pp 1 - 5
DOI: 10.3366/epi.2011.0002, Published online: 03 January 2012

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S174236000000160X

How to cite this article:
Mikkel Gerken, Jesper Kallestrup, Klemens Kappel and Duncan Pritchard (2011). Introduction: Social Cognitive Ecology and Its Role in Social Epistemology. Episteme, 8, pp 1-5 doi:10.3366/epi.2011.0002

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INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL COGNITIVE ECOLOGY AND ITS ROLE IN SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

1. INTRODUCTION

The articles in this special issue were selected from the 2010 *Episteme* conference, "*Cognitive Ecology: The Role of the Concept of Knowledge in Our Social Cognitive Ecology*," which took place at the University of Edinburgh in June 2010. The overarching purpose of the conference was to explore our epistemic concepts – and the concept of knowledge in particular – from the perspective offered by a social cognitive ecology.

2. ON THE NOTION OF SOCIAL COGNITIVE ECOLOGY

The term 'ecology' is typically associated with a sub-discipline of biology. Roughly, ecology is the study of living things' relationships to the environment. Derivatively, a *cognitive* ecology may be taken to be the study of living things' cognitive relations to their environment, whereas a *social* cognitive ecology may be taken to be the study of the distinctively social aspects of such cognitive relations. But such a characterization is, of course, rather broad.

In his contribution, Martin Kusch pursues a more specific characterization that is also inspired by the biological notion of ecology. He characterizes cognitive ecology in general as "the investigation into how organisms obtain information about their surroundings." Social cognitive ecology, in turn, is characterized as "the inquiry into how highly gregarious, deeply interdependent cognizers (like us) obtain information about their natural and social environment." Moreover, according to Kusch, a social cognitive ecology is a distinctive species of social epistemology in that it is descriptive and empirically oriented; he writes that "social cognitive ecology should be *descriptive-explanatory* rather than *normative*, and it should, wherever possible, reckon with the results of the natural and social sciences."

Like Kusch, Axel Gelfert emphasizes in his contribution the importance of the empirical aspects of ecologies of epistemic concepts and the centrality of evolutionary accounts. Specifically, Gelfert promotes a focus on how the concept

Episteme 8.1 (2011): 1–5
DOI: 10.3366/epi.2011.0002

www.eupjournals.com/epi

of knowledge has evolved as an adaptive response to multiple, as opposed to monocausal, pressures on epistemically interdependent social beings.

Lorraine Code has pursued a similar characterization in her book *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*. In this work, she characterizes ecology as "a study of habitats both physical and social where people endeavor to live well together" (2006, 25). Moreover, Code also regards ecological thinking as empirically informed. However, Code's conception of ecological thinking does not align with Kusch's view that ecological thinking is a non-normative enterprise. Rather, she conceives of it as a thoroughgoing revision of epistemology or even a new way of doing epistemology.

These different approaches exemplify somewhat overlapping conceptions of the idea of a social cognitive ecology. But there are significant differences with regard to whether ecological thinking should be thought of as normative or merely descriptive. Furthermore, each conception of social cognitive ecology involves some specific and even programmatic assumptions. For example, neither Code's revisionism nor Kusch's focus on the *acquisition* of information will be universally agreed upon by self-declared social cognitive ecologists.

Moreover, the term 'ecology' may be used in much broader senses. To consider a prominent example, in his widely read *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (2000), Gregory Bateson emphasizes relationships between the concepts and the environment but also interrelations between the concepts themselves. This latter focus is shared by many epistemologists. But whereas Bateson's ecology of mind concerns such interrelations quite generally, epistemologists are more likely to be interested in how our *epistemic* concepts are interrelated and related to the environment.

Thus, one way of thinking about a *cognitive* ecology is to think of it as the study of how our (evolved) *epistemic* concepts are related to the environment and interrelated in our thinking. If one thinks of a cognitive ecology in this manner, the idea of a *social* cognitive ecology may be characterized, broadly and roughly, as follows: *Social cognitive ecology is the study of how epistemic concepts are interrelated and related to the physical and social environment and of how such relations bear on the evolution of epistemic concepts and vice versa.*

Thus conceived, a social cognitive ecology is in some ways more restricted in its focus than a general ecology of mind. For example, it purports to investigate epistemic concepts in particular. On the other hand, the above characterization is more inclusive than some of the ideas that have been proposed or presupposed in this volume or elsewhere. For example, it includes both diachronic investigations pertaining to the genesis of the epistemic concepts as well as synchronic investigations of their present interrelations, functions, and social roles.

In sum, while the idea of a social cognitive ecology has gained increasing attention, there continues to be ample room for debate about how to conceive of the idea. This fact should be of little surprise, as there is ample room for debate about virtually any broad methodological approach in philosophy. So, we can do

no better than to briefly consider the various contributions' engagements with ideas pertaining to a social cognitive ecology and its role in social epistemology.

3. SOCIAL COGNITIVE ECOLOGY AS SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

How may a social cognitive ecology contribute to social epistemology? Given the diverse views on what a social cognitive ecology *is*, diverse views regarding what it may *contribute*, if anything, is to be expected. The present issue of *Episteme* includes contributions that, taken together, exemplify a wide range of views on the matter. Some include an explicit meta-epistemological or methodological aspect. Others seek to shed light on the methodological issues by way of example.

As we have noted, Code has put forward the view that ecological thinking has the capacity to reconfigure epistemology, all the way down. Eschewing individualism, ecological thinking assesses the effects of situation, epistemic responsibility, and social-political hierarchies as contributors to the place of knowledge in a given cognitive ecology. In her contribution to the present volume, "An Ecology of Epistemic Authority," Code illustrates this aspect of ecological thinking by using two examples of putatively authoritative knowledge to reexamine the place of trust in knowledge and its entanglement with relations of epistemic dependence.

In stark contrast, in his contribution ("Why Should We Care About the Concept of Knowledge?"), Hilary Kornblith articulates a very pessimistic view about the brand of social cognitive ecology that is pursued by Edward Craig in his highly influential book *Knowledge and the State of Nature* (1990). Specifically, contra Craig, Kornblith argues that "for those who wish to understand the nature of knowledge, there may be no reason at all to care about our concept of knowledge." Kornblith's critique involves the idea that the concept of knowledge is a natural kind concept. According to Kornblith, the consequence is that investigating our concept of knowledge or its genesis is an infertile way to investigate the nature of knowledge. One reason for this pessimistic view is that we can acquire and use a natural kind concept while having radically mistaken beliefs about its referent. Such mistakes are typically corrected by investigating the world rather than by investigating our concepts, and Kornblith argues that the natural kind concept of knowledge is no exception to this rule.

In "Knowledge and Certainties in the Epistemic State of Nature," Martin Kusch sets forth a far more optimistic view on whether a Craigian conceptual synthesis may contribute to social epistemology. Kusch regards Craig's approach as one of the central examples of a social cognitive ecology. After all, Craig's genealogy is an inherently *social* ecology in that on this view the central function of the concept of knowledge is to flag good informants, something which is typically a social matter. Kusch also regards the late Wittgenstein as an exponent of social cognitive ecology and sets out to explore the interrelations between the late Wittgenstein and Craig's genealogy. A central ambition of this exploration is to argue that Craig's

methodology may shed light on – and augment – Wittgenstein's remarks according to which we cannot ascribe knowledge about common-sense certainties. However, Kusch argues that before Craig's methodology may be called upon in this context, it must be modified as to accommodate Wittgenstein's view that the concept of knowledge is a family-resemblance concept.

Another take on Craig is provided by Christoph Kelp ("What's the Point of 'Knowledge' Anyway?"), who criticizes Craig's thesis that the function of the concept of knowledge is to flag good informants. Rather, Kelp suggests that the function of 'knowledge' is "to flag when agents may adequately terminate inquiry into a given question." Kelp provides some cases that he argues cannot be adequately explained if 'knowledge' is associated with the function of information-flagging. Moreover, he argues that this difficulty does not arise if the function of 'knowledge' is understood in terms of terminating inquiry. So, Kelp concludes that his thesis about the function of 'knowledge' is preferable to Craig's thesis.

In "Steps to an Ecology of Knowledge: Continuity and Change in the Genealogy of Knowledge," Axel Gelfert sets forth a *methodological* critique that questions some basic assumptions underlying Craig's genealogy. Gelfert begins by criticizing Craig and Bernard Williams (2002) for their focus on imaginary genealogies rather than real genealogies and biological changes. Specifically, Gelfert challenges what he calls their "Constancy Assumption," according to which the on-board sources of epistemic agents – e.g., perception, memory, inference, and powers of reasoning – are held constant throughout the genealogical scenario. Gelfert considers instead whether our cognitive capacities are "genealogically prior" to our cognitive concepts or whether they should be regarded as co-evolving.

David Henderson's contribution, "Gate-Keeping Contextualism," is also influenced by Craig's idea that the central function of the concept of knowledge is to flag good informants. Henderson uses the term "epistemic gate-keeping" as a label of this function of the concept of knowledge. But he emphasizes the function's social aspect by suggesting that one is gate-keeping for a contextually salient community. However, since epistemic standards vary across communities, so do the standards for ascribing knowledge. According to Henderson, a brand of contextualism about knowledge ensues because the point of an evaluative concept is a feature that bears on its nature. Moreover, Henderson argues that gate-keeping contextualism has resources to respond to certain skeptical objections.

In her "Knowledge and Social Roles: A Virtue Approach," Sarah Wright also considers variations in patterns of knowledge ascriptions from a social perspective. She provides a case-based argument for the view that the truth-values of knowledge ascriptions depend in part on the social roles of the subject to whom knowledge is ascribed. According to Wright, this assumption causes *prima facie* trouble for both attributer contextualism and subject sensitive invariantism (henceforth SSI). However, Wright suggests that SSI should incorporate a *social sensitivity requirement* according to which *S* knows that *p* only if *S*'s belief that *p* displays epistemic virtue with respect to *S*'s social context. Such a modified version of SSI can, Wright

argues, account for the cases suggesting that knowledge ascriptions are sensitive to social roles and other cases that it cannot otherwise explain.

Finally, in "The Division of Epistemic Labour," Sanford Goldberg distinguishes between two species of epistemic dependence on others. Roughly, direct epistemic dependence concerns cases in which the epistemic properties of a subject's attitude vary with variations in another subject's epistemic perspective. In contrast, diffuse epistemic dependence concerns, roughly, cases in which the epistemic properties of a subject's attitude vary with variations in the practices, states, and dispositions of the members of a community. With this distinction in hand, Goldberg investigates the epistemology of testimony. For example, he argues that the category of diffused epistemic dependence sheds light on the phenomenon of *epistemic coverage*, whereby an individual may depend on her community to discover a putative true proposition and report it to her.

4. CONCLUSION

As the various perspectives on the prospects and problems for a social cognitive ecology as a part of social epistemology exemplify, many foundational issues remain open. At the one extreme, we find optimism and excitement about a novel philosophical method and a range of new issues. At the other extreme, we find skepticism regarding the very notion of a social cognitive ecology and its relevance for social epistemology.

Whether one of these extreme positions is correct or the truth is to be found between them, it is worth exploring diverse perspectives on the notion of a social cognitive ecology. Hopefully, this special issue of *Episteme* contributes to the methodological debates that are especially important for a relatively novel and rapidly expanding field such as social epistemology.

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