

Social epistemology: what's in a name?

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Social epistemology: what's in a name?

Miranda Fricker, Peter J. Graham, David Henderson, and Nikolaj J.L.L. Pederson (eds): *The Routledge handbook of social epistemology*. London: Routledge, 2019, 490 pp, £190.00 HB

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What sets *the Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology* apart from other social epistemology anthologies is its perspicacious introduction and six-chapter opening section, which reflect deeply on the history and present organisation of social epistemology. The *Handbook* begins with a section titled 'Historical Backgrounds to Social Epistemology'. The rest of the anthology is constituted mostly by the highly topical sorts of contributions that typically compose the contents of social epistemology anthologies. Among these are many and diverse contributions that deal directly and seriously with science. This and the *Handbook's* meta-philosophical framing should make it of particular interest to this journal's readership compared to many other social epistemology anthologies on offer.

On the one hand, it is unfortunate that social epistemology anthologies typically neglect the history, philosophy, and sociology of science, as well as parallel approaches such as in science and technology studies. On the other hand, the less grand ambitions of most social epistemology anthologies are understandable and even prudent. 'Social epistemology' is a notoriously imprecise label, grouping together approaches with disparate fundamental tenets, methods, and memberships. My own research is in analytic social epistemology. I completed my doctoral research in a history and philosophy of science department. Lectures and joint events with science and technology studies researchers and departments were not rare. This was interesting and formative. But it was not the melting pot for generating collaborative research it might sound like. What common threads purportedly exist between analytic social epistemology, the history and sociology of science, and science and technology studies were almost never discussed. The few discussions that occurred were imprecise, certainly never birthing any well-defined, collaborative research. This is not to say there are no examples of fruitful cross-pollination

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between disparate branches in social epistemology (e.g. Weatherall and Gilbert 2016). However, these are less common than examples of integration between other branches of philosophy that do not fall under a vague, umbrella-like term such as 'social epistemology'. Look no further than the explosion of epistemological interest in philosophy of mind topics (e.g. extended and distributed cognition). Indeed, certain branches of social epistemology will look towards work in social psychology, cognitive psychology, or cognitive neuroscience a thousand times for every consideration of work in other branches of social epistemology.

The opening section of this *Handbook* is refreshingly illuminating in showing why this is so. Though this may not be the intended aim of this section, it illuminates precisely why the label 'social epistemology' is about as useful as the label 'life sciences'. Such labels are helpful only for drawing the broadest of distinctions. 'Social epistemology' is a term helpful for acquiring an understanding of the history and present organisation of diverse branches in philosophy. Yet, what is dynamic in these branches proceeds independently of other branches to the extent these branches are grounded in divergent commitments and aims, which are made particularly clear in the first three contributions of the *Handbook's* opening section.

The limited utility of dealing with social epistemology as a whole is also evidenced by the closing section of the *Handbook*. At first glance, it appears to be a collection of forward-looking perspectives on the whole of social epistemology, forming meta-philosophical bookends with the opening section. However, following the first two contributions by Goldberg and Henderson and Graham, the remainder of the closing section is as topical as the guts of the *Handbook*. This is not a criticism. The *Handbook* shows the limits of a global treatment of social epistemology: an exercise in recent, very broad history of philosophy, exemplified by Alvin Goldman's and Finn Collin's contributions to this anthology's opening section. Notably, several contributions to the opening section are not treatments of social epistemology as a whole, though as a collection they can be conceived of this way (i.e. Stephen Turner's history of the sociology of knowledge, K. Brad Wray's exploration of Kuhn's influence on certain threads in social epistemology, and Chase Wrenn's discussion of the naturalisation thread in epistemology).

As I pointed out earlier, that there is inherent divergence between areas in social epistemology has not precluded integration on occasion. Furthermore, in identifying fundamental differences between approaches in social epistemology, the opening section of the *Handbook* helps to pinpoint areas of potentially genuine integration that have so far been overlooked. In his contribution to the opening section, 'The Twin Roots and Branches of Social Epistemology', Finn Collin identifies a lack of any deep engagement with scientific practice in analytic social epistemology. Scientific *production* is increasingly applied in social epistemological analyses, but analytic social epistemology has engaged less with scientific practice itself. In other words, there is a welcome spike in scientifically informed social epistemology but not in the social epistemology of science. Granted, there has been a good deal of *topical* social epistemology of science (e.g. on collaboration between diverse experts, scientific consensus and dissent, relations between science and the public, etc.), including a number of contributions to the *Handbook*. Yet, less social epistemology of science offers *systematic* analyses concerning the fundamental

organisation of science in the traditions of Kitcher (1992, 1993) and a number of feminist philosophers of science, of which Collin focuses on Longino (1990, 2002).

Besides its historical framing of social epistemology, its identification of potential areas of genuinely integrative research, the *Handbook* offers an array of topical contributions which accelerate the expansion of several specific horizons in social epistemology. It is an impressive and welcome collection.

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