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The Importance of Social Epistemology

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Descartes is often credited with making epistemology central to philosophy. Unfortunately, the English-language philosophical tradition has tended to focus on the wrong part of Descartes' achievement. Journals are full of technical articles about various forms of skepticism (typically dead issues), attempts to define 'knowledge', and a host of cottage industries that have been spun off from such ventures. We tend to forget how Descartes' own interest in certainty stemmed from a more fundamental desire to discover methods for inquiry that would work reliably. His interest in firm foundations surely rested on a well-motivated determination to avoid repeating the career of Aristotelianism. Two millennia of wrong-headed efforts were more than enough.

The great epistemological tradition since the seventeenth century is not the struggle to show how we have knowledge of an external world, but the provision of criteria for assessing evidence across a range of disciplines. The heroes are Bayes and Mill and Peirce and those who continue their efforts today – as in the work of Judea Pearl, and Clark Glymour and his team on hunting causes. Yet, despite Peirce's clear understanding of the collective character of inquiry, virtually all ventures in this tradition have been individualistic. Little has been done to understand how communities should be organized so as to facilitate the search for knowledge.

That is changing. Thanks to a number of contemporary scholars, many of them based in Europe, questions about the norms and structures of collective inquiry are now being raised. And, they are being pursued with precise formal tools. The chief epistemological problem of our day is to understand how to improve the knowledge-seeking endeavors of communities of investigators. As I once put it – “The philosophers have ignored the social structure of science (I should have said “the sciences”). The point, however, is to change it (them).”

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