
ON SCHÜTZ *THE WELL-INFORMED CITIZEN* AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

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Abstract: *This contribution focuses on the relevance of Schütz's essay *The Well-informed Citizen* for social epistemology. This writing discusses the role of information through testimony, the problem of epistemic disagreement and the normative role of the person as a citizen with respect to superficial information and the specialist knowledge of experts.*

Keywords: *social epistemology, testimony, disagreement, social evidence, citizen, expert*

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Introduction

Alfred Schütz was born in Vienna in 1899. He was a sociologist and philosopher who developed a social science based on revised phenomenology according to the theory of action (Weber). He has published a huge number of writings that represent a solid basis for social ontology even through other disciplines.

I am concerned about Schütz's very important contribution to social epistemology because it seems to be quite unknown. His essay *The Well-Informed Citizen. An essay on the social distribution of knowledge* (1964) deals with the themes of citizenship and the sociology of knowledge in the light of the social distribution of knowledge, the construction of ideal types of experts, the common man and the well-informed citizen (who must determine which expert is competent). Schütz outlines various areas of interest or relevance, reflects on the possibility of a constant change in the configurations of relevance and differentiates the intrinsic relevance of a theme that a person follows and those

imposed. The process of rationalization of modernity and technological development, as demonstrated by the example of the arms race, are invasive processes and require correct information from citizens. A well-informed person refers on a form of knowledge socially derived from the consultation of eyewitnesses, analysts, commentators, depending on their access to the facts and the relevance that governs it. Social epistemology is a crucial area to discuss the problem of testimony and social evidence that we obtain from indirect information, that is to say that information we do not obtain from our experience or from inferential reasoning.

1. Testimony in Social Epistemology

The ongoing debate on "testimony" is very lively and presents interesting and conflicting perspectives. A classic distinction concerns "direct" or "indirect" forms of information and knowledge. Hume argued that testimony is an indirect source of knowledge, because even though we generally trust what others say, we are allowed to trust them by virtue of what we have learned using direct forms of knowledge. This type of testimony is called "reductionism", as it reduces the force of justification to the combined forces of perception, memory and inductive inference. More precisely, this form of justification is called "global reductionism", because it allows auditors to be justified to believe in a peculiar example of testimony through the inferential reference to the overall reliability of testimony. An alternative to global reductionism is "local reductionism," which does not require an auditor to be justified in believing that the testimony is reliable. It only requires that the speaker responsible for the testimony be reliable and sincere on the subject matter. We can observe that this is a weaker and easier requirement to meet compared to global reductionism. Another view on testimony is "anti-reductionism" (Coady, Burge, Foley). According to the anti-reductionism, we can introduce a weaker condition, namely that the listener would have no evidence that could affect the testimony. As we have seen, because this requirement is too weak, some authors think we need to test the reliability and sincerity of the speaker. A third, interesting view of the testimony

is the "interpersonal" approach, which rejects the requirements introduced by reductionism and anti-reductionism (Ross, Hinchman, Moran, Faulkner, Zagzebski). In this case, the testimony is valid by virtue of the fact that it is a "guarantee" by its nature. In this case, the justification through testimony stems from the fact that the speaker takes responsibility for the truth of his statement (Moran) or invites the listener to trust her (Hinchman).

"Communitarianism" according to which the community is the main source of knowledge. It maintains the idea that an agent would have "direct" possession of the evidence, but breaks with the assumption that such an agent would be or could be an individual.

Hardwig could be considered as community not only with regard to epistemology but also philosophy in general. The testimony occupies a space where epistemology meets ethics. Whether a certain result of an expert provides a good reason to believe it, it will depend on the recipient's perception of the reliability of the expert's testimony, which on his part will depend on an assessment of his character. Hardwig's work on teams and trust in scientific practice has influenced relevant authors in the field of social epistemology (Galison, Knorr Cetina, Shaffer, Shapin and Mackenzie). Kusch emphasizes two limits of his approach. First, Hardwig privileges scientific communities, so it does not consider cases of cooperation in ordinary life where testimony plays a crucial role. In fact, we trust many public messages without investigating the sincerity and competence of the source. Secondly, the way in which Hardwig refers to evidence of a true belief is not very clear. Beyond individualism, there is an explanation of the nature of the evidence held by the teams or the process through which we can proceed to a true conviction.

Michael Welbourne makes a fundamental theoretical move; he considers testimony not as "mere transmission of information" (the so-called "saying so" that characterizes classical epistemology). Knowledge takes place in a community in which it is transmitted according to a certain vision of "shared knowledge". Sharing knowledge means sharing commitments and rights with

others. His theory of "authority" conflicts with the theory of evidence. We have no direct evidence for knowledge, because with law, simply anything can serve as the basis for our inferences. Knowledge must be objective and therefore "social" because we consider it an external and objective standard for what others should also recognize. The commitments we make involve an investigation into the rights of others; therefore, we create a dialogical dynamic that generates new shared knowledge. The biggest limitation of Welbourne's point of view is, according to Kusch, that he does not consider the normative ground of testimony, namely basic knowledge. This background represents what the agents actually share and encapsulates the important achievements of the previous communities of knowledge from which we inherit them.

Therefore, it would be possible to go beyond the dialogical exchange of reasons, starting from commitments and rights and proceed on the knowledge constituted by testimony through a sort of "institutionalization". In this case, we need a theory of social institutions and social states based on the use of so-called "performatives" (Austin). The main references for social epistemology in this context are John Searle, Barry Barnes and David Bloor. However, we also remember the work of Kent Bach, Esa Salkonen, Eerik Lagerspetz and Raimo Tuomela. The performative testimony moves from the act they do by saying anything and from how it is received by our interlocutor. It is not a matter of simple "saying so" or simple transmission, but a process of social construction. Beyond this view, we point on the importance of the "scorekeeping" model introduced by the American philosopher Robert Brandom as a dialogical model to get the objectivity of knowledge we can share.

2 The Problem of Disagreement in Social Epistemology

We briefly introduce the debate on disagreement because Schütz presents an original description of layperson, expert and the well-informed citizen that involves important normative dimensions. We can say that we usually believe what another person tells us, but other times we disagree with them. So we ask ourselves: is it rational for us to continue to maintain our convictions with the

same degree of trust as before? Or does rationality require us to reduce our confidence? This would seem to depend on the reasons we have about the person who is in a better position to achieve a possibly objective result on the issue. One could present the case in which there are good reasons that make our interlocutor an "epistemic equal", because he seems to be a person with good arguments to support his vision. In social epistemology, different positions are introduced to solve the problem of disagreement.

"Conciliationism" is the opinion that in disagreement between equals it is reasonable to assess the request for a change in one's trust. Two related considerations seem to support conciliation: the failed agreement seems to be questionable dogmatic and the disagreement itself seems to constitute some evidence (of higher order) that it was wrong. The most challenging version of conciliationism is the vision of equal weight, according to which one should give the same weight to the opinion of a peer as one's own (Christensen, Elga, Feldman, Matheson).

The critics of the conciliationism offer a series of objections. There is a criticism of self-refutation: since conciliation itself is a widely contested statement, it follows (given conciliation) that if conciliation is true, we are not able to believe it rationally (Christensen). A second criticism comes from the view of the "right reasons" (Kelly). Let's assume that after all the evidence has been disclosed, two colleagues continue to disagree. In this case what rationality requires is what rationality requires everywhere: belief in accordance with the relevant evidence.

In a more recent document, Kelly has developed a third criticism of conciliation, which questions whether rationality requires the same thing in any disagreement between peers. What rationality could require in a case of disagreement between equals is determined by what the total proof sustains after adding the evidence that is acquired in the disagreement itself (Lackey). In some cases, total proof (post-disagreement) will require a significant change in one's degree of trust, in other cases it will not require any change, and in other cases it will require something in between. As we will see, these positions are

more or less consistent with more formal and Bayesian approaches to update beliefs about other people's beliefs

Debates about disagreement between equals have branched out in interesting ways. One branch concerns the epistemic meaning of disagreement that is (not real but) reasonably anticipated (Ballantyne). A second branch concerns the epistemic meaning of what Fogelin called "deep disagreements", long-standing disputes in which there is no consensus on how to resolve disagreement. While profound disagreement has long been the basis for skeptical concerns about the possibility of ethical or religious knowledge, social epistemologists have most recently turned their eyes to philosophy itself (Frances, Goldberg, Kornblith).

3 The Well-informed citizen

Classically, we can read the essay in three ways. In the first place, as a contribution to a "theoretical science that deals with the social distribution of knowledge" [Schütz 1964, 89]. This is a very good point for social epistemology since the essay challenges the statement that the sociology of knowledge could represent the exclusive field for interpreting all thought as a product of material social conditions. Secondly, it offers a way to conceptualize the social change that causes the mutual anonymity typical of modern civilization. Finally, it provides a thoughtful reflection on the responsibility of citizens towards politics. Following Max Weber, we observe that we live in the era of a rational authority shown by the evolution of society that continuously increases its complexity. So we need a new kind of responsibility, that is, to be well-informed as individuals willing to know their place in relationships with others on political, economic and psychological aspects.

The well-informed citizen has a peculiar position different from the expert who possesses a supply of knowledge that forms a world relatively impenetrable from others and states that others are ignorant if they are unable to speak in the terms of that field. He/she is also different from the man on the street who is guided by a simple end-of-average reasoning, that is, the knowledge possessed

in this way allows this person to realize "as if it were a ritual" each of the myriad of practical purposes at hand.

All human interests are subject to one of two systems of relevance: intrinsic or imposed. The intrinsic relevance is actively selected but, once established, they determine the system of intrinsic relevance to the chosen interest [Schütz 1964 p.126]. On the other hand, there is a system of relevances that are imposed by situations and events and over which we have limited control such as destiny, destiny, providence, losses, acts of God, disease etc. The theory of intrinsic and imposed relevances is linked to Schutz's distinction between socially derived and socially approved knowledge. Socially derived knowledge constitutes the majority of our knowledge and consists of experiences of contemporaries and predecessors communicated or handed down to us. At least four ideal typical people transmit socially derived knowledge: the eyewitness, the insider, the analyst and the commentator [Schütz 1964 132-133]. Socially approved knowledge is that accepted by other members of our group such as popular habits and customs. We can observe that in modern societies socially approved knowledge produces systems of imposed relevance because "in-groups" do not constitute entire communities. The more complex a society becomes, the less we can know the origin of shared knowledge. This means that some forms of community begin to disappear, the direction of tradition and the inner direction are replaced by another direction and public opinion assumes a new abstract and anonymous authority over social and political life. In the words of Schütz:

No spot of this globe is more distant from the place where we live than sixty airplane hours; electric waves carry message in a fraction of a second from one end of the earth to the other; and very soon every place in this world will be the potential target of destructive weapons released at any other place...Politically, economically, and socially imposed relevances beyond our control have to be taken into account by us as they are. Therefore we have to know them. But to what extent? [Schütz,1964 129].

The well-informed citizen should be able to reinterpret and redirect the imposed relevances derived from arbitrary individual opinions and those derived from competence. Schütz seems to maintain a sort of anti-reductionism in social epistemology. He thinks that the reliability of the people who transmit knowledge is crucial. But the situation in complex societies is much more complex because knowledge is transmitted as probabilistic, that is, it has two distinct phases, one rooted in the present and the other rooted in the expectation of the future. The interest in the future has a probabilistic character that influences public opinion. It derives its influential status from its very nature, that is, it is scientifically constructed and socially approved knowledge. For example, interest in the future organizes the vast majority of questions asked by epidemiologists when they try to determine what factors can play a role in the future health of a population. In the same way, this interest operates in theoretical efforts to understand the economy.

Conclusion

We can observe the increase of the imposed relevances compared to the intrinsic relevances in the development of complex societies so that public opinion, including knowledge through testimony, comes to represent the measure of authority in democratic societies. It represents a source of authority derived from socially approved aggregated knowledge (such as environmentalists and movements constitute an aggregated "we" in the hope of influencing the future direction of environmental policy). The authority of testimony in complex societies could diminish the freedom of interpretation and action of the well-informed citizen. Schütz proposes a cultural condition for democratic society based on the interpretation of the past. This means that the civic-minded citizen has an obligation that goes beyond making his private opinion prevail over the opinion of the man on the street. Against the science of opinion, the well-informed citizen is obliged to interpret the past otherwise only interpretations of self-interest will prevail.

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