J. Angelo Corlett

THE FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

SUMMARY: There is no more prolific analytical philosopher than Alvin I. Goldman when it comes to social epistemology. During the past two decades, he has done more than any other analytical philosopher to set the tone for how social epistemology ought to be conceptualized. However, while Goldman has provided numerous contributions to our understanding of how applied epistemology can assist not only philosophy, but other fields of learning such as the sciences, law, and communication theory, there are concerns with the way he conceptualizes the foundations of social epistemology. One is that he somewhat problematically partitions off social epistemology from traditional analytic epistemology in ways that make the latter, but not the former, naturalistic and reliabilist (on his construal of naturalism and reliabilism). Another difficulty is that he seems not to recognize that social epistemology poses a rather embarrassingly potential problem for traditional epistemology, namely, it exposes traditional epistemology’s excessive individualism. That Goldman seems not to recognize this is evidenced by the fact that in his conceptualization of the foundations of epistemology he retains traditional epistemology as an area of philosophical inquiry on its own terms, without arguing that elements of the social might well have to be taken into account by traditional analyses of human knowledge. Thus, to put it in the terms of another social epistemologist, Steve Fuller, Goldman’s social epistemology is not revisionist, though Goldman himself insists that it is normative. This leads to a third problem for Goldman’s social epistemology, namely, that it contains no justified true belief analysis of the nature of social knowledge.

KEY WORDS: Alvin Goldman, social epistemology, traditional epistemology, social epistemic reliabilism.

Introduction

There is no more prolific analytical philosopher than Alvin I. Goldman when it comes to social epistemology. During the past two decades, he has done more than

1 The title of this article is deliberately similar to that of Alvin Goldman’s 1987 article, “Foundations of Social Epistemics” in order to underscore the seminal nature of his initial contribution to social epistemology, and how Goldman’s informative work might be further improved.
any other analytical philosopher to set the tone for how social epistemology ought to be conceptualized ([8]-[24]). However, while Goldman has provided numerous contributions to our understanding of how applied epistemology can assist not only philosophy, but other fields of learning such as the sciences, law, and communication theory, there are difficulties in the way he conceptualizes the foundations of social epistemology. One is that he somewhat problematically partitions off social epistemology from traditional analytic epistemology in ways that make the latter, but not the former, naturalistic and reliabilistic (on his construal of naturalism and reliabilism). Another is that he seems not to make much of the fact that social epistemology poses a rather embarrassingly potential problem for traditional epistemology, namely, it exposes traditional epistemology’s excessive individualism. That Goldman seems not to make much of this concern is evidenced by the fact that in his conceptualization of the foundations of epistemology he retains traditional epistemology as an area of philosophical inquiry on its own terms, without arguing that elements of the social might well have to be taken into account by traditional analyses of human knowledge. Thus, to put it in the terms of another social epistemologist, Goldman’s social epistemology is not revisionistic ([6]), though Goldman himself insists that it is normative ([16], pp. 4-5). This leads to a third problem for Goldman’s social epistemology, namely, that it contains no justified true belief analysis of the nature of social knowledge. So there are important gaps in Goldman’s theory of social knowledge, but ones that seem to be able to be filled in ways that are consistent with his major epistemological programme as articulated in Epistemology and Cognition.

Epistemological dualism

Goldman’s earlier explications and defenses of his own social epistemology have already been the subject of critical discussion ([3], pp. 21-37). But since then Goldman has developed his thinking about social epistemology mostly in terms of

---

2 For perhaps the first philosophical work on social epistemology in the contemporary era by any philosopher, see [4]. Steve Fuller has contributed pivotal and seminal work in this area from a continental philosophical framework, focusing generally on the social epistemological workings of science.

3 Indeed, in [3] a social cognitive process reliabilist analysis of knowledge (called “Social Epistemic Reliabilism”) is set forth and defended wherein epistemology is both socialized and naturalized. For discussions of Goldman’s more recent views on social epistemology, see [2], [26], and [27], among others. It is important to note, however, that while these particular criticisms of Goldman’s recent views on social epistemology focus on notions of the socialization of epistemology and democracy, the criticisms herein criticize Goldman’s social epistemology on different grounds.
what he deems a ‘universal’ veritistic perspective rather than a ‘special’ one, admitting that ‘individual and social epistemology are not exclusive branches of epistemology’ ([15], p. 4, note 1). And even more recently, Goldman has distinguished between ‘pure veritistic epistemology’ and ‘extended veritistic epistemology’ as species of social epistemology ([19, pp. 218-219]). While this admission and these distinctions are appreciated, Goldman does not seem to recognize the further point that, when both individual and social epistemology are naturalized ([3, pp. 53-123), there are certain implications for epistemology, traditionally construed within the analytic tradition. One such implication is that if, as Goldman conceptualizes epistemology, there are three main divisions of epistemology: primary epistemics, secondary epistemics, and social epistemology ([8, 10]), and if it is also the case that all three are veritistic in their ends ([10]), but that ‘Primary epistemics studies the veritistic properties of basic psychological processes. Secondary epistemics assesses the veritistic properties of learnable problem-solving methods,...Social epistemics studies the veritistic properties of social practices, or institutional rules that directly or indirectly govern communication and doxastic decisions’ ([10], p. 120), then conceptual problems arise for this epistemological division of labor.

Why is it that only primary individual epistemics, on Goldman’s view ([23, p. 11]), studies the veritistic properties of basic psychological or cognitive processes? Why does this function not also belong to social epistemics? After all, there is an entire field of experimental cognitive psychology (namely, experimental social cognitive psychology) that studies how basic psychological processes such as memory and perception function in social contexts. This is an important point for Goldman’s epistemology more generally because of his deep and long-standing commitment to naturalism and reliabilism at the level of individual epistemology ([8]; [11], pp. 1-32; [14]). And one must keep in mind here that it is Goldman himself who devotes more than half of his most famous work to a statement and defense of how individual epistemology can be naturalized in terms of (individual) experimental cognitive psychology ([8], pp. 180-380). Indeed, Goldman more recently devotes an entire paper to the naturalization of epistemology in terms of the sciences, yet never once even mentions in his discussion of social epistemology

4 ‘A universal conception of social epistemology would study all forms of social interaction that have significant knowledge-producing or knowledge-disseminating properties. This is the sort of conception developed in Knowledge in a Social World’ ([19, pp. 197-198]. A special conception of social epistemology would be that found in [5], according to Goldman, as Steve Fuller’s focus on how scientific communities acquire knowledge serves as a less general but keen example of social knowledge acquisition ([19, p. 197].

5 This is somewhat of a change from Goldman’s earlier construal of epistemic categories consisting of primary and secondary epistemics, with social epistemology falling under secondary epistemics [8], [9].
the possibility that social epistemology might be naturalized in the same manner in which he naturalizes individual epistemology [22]. So if it can be shown that social epistemology can be naturalized, especially in terms of a reliabilist conception of social knowledge, then it behooves Goldman to take seriously this possibility. This is especially true since, on Goldman’s view, ‘there is no consensus on how the field of social epistemology should be constructed or conceived’ ([16], p. 4). And if there is no such consensus, and if there is no good reason to rule out the possibility of naturalizing social epistemology along reliabilist lines, then one central question for Goldman’s epistemology is why would not social epistemology be couched in naturalistic and reliabilist terms as is his individual epistemology? More specifically, why would not Knowledge in a Social World contain substantial explanations of how individual (and perhaps group) cognition functions reliably (or not) in specified social contexts, and include in the analysis of social knowledge not only a truth component, but belief and justification components also? In other words, why would not Goldman do social epistemology in Knowledge in a Social World along the lines of naturalized, externalist and reliabilist justified true belief theory as he has done with his individual epistemology in Epistemology and Cognition? Indeed, Goldman somewhat distances his social epistemological veritism from those that would focus on matters of justification, as his social epistemology seeks to emphasize truth [16]. Perhaps this is what leads him even in his more recent work to separate social epistemology from the very problems of externalism and naturalism [19], suggesting quite strongly that social epistemology has nothing to do with matters of traditional analytical justified true belief theories of knowledge regarding externalism, naturalism, and reliabilism. Curiously, however, he does reject social epistemologies that dismiss the key elements of justified true belief theory ([19], p. 191). Nonetheless, Goldman does not deliver a social epistemology along the lines of justified true belief theory, much less a naturalized and externalist account that is reliabilist, leaving his individual and social epistemologies separated. But stating, as he does, that something is the case is not the same thing as providing reasons for its being the case.

It will not suffice for Goldman to state that ‘what people believe and know is largely a function of their community and culture…Most of what we believe is influenced, directly or indirectly, by the utterances and writings of others’ ([16], p. 3),6 as this point has already been made but in a way that has naturalized social epistemology in terms of a reliabilist account of social knowledge [3]. Nor will it do for Goldman to claim that ‘social epistemology deserves at least equal standing alongside the individual sector of epistemology’ ([16, p. 3). For there remains in Goldman a lack of any obvious attempt to naturalize, ‘externalize,’ and ‘reliabilize’

---

6 This is particularly true concerning testimony and the circumstances under which it can possibly lead to truth acquisition ([1]; [15], pp. 103-130; [19], pp. 139-163).
It should be noted that Goldman nowhere rejects such an attempt.
However, Goldman’s excessive individualism in his social epistemology fails to appreciate the Problem of Social Reliabilism. This is the problem of discovering by way of empirical experimentation how reliable socialized individuals and groups are when they make decisions and attempt to know. There are at least three well-documented problems facing individual and social cognizers: The problems of group consensus, groupthink, and deindividuation. And each one is documented by way of research in decades of work in experimental social cognitive psychology. Now just as Goldman argues that the reliability of belief-forming cognitive processes is an essential element to justification and knowledge of individuals outside of a social context, and that experimental cognitive psychology can inform us of the general reliability we have as cognizers, Social Epistemic Reliabilism (my theory of social knowledge) argues that the reliability of belief-forming cognitive processes of socialized individuals or groups of them is a necessary condition of social knowledge, and experimental social cognitive psychology is equipped to inform us of contexts in which certain problems of decision-making cognition may go awry, and why. This understanding of social epistemology would appear to be central for a reliabilist and naturalist about human knowledge. Yet it is totally absent from Goldman’s account. Instead, it is as if social epistemology has little to do with traditional epistemology when it comes to very nature of human propositional knowledge itself. In short, Goldman’s denial that there is nothing inherently social about human cognitive processes that would make them the legitimate focus of primary epistemics is dubious in light of the fact that an entire field of experimental social cognitive psychology devotes itself to studying precisely those human cognitive processes that are influenced within social contexts: social memory, social attention, social reasoning.

Goldman ‘pleads guilty’ to the charge of methodological individualism ([21], p. 222), which I take to be his answer to the question as to why he treats social epistemology in such a different manner than he treats traditional epistemology. Yet he refuses to rule out groups as possible subjects of beliefs and knowledge ([21, p. 222-223]). Perhaps Goldman has not focused his attention on groups in that they are not the primary epistemic subjects. So the question is the extent to which methodological individualism is sound. More specifically, the relevant question here is the extent to which it makes sense to attribute beliefs, truth, and justification (along with their related concepts) to groups. But even if epistemological collectivism is unsound, it still would not follow that social epistemology is not legitimately within the purview of primary epistemics. Social epistemology seeks to analyze knowledge of individuals in social contexts, and whether or not social knowledge obtains for socialized cognizers is largely a matter of the extent to which they avoid pitfalls in social reasoning.

Analyses of social knowledge are found in [3] and [4].
Social epistemology as a critique of traditional epistemology

Now it is this first problem with Goldman’s account of social epistemology that seems to lead him to miss at least one way in which social epistemology, plausibly construed, can serve as one form of criticism of traditional analytical justified true belief theory. For it is in the recognition of the importance of the social in epistemological investigations that reveals just how problematic individualistic epistemological analyses have become, i.e., how rarely they seem to pertain to epistemic agents as they exist in this world. For all Goldman argues incisively about testimony and how truth can be obtained in social contexts of law, science and politics, he seems to have not recognized that much of traditional individualistic epistemology—even the Gettier Problem itself—is predicated on social influences of cognizers. And this fact can and ought to transform justified true belief theory insofar as the prominence of the social can assist in the realization that epistemology must become social in its essential core. Otherwise, it will remain the philosophical analysis of the possibility of propositional knowledge that is not possible for humans or persons because we are, as Aristotle states, political and social beings. For epistemology to become fully human is for it to become and remain essentially social. This need not, as Goldman states, imply that justified true belief theory become collectivistic and subscribe to nonsummativist notions of group belief, justification, truth or knowledge. Although such notions ought not to be ruled out a priori, it is possible to develop summativist notions of the same notions, and just as possible to develop such notions in the framework of naturalism and reliabilist externalism. Of course, the overall plausibility of such an account requires serious philosophical attention.

Analyzing social knowledge

This leads to a third criticism of Goldman’s social epistemic veritism, namely, that it fails to provide a philosophical analysis of the nature of social knowledge. That on Goldman’s view social epistemology, in contrast to individual epistemology, ‘asks how groups or communities of agents can best pool their evidence-gathering resources and profit from dialectical exchange and debate’ [26] in no way excuses social epistemic veritism from the burden of any plausible theory of knowledge: to provide an analysis of the nature of knowledge (in this case, social knowledge). The charge here is not that what Goldman in his many works in social epistemology has provided is not worthwhile or informative. Indeed, he has discussed in some detail various ways in which social information can be and is obtained [25]. The concern here is rather that, for all Goldman argues, he neglects to set forth and defend an analysis of social knowledge from his veritistic perspec-
tive. And his claim that the main aim of his veritistic approach to social knowledge is not to focus on matters of justification, but rather of truth, only serves to underscore this problem of limited scope facing his social epistemology. That Goldman’s veritism fails to provide and defend an analysis of the nature of social knowledge makes dubious his claim regarding *Knowledge in a Social World* that ‘it never abandons the theoretical mission of epistemology’ ([9], p. 185) as the mission of any plausible epistemology, social or otherwise, is to at least analyze the nature of human knowledge.

What, in skeletal form, would such an account look like? Consider a social epistemology that is meant to be congruent with the basics of what is most plausible about Goldman’s individual process reliabilism as developed in [8] and elsewhere thereafter: Social Epistemic Reliabilism. On this view, social knowledge is naturalized along an externalist and reliabilist framework wherein an individual in a social context or a group (construed in summativist terms) knows that \( p \) to the extent that: (a) that social epistemic agent believes that \( p \); (b) \( p \) is true; (c) that social epistemic agent is justified in believing that \( p \); (d) that social epistemic agent accepts that \( p \) because \( p \) coheres with her or its background doxastic system; (e) that \( p \) was produced by a reliable belief-forming process; and (f) that social epistemic agent was a responsible agent at the time of her or its accepting that \( p \).

Focusing on the reliability condition (e), it would appear that the foundations of a Social Epistemic Reliabilism can be constructed in approximately the same way that a reliabilist account of individual knowledge was in *Epistemology and Cognition*. Without committing itself to all of the nuances of Goldman’s process reliabilism, social epistemic reliabilism can be explicated in naturalized terms in that it can depend on the findings of experimental social cognitive psychology in order to discover under what conditions social cognizers tend to form their beliefs reliably and under what conditions they tend not to. More specifically, experimental social cognitive psychology can inform social epistemologists of the conditions under which the social cognitive processes of perception and memory tend to function reliably or not in reasoning and the judgment of testimonial experts as they play roles in the reasoning process. So it seems at least *prima facie* plausible to think that social epistemology can be naturalized in much the same way that Goldman naturalizes individual epistemology.

And the reliability condition can be cast in terms of stating that a social cognizer, collective or individual, is justified in believing that \( p \) to the extent that her or its belief that \( p \) is the result of a reliable cognitive process in a social context, pursuant to the analysis above. The analysis in question, much like Goldman’s earlier process reliabilism, need not commit itself to the view that anyone in

---

9 See also [14].
particular has knowledge. Rather, it sets forth conditions under which knowledge obtains.

One good-making feature of this analysis of social knowledge is that it can accommodate Goldman’s work on social epistemology in that much of what he provides is an applied epistemology for social contexts of law, politics, and science. This is to say simply that it appears that what Goldman has provided in terms of social epistemology is not incongruent with my argument that social epistemology ought to be naturalized, externalized and reliabilized.\(^\text{10}\)

Finally, it is rather curious that Goldman states that “there is a smorgasbord of legitimate projects for social epistemology; we need not insist on a unique conception of the field” ([19], p. 204). This seems like one more way in which Goldman’s double-minded epistemology manifests itself. Would Goldman ever make such a statement about individual epistemology? I am not aware of any statement made by him concerning justified true belief theory that would even hint that we ought not to insist on a unique conception of the field of individual epistemology. Indeed, anyone making such a statement would no doubt be considered to be one who endorses some version of ‘veriphobia,’ something that Goldman goes to great lengths to refute ([15], pp. 7-44). I concur with Goldman’s refutations of such views. However, it seems misleading to make the above statement about the need to not insist on a unique conception of social epistemology after going to such lengths to refute various forms of veriphobia.

**Desiderata of a plausible social epistemology**

This leads to the need for a set of desiderata for a plausible theory of social knowledge, something that has not to my knowledge been proffered in the work on social epistemology. One such desideratum is that a theory of social knowledge ought not at the outset to rule out the possibility of social epistemic skepticism, as that would overly bias the field against a legitimate epistemic possibility. A second desideratum is that the field of social epistemology, as a sub-field of epistemology more generally, ought not without good reason to be construed in terms that are fundamentally distinct than the sub-field of individual epistemology. If epistemology is the philosophical analysis of the nature of human knowledge, then any sub-field of epistemology—individual or social—ought to entail the very same basic methodology and purpose. So if justified true belief theory is the way epistemology ought to be conducted, then epistemology—whether individual or social—ought to be conducted by way of justified true belief theory. Still another desideratum of a

\(^{10}\) This is consistent with Goldman’s claim that sociality lies at the heart of epistemic justification ([13], p. 155).
plausible social epistemology is that it ought not to rule out *a priori* the possibility of there being collective epistemic agents. Discussions of individualism versus collectivism in epistemology ought to take place in the very same ways in which metaphysical debates about the matter are resolved, without undue prejudice infecting the very manner in which social epistemology construes epistemic agency. Perhaps even more fundamental than the foregoing desiderata is that a theory of social knowledge, just as with individual epistemologies, ought to provide an explication and defense of the nature of social knowledge. For without an analysis of the nature of social knowledge, there can at best be but a limited understanding of the category as it is used in social epistemological discourse. And if justified true belief theory is to be our guide along these lines, then we would expect that some of the main competitor theories of social knowledge would include internalism, externalism, naturalism, reliabilism, foundationalism, coherentism, skepticism, etc. Finally, a plausible social epistemology ought to provide an adequate understanding of ‘social’ in order to avoid confusion as to the very nature of the epistemic enterprise in question. Goldman in fact goes to great lengths to clarify what he means by ‘social’ in his discussion of social factors in science ([12], pp. 277-278). In answer to the vital question, “What is ‘social’ about veritistic social epistemology?” he states: ‘The believing agents discussed are principally individuals, and *qua* believers they are not a locus of sociality’ ([24], p. 195). While it is clear that Goldman’s social epistemic veritism satisfies the third and fifth of these desiderata, it is not obvious that it does enough to satisfy the first, second and fourth desiderata. So while Goldman’s social epistemology provides valuable information insofar as the explication of epistemic principles to law, science, argumentation, etc., are concerned, veritism’s self-imposed limitation to the study of truth acquisition in social contexts poses problems related to the limited scope of his theory.

**Conclusion**

While Goldman’s social epistemic veritism has provided rather incisive connections to various important areas of study such as law, science and communication theory, it seems by its very conceptual framework to not see the fundamental connections between social and individual epistemology in terms of justified true belief theory. As a result, Goldman fails to exploit the fact that social epistemology can, among other things, serve as the source of plausible critique of traditional epistemology insofar as the latter’s excessive individualism is concerned. Perhaps these problems are based on the fact that methodologically, Goldman’s veritism neglects to set forth and defend an analysis of social knowledge. It is likely that if this essential step had been taken at the very outset of Goldman’s social epistemol-
ogy, then the precise similarities and differences between individual and social epistemologies would come to light, that is, barring some plausible reason or set of reasons as to why social epistemology ought to be conceptualized so differently than traditional justified true belief theory.

Clearly, nothing I have argued herein leads to the conclusion that Goldman’s enterprise cannot accommodate my concerns without trouble. But until it resolves such difficulties, Goldman’s social epistemology will fail the test of completeness as these problems point to some essential matters that must be faced by any plausible social epistemology.

J. Angelo Corlett
San Diego State University

References

[3] [4]
Dž. Anđelo Korlet

**Osnove socijalne epistemologije**

(Apstrakt)

Kada je reč o epistemologiji onda nema produktivnijeg analitičkog filozofa od Alvina Goldmana. U postavljanju standarda o tome kako treba da izgleda socijalna epistemologija on je toku poslednje dve decenije uradio više od bilo kog drugog analitičkog filozofa. Međutim, iako je Goldman dao brojne doprinose našem razumevanju primjenjene epistemologije koji nam mogu pomoći ne samo u filozofiji nego i u drugim oblastima našeg znanja, na primer u nauci, pravu, ili teoriji komunikacije, ipak ima mesta za dalje problematizovanje načina na koji se može konceptualizovati osnova socijalne epistemologije. Jedno od tih mesta je unekoliko problematično izdvajanje socijalne epistemologije iz tradicionalne analitičke epistemologije na način da je samo poslednja ali ne i prva naturalistička i daje dovoljno osnova za pouzdanost. Druga teškoća je da on izgleda ne priznaje da socijalna

epistemologija uvodi potencijalno neprijatan problem za tradicionalnu epistemologiju, naime izlaže tradicionalnu epistemologiju preteranom individualizmu. Goldman izgleda ne prepoznaje da se to vidi u činjenici da on u svojoj konceptulizaciji osnova epistemologije zadržava tradicionalnu epistemologiju kao genuinu oblast filozofskog istraživanja, bez ukazivanja na to da se element društvenog može ugraditi u opis koji daje tradicionalna analiza ljudskog znanja. Ili, rečeno u terminima jednog drugog socijalnog epistemologa, Stiva Fulera, Goldmanova socijalna epistemologija nije revizionistička iako sam Goldman tvrdi da je ona normativna. Ovo vodi u treći problem za Goldmanovu socijalnu epistemologiju, naime da u analizi socijalnog znanja ona ne zahteva sadrži opravdana istinita verovanja.

KLJUČNE REČI: Alvin Goldman, socijalna epistemologija, tradicionalna epistemologija, socijalna epistemička pouzdanost.