



Introduction to the Special Issue

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This special issue of *Acta Analytica* contains four articles from papers presented at the 2019 Bled Epistemology Conference. The theme of the conference was “Social Epistemology and the Politics of Knowing,” and the articles included in this special issue represent the breadth of these topics, while also interweaving the themes through their work.

The first two articles focus on the politics of knowing and the epistemology of political thought experiments. Catherine Elgin’s “The Mark of a Good Informant” highlights a potentially worrisome place that the politics of knowing can become entrenched in functional accounts of knowledge. Her objection to functional accounts comes from the ways in which they can require knowers not only to be good informants in the sense of having accurate information, but also to be identifiable as good informants. Identifiability is a natural element to include in the concept of knowing, if this requires being a good informant, as Edward Craig and Michael Hannon, among others, have argued; one cannot learn from an informant unless one can identify them as an informant. It is common then to include the practical requirement that a knower have a publicly acknowledged mark of a good informant. While this requirement is practical, Elgin notes that it is also very problematic when combined with social forces that obscure or highlight the epistemic marks of members of different communities based on their social identities. While this can include those excluded on the basis of the kind of identity prejudices that Miranda Fricker (2007) focuses on, Elgin argues the category of epistemic injustice should be wider, and includes a broad range of cases where someone is misjudged in their capacity as an epistemic agent. And this then comes back to expand the nature of being a good informant. Elgin argues that being reliable is not enough; transferring information is a skillful act, and so a good informant should be trustworthy, in the sense not only of having and sharing information but also of doing so in a way that is skillfully attuned to the needs of the recipient.

We might think of Elgin’s argument as applying political concerns to epistemology, Nenad Miscevic’s contribution to this volume, “Political Epistemology: Debating the Burning Issues(s)” does the opposite, applying epistemology to political philosophy,

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specifically to ideal (or semi-ideal) social contract theory as it is used to provide a standard of legitimacy for political organization. The real-world situation to which he applies the standards generated by social contract theory is a pressing one—that of how a state might legitimately treat refugees who appeal for asylum. Idealized social contract theory asks us to consider what agreement(s) would be reached by these parties if they were to engage in an idealized negotiation. But such a negotiation cannot be implemented, it only takes place in the realm of political thought experiment, as those considering the problem take up the roles and concerns of the different parties. It is here that Miscevic brings in the epistemic connection, showing how we can and ought to cognitively engage in the processes of idealization and role-taking. Miscevic argues that the goal of these cognitive operations is understanding. Taking up the perspective of another requires both cognitive and affective empathy to generate an informed intuition about the interests of others; it is these informed intuitions that should guide our policy-making.

The last two articles concern thinking with others and how we can do that well. Benjamin McCraw, in his “Thinking with Others: A Radically Externalist Internalism,” proposes a model of conversational socially extended cognition and argues that the justification that comes from this cognition can be internalist, even though many of the relevant justificatory beliefs and perceptions reside in the heads of others, hence, are physically external to us. This kind of “externalist internalism” can seem paradoxical, by McCraw argues that this tension is resolved when we recognize that the internalism is about justification and the externalism is about the location of cognition. Although the extended mind hypothesis, claiming that cognition can occur outside of the head, has traditionally extended to objects and cognitive technologies where we might keep our memorial beliefs, McCraw explores the idea of socially extending our mind through others, motivated by insights from recent feminist epistemology as well as well as a desire to argue that internalism about justification can be applicable to extended cognition.

While McCraw focuses on the forms of epistemic justification that are relevant to thinking with others, Justin Simpson and Josué Piñero focus on how we can improve the ways that we think with others by improving the conversations we have with them. In “Eventful Conversations and the Positive Virtues of a Listener,” Simpson and Piñero begin with an inspiration from Miranda Fricker’s virtue of testimonial justice, which requires us to root out biases in ourselves that might otherwise lead us to undervalue the testimony of those in particular groups. While this virtue is clearly required for a good conversation, Simpson and Piñero note that it is a negative or ameliorative virtue—testimonial justice only requires that we are not biased, it does not require or direct any positive action on the part of the listener. Other virtues with this negative form include humility, which is the correction for arrogance. In addition to controlling our vices, there are clearly actions and dispositions that a listener can have which will enhance a conversation, and it is these virtues Simpson and Piñero develop an account of. They argue that a good listener will develop positive virtues that require both meta-reflections and on their own biases, context sensitivity, and sensitivity to the needs of the speaker. A good listener will clearly pay attention to the speaker’s words but will also apply a virtue of care in to empathetically consider exactly what the speaker is getting at. Since we might not always have the exact shared language that we need, the listener will need to exhibit a virtue of creativity in how she interprets the

other and in finding or developing a shared language and understanding between both parties. The listener will need courage to engage in critical inquiry together with the speaker, and Simpson and Piñeiro note that this inquiry can also help develop the virtues of courage in the speaker. By characterizing the role of the listeners in such a nuanced way, Simpson and Piñeiro make it plausible that the best conversations do not just transfer information, but also foster the emergence of new ideas and new identities, of just the sort that might be required for political change.

Reference

Fricke, M. (2007). *Epistemic injustice: power and the ethics of knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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