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Kant and the Enlightenment's Contribution to Social Epistemology

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Introduction

In the present paper, I undertake a detailed study of what I take to be Immanuel Kant's contribution, along with that of the German Enlightenment tradition leading up to Kant, to social epistemology. At first sight, such a project might seem viciously anachronistic. How, one might ask, could Kant – let alone his predecessors – have contributed to social epistemology, given that the subject was not established as a subdiscipline of philosophy until the late twentieth century? The charge of anachronism, however, does not stick. As I hope to show, Kant has much to say about core issues in what would nowadays be described as social epistemology, including the epistemic status of testimony-based beliefs, the role of scientific experts, and the management of what has traditionally (and, in the eyes of some, naively) been called 'the growth of knowledge'. Underlying the various specific discussions, in Kant, of issues of social-epistemological import, one finds a unity of typical 'Kantian' concerns, ranging from the tension between epistemic autonomy and the authority of others to the ethical dimension of communication in general.

The subsequent discussion is organised into five sections. The first describes some of the elements of the 'received view' of Kant as a philosopher whose epistemology is seen as largely detached from his social thought; the section also contains a brief caveat regarding the attribution to Kant of a unified social epistemological 'theory'. The second section gives a detailed account of Kant views

regarding testimony as a source of knowledge, and in doing so outlines some of the elements of early Enlightenment thought about testimony more generally. Having established that Kant gives a ringing endorsement of testimony as a source of empirical knowledge, the third section broadens the scope to consider whether, and when, on Kant's account knowledge may be thought to have a social character. In the fourth section, I consider three domains of applied social epistemology – education, the growth of knowledge, and the figure of the scientific expert – and discuss Kant's position regarding a number of interrelated questions arising from these domains. In the concluding section, I comment on some of the ramifications of the preceding discussion for the self-image of social epistemology as a discipline.

Kant's place in the history of social epistemology: the received view

In contemporary discussions of social epistemology, Kant seems notable only by his absence. Few of the 'modern classics' and recent anthologies of social epistemology mention Kant by name; those that do, often refer to him only by way of contrast, with Kant inevitably being cast in the role of the traditional 'individualistic' epistemologist. In traditional Kant scholarship, the situation is hardly any different. Reconstructions of Kant's epistemology almost never convey a sense of its having a social dimension, whereas discussions of his social and political thought rarely identify a specifically epistemological dimension of sociality.¹ Instead, conclusions for social and political life are typically drawn from explicitly individualistic conceptions of freedom and autonomy.² This observation is not meant to level criticism at Kant scholarship in general, or at contemporary Kantian ethics in particular; rather, it suggests that a better understanding – of both Kant's philosophy and contemporary social epistemology – may be gained by placing both in a relation to one another.

Those social epistemologists that have discussed Kant's relation to the programme of social epistemology, have used his example as a foil for the envisaged scope and method of their newly envisaged discipline. In a paper that purports to be a

¹ One notable exception to the first claim is (Höffe 2003), who hints at the social dimension of Kant's 'epistemic universalism'; an important exception to the second claim is Onora O'Neill; see especially Chapter 2 ('The Public Use of Reason') of her *Constructions of Reason* (1989).

² For a re-assessment of Kant's notion of autonomy, see (Shell 2009).

manifesto of what a future social epistemology might look like, Steve Fuller takes Kant as his starting point only insofar as he is interested in ‘presenting two scenarios for the history of epistemology since Kant, one in which social epistemology is the natural outcome and the other in which it represents a not entirely satisfactory break with classical theories of knowledge’ (Fuller 1987: 145). On this account, while Kant’s achievement – *viz.*, ‘to detach the question about knowledge from the question about [metaphysical] reality’ – was a necessary step towards the autonomy of epistemology as a philosophical discipline, he is thought to have attached little significance to the role of social reality in matters of knowledge; this, Fuller suggests, is an achievement of the 19th century, beginning with such figures as Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, who displayed a concern for ‘the social organization of knowledge’. (Fuller 1987: 149)

A more balanced picture is sketched in Frederick Schmitt’s paper ‘Justification, Sociality, and Autonomy’, published in the same *Synthese* volume as Fuller’s article. In this paper, Schmitt tentatively explores the tension between our dependence on others for testimonial knowledge and an account of epistemic autonomy according to which ‘testimonial evidence, however conclusive, is not the sort on which an intellectually autonomous subject would rely’ (Schmitt 1987: 46). While Schmitt speculates that this is a view that ‘Kant might be seen to be offering’ in his famous maxim ‘to think for oneself’, he does caution ‘against exaggerating Kant’s commitment to individualism’ (*ibid.*), given Kant’s further demand that a subject ought to reflect ‘upon his own judgment from *a universal standpoint*’, taking into account ‘the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, *as it were*, to weigh [his] judgment with the collective reason of man-kind’ (quoted after Schmitt 1987: 46f). Still, Schmitt claims, ‘the way sociality enters here is consistent with a Lockean [individualistic] view, since there is no reliance on testimony’ (Schmitt 1987: 47).

In the following sections, I shall argue that the role of sociality in Kant’s epistemology runs deeper than the – admittedly ambiguous – remarks in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment* perhaps led Schmitt to believe. In doing so, I shall draw on, and expand on, recent work on Kant’s epistemology of testimony (Gelfert 2006; Scholz 2001) as well as on other scholarly contributions, ranging from renewed interest in Kant’s anthropology (e.g., Zammito 2002) to recent contributions to social epistemology. While the present paper is intended as both a contribution to the history of philosophy and to (systematic) social epistemology, it risks being

neither; in particular, there is a very real danger of overinterpretation, given that many of the most fascinating of Kant's remarks on social-epistemological questions take the form of philosophical vignettes rather than elaborate arguments. Some risks are worth taking, however, and I believe that, while it may not be possible to attribute a unified social-epistemological 'theory' to Kant, it is nonetheless worthwhile to explore some of the issues and connections that Kant merely alludes to – even where these concern, as Philip Rossi puts it (who faces a similar challenge), 'links that Kant seldom explicitly marks or brings to the attention to the reader' (Rossi 2005: 104).

Kant's epistemology of testimony in context

If social epistemology begins with the acknowledgment of our indebtedness to the social world for much of our knowledge, then testimony clearly deserves to be at the centre of attention. Not only is testimony epistemically significant in its own right – that is, as a social source of knowledge – but it also is of interest as a touchstone for different (systematic and historical) construals of social epistemology as a discipline. No matter what one's other theoretical commitments with respect to the social character of knowledge – whether one believes that its social aspects are 'parasitic' upon an individualistic conception of knowledge, or whether one defends a thorough-going 'communitarian' view of knowledge as a social status (Kusch 2002) – as a social epistemologist one cannot afford to ignore the realities of testimonial encounters and practices.

Contemporary discussions of the epistemology of testimony (e.g., Coady 1992) tend to take as their historical starting point David Hume's (prima facie) reductionist position (developed in the section *Of Miracles* in the *Enquiry*), which combines an inductivist account of testimony in general with a rejection of miraculous testimony in particular.³ This is then contrasted with Thomas Reid's 'credulist' position, according to which testimonial justification does not stand in need of reduction, since humans are naturally endowed with two principles 'that tally with each other', namely 'a propensity to speak the truth' and 'a disposition to confide in the veracity of others' (Reid 1764: VI: XXIV). While Hume's and Reid's positions

³ For a challenge to the received view of Hume's alleged reductionism, see Gelfert (forthcoming).

are illustrative of the two dominant philosophical temperaments concerning testimonial acceptance – reductionism and anti-reductionism – historically they form but one strand within a much more complex debate. In the present section, I wish to identify an alternative strand within the history of the epistemology of testimony, leading up to Immanuel Kant's views on the matter. Inevitably, not least due to limitations of space, tracing this alternative trajectory of the debate will require my being selective in the choice of authors and theoretical issues to be discussed; nonetheless, it is perhaps not unreasonable to hope that even a highly selective account of enlightenment theories of testimony can have something to contribute to our understanding of what one might call, in a phrase due to Ernst Cassirer, the epistemological '*Gesamtkultur* of the eighteenth century' (Cassirer 1932: 473).

The intellectual constellation against which the emergence of enlightenment theories of testimony must be understood, is characterised by a confluence of questions concerning hermeneutics, the philosophy of history, anthropology, and science. Logic, understood in its broadest sense as the 'art of thinking' (*ars cogitandi*), had been the traditional place in the curriculum for questions that we would now consider 'epistemological' in character; apart from instructing students in the rules of proper reasoning, textbooks in logic would also consider the reasonableness of methods of belief formation in general as well as maxims for managing specific cases (such as the conflicting testimonies of witnesses that contradict each other). It is thus no surprise that, under the influence of changes in the curriculum and the ways of instruction in general, and in response to the emerging authority of the sciences, logic became the primary locus where distinctly epistemological discussions of testimony began to take shape.⁴ An important overall development, at least since the middle of the seventeenth century, was the gradual erosion of the significance of hermeneutics as a separate discipline and its subsumption under the more general framework of philosophical logic.⁵ Hermeneutics, of course, had its most central place in textual interpretation and scriptural exegesis, and much of its disciplinary significance was derived from the presumed infallibility of the very texts whose authority it was meant to safeguard (for example, by assimilating the 'figural' meaning to the 'literal' meaning of passages

⁴ For a brief survey of this development, see (Scholz 2009).

⁵ On this point, see (Danneberg 1997).

that needed interpretation).⁶ As long as the search for the literal meaning of testimonies was regarded as exhausting the assessment of their validity, there was little space for genuinely epistemological questions; after all, to meaningfully raise questions concerning the truth and reliability of claims in general, one would first have to acknowledge their in-principle fallibility. As the philosophical emphasis shifted from exegetical issues to questions pertaining to civic life and profane historical facts, the epistemological dimension of assessing testimony became more prominent. At the root of all epistemological worries about testimony lies the recognition that the act of testifying bears no necessary connection to the truth of the claim in question. Christian Thomasius (1655-1728) puts this nicely, when he laments that ‘because of the common wickedness it can easily so happen that a man speaks differently from what he thinks’ (Thomasius 1691: 174); our knowledge of another’s true opinion is thus always dependent on the hypothesis that ‘their words conform to their thoughts’.⁷ However, ‘in civic life, since matters cannot be carried further, this [way of acquiring] knowledge must count as much as knowledge of an indisputable truth’ (ibid.).

While Thomasius’s justification of our everyday acceptance of testimony ‘is based on considerations of practical necessity (‘matters cannot be carried further’), it is nonetheless indicative of the overall move towards a clearer acknowledgment of the gap between the ‘*probabilitas hermeneutica*’ of a statement (i.e., whether it has been correctly interpreted) and its ‘historical probability’ (i.e., whether it tells a fact). The distinction between these two probabilities, and their epistemological significance, becomes a common feature of early Enlightenment discussions; thus, Johann Martin Chladenius (1710-1759) warns that ‘hermeneutic hypotheses’, even when they are probable in the sense that they may render passages intelligible that would not otherwise make sense, ‘must not be employed as secure foundations for knowledge of history itself’ (Chladenius 1742: 379). A keen awareness of the many circumstances that may defeat another’s testimony is evident from injunctions such as the demand, issued by Christian August Crusius (1715-1775), that ‘one should strive to come to know as much as possible about the external and internal circumstances of the author, partly so as to form the right idea of his character, partly to hit upon the right

⁶ For a study of this aspect of Biblical hermeneutics, and its subsequent decline in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see (Frei 1974).

⁷ All translations from the original German are my own, except where indicated otherwise.

viewpoint, from which he has looked at matters, e.g. to what extent he measured up to the language [terminology]; what expertise [*Wissenschaft*] he had; at which location, at which time, and on which occasion he spoke' (Crusius 1747: 637). At first sight this may seem merely a refinement of the *Port-Royal Logic*'s fairly commonplace demand that 'all the accompanying circumstances, internal or external' (1996: 264) of a testimony ought to be taken into account, but the specific emphasis on the testifier's character and expertise, along with the implicit demand to take into account the testifier's 'viewpoint'⁸ when judging his testimony, introduces a richer vocabulary that lends itself to a more interpersonal account of testimony. Crusius's account is also a good example of how the gradual subsumption of hermeneutics under the framework of philosophical logic introduced a new structural feature into epistemological discussions of testimony, in the form of rules of presumption governing the acceptance of testimony. In Crusius, such presumptive rules still have a distinctly hermeneutic flavour, insofar as they demand that one presume ('as long as the opposite has not been shown or the ground of the presumption has not been defeated') of every testifier 'that he speaks clearly and wants to be understood' and 'that he speaks in line with ordinary usage and avoids obscurity and ambiguity'. However, given that Crusius regards it as 'the natural purpose of speech that one wants to be understood' and given further that he accords this discussion an important place in a treatise devoted to the *Way Towards Certainty and Reliability of Human Knowledge*, it may not seem too far-fetched to credit Crusius with an – admittedly 'embryonic' – version of what in contemporary epistemology of testimony has been called a 'presumptive right thesis' regarding the acceptance of testimony (Fricker 1994: 125). A full-fledged version of the same basic idea would later find its way into Kant's *Blomberg Logic* (commonly dated to the early 1770s):

As for what further concerns the credibility and sincerity of witnesses who communicate experiences they have obtained, everyone is taken to be sincere and upright until the opposite has been proved, namely, that he deviates from the truth etc. According to the well-known principle of fairness [*Billigkeit*]: *Quilibet praesumitur bonus, / Donec probitur contrarium*. [*Everyone is presumed good until the opposite is proved.*] (AA XXIV.1: 246)

⁸ There is more than a passing resemblance between this and Chladenius's theory of 'viewpoint' (*Sehepunkt*); see e.g. Grondin (1997).

The concept of fairness (*Billigkeit*; Latin *aequitas*) has clear legal and ethical connotations, which derive not only from the historical connection with Aristotle's discussion of *epieikeia* in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, but more directly from the widespread appeal to principles of equity in legal hermeneutics.⁹ '*Billigkeit*' is also a central term in the general hermeneutics of Georg Friedrich Meier (see Scholz 1994), whose *Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason* was to form the basis of many of Kant's lectures on logic. In Kant, however, as I shall argue later in this section, there is a clear sense in which epistemic interdependence is seen as the natural predicament of human reasoners, which calls for a way of handling the testimony of others in accordance with general principles of fairness and reciprocity (rather than, for example, through quasi-forensic evaluations of a speaker's track record, the availability of independent evidence, and so forth).

Before turning to a more systematic account of Kant's views on testimony, I wish to briefly summarize Meier's discussion, which was perhaps the most direct influence on Kant's own views. As just mentioned, Kant's lectures on logic, which provide the bulk of the textual evidence for his views on testimony, were heavily based on Meier's *Excerpt*. Kant, however, did not slavishly follow Meier's text to the letter; instead, in his own words, he aimed at 'assessing, weighing, and expanding' the text – and criticizing it where necessary. (See Gelfert 2006: 629-631, for details.) Where the abridged *Excerpt* overlaps with the full *Doctrine* (published earlier the same year, 1752), the wording is typically almost identical. Most of Meier's arguments regarding testimony can be found in §§ 206-215 in the *Excerpt* (§§ 236-245 in the *Doctrine*). He begins (§ 206) by defining the act of testifying as that which someone does when he 'presents [*ausgeben*] a real matter as true in order for someone else to also hold it true'. Accepting something on the basis of another's testimony is a matter of believing him (*credere*), of placing faith in him. The nature of this faith (*fides historica*) is defined as 'the approval [*Beifall*] which we give a thing on the basis of [someone's] testimony'. It is noteworthy that Meier understands the domain of this kind of faith, and hence of testimony, as comprising past, present and future matters, 'but no other truths'¹⁰ – a restriction which, as we shall see, has an analogue in Kant's theory of testimony. In the *Doctrine*, Meier even writes that 'it is a sign of a

⁹ For a discussion of the early history of legal hermeneutics, see (Strömholm 1978).

¹⁰ In the *Doctrine* (§ 236), Meier draws a distinction between *fides historica*, that is historical faith associated with testimony, and 'beatific faith' ('seligmachender Glaube') which is dealt with by theology and which is 'of an entirely different nature' (*von einer ganz anderen Natur*).

simple-minded character and a proof that one is biased by prejudice if one also accepts as true, on the basis of other people's testimony, truths which do not consist in the reality of matters' (§ 236).

Whether or not someone's testimony is to be accepted is, for Meier, a question of the testifier's authority (*Ansehen*). Whilst 'authority' (*autoritas testis*) is defined as 'the degree of honour, by virtue of which [the testifier] is judged as exemplary [*nachahmenswürdig*] in his knowledge' (*Excerpt*, § 207), it is an essentially epistemic notion. Two necessary components of epistemic authority need to be distinguished: First, the testifier's *competence* [*Tüchtigkeit*], that is, his possessing 'sufficient powers to not only acquire the right experience but also to designate it in the right way' (*ibid.*); second, the testifier's *sincerity*, that is, 'the inclination of his will to designate his experiences the way he holds them to be true' (*ibid.*). Meier stresses that both conditions, that of competence and that of sincerity, must be fulfilled and neither is sufficient by itself, without the other, to establish the testifier's epistemic authority. In particular, 'we can believe no testifier whom we judge to have no authority' (*ibid.*).¹¹

On the one hand, this suggests that a testifier stands *prima facie* in need of assessment by us. On the other hand, Meier declares, in § 207 of the *Excerpt*, that 'the testimonies of a competent and sincere testifier cannot be wrong'. Hence, what needs to be substantiated when assessing another person's testimony is not so much the truth of the asserted matter of fact, but the person's qualities of being competent and sincere. In order for someone to place 'reasonable faith' [*vernünftiger Glaube*; *Doctrine*, § 243] in someone else's testimony, he may not accept it until 'he has examined the credibility of the testifiers, by coming to see on at least probable grounds that the testifiers are sufficiently competent and sincere' (*ibid.*). The problem of how best to ascertain whether the testifier displays these qualities, however, is not fully resolved in Meier's work. In the *Doctrine*, Meier recognises that it would take 'a more extensive study [in order to determine] from which characteristics one could infer, with probability, the sincerity of a witness or cast doubt on it' (§ 240). However, Meier claims, meeting this challenge is not the proper task of philosophical logic but would require a new 'logic of probability' (§ 245). In the *Excerpt*, perhaps because of its constraints of space and the corresponding need to simplify the

¹¹ More accurately: 'We can believe no testifier who is not held in [high] esteem [*Ansehen*] by us.' Meier here appears to equivocate between the objective definition of *autoritas testis* with its two components competence and sincerity, and the subjective connotation of the German '*Ansehen*' (reputation, esteem, authority).

discussion, Meier's approach is different in that he now *defines* 'reasonable faith' as 'the skill to believe only credible testifiers' (§ 214).

Several elements of Meier's account found their way into Kant's discussions of testimony. This is perhaps less remarkable than it might first seem. First, one should not exaggerate the originality of Meier's general position; many aspects of his account would have been widely shared among (and, indeed, can be found in the writings of) his contemporaries. Second, as hinted at earlier, throughout his 40-year career of teaching logic, Kant often lectured directly from his heavily annotated copy of Meier's *Excerpt*, so a direct influence is only to be expected. Kant adopts a fairly broad definition of testimony, according to which 'statements of empirical cognitions, of experiences, are testimonies' (AA XXIV: 244f.). Like Meier, Kant regards as uncontroversial instances of testimony only those statements that report empirical matters of fact. The gap between the act of testifying and testimony as a source of knowledge in general is bridged by the 'historical faith' (*fides historica*) on the part of the recipient; the trust we place in another's testimony must be apportioned according to the witness's 'competence' (*Tüchtigkeit*) and (moral) 'integrity' (AA IX: 72). As a type of 'mediated experience (*Erfahrung*) of experience that has been attested to by others' (AA XVI: 502), testimony is firmly placed on the side of experience as a source of knowledge. Significantly, Kant claims that 'holding-to-be-true' (*Fürwahrhalten*) on the basis of testimony is 'neither in degree, nor in kind in any way to be distinguished' (AA XVI: 501) from knowledge based on one's own experience.¹² In matters where one can reasonably presuppose that the interlocutor (or the initial witness, in a chain of testifiers) has had direct experience, Kant writes, 'it must be possible, in this way (via historical faith) to obtain knowledge' (AA V: 469). Hence, 'we can accept with as much certainty an empirical truth on the basis of another's testimony as if we had arrived at it through facts of our own experience' (AA IX: 72).

Surprisingly, and somewhat disturbingly, these passages – which, by all lights, should be considered a ringing endorsement of testimony as a source of knowledge – have occasionally been taken to indicate a hostility, on Kant's part, towards 'teaching

¹² *Fürwahrhalten* (literally: 'holding for true'), sometimes translated as 'assent', is Kant's preferred term to designate a positive epistemic attitude towards a proposition; different kinds of assent, such as conviction (*Überzeugung*), opinion (*Meinung*), and persuasion (*Überredung*) are then distinguished in terms of their objective and subjective sufficiency conditions. For a clear account of the various kinds of assent in Kant, see (Chignell 2007).

authority as a distinct source of knowledge that deserved special consideration’ (Kennedy 2004: 7). Rick Kennedy (2004: 229) even goes so far as to claim that Kant was ‘the key figure in philosophically justifying the collapse of testimony into the experience of autonomous selves’. As a specific consequence of Kant’s proposals, Kennedy claims, ‘trusting authorities, tentative listening, and granting benefit of the doubt to credible testifiers about hard-to-believe information ceased to be a virtue of reasonable people’ (ibid.). Apart from this being a gross oversimplification of the complex historical process by which the proper limits of reliance on testimony were gradually delineated, the singling out of Kant as a culprit seems particularly unjust. For Kant, the credibility of a given testimony depends on the ‘moral (and physical) constitution of the witness’ (AA XVI: 504); accepting testimony is a case-by-case affair and requires the capacity (*Fertigkeit*) to accord each statement the approval (*Beifall*) that it deserves. (AA XVI: 508) While it is true that Kant sometimes writes that ‘without such critical reasons in the appraisal of a testimony we cannot trust a testifier’ (AA XXIV: 899), he does not demand conclusive evidence of a testifier’s truthfulness or expertise. On the contrary, Kant speaks of a ‘lack of moral interest’ in anyone ‘who does not want to accept anything on the basis of testimony, unless it has been sufficiently confirmed as knowledge’ (AA XVI: 508). Withdrawing from the reciprocal practice of communication is not a morally – nor, indeed, epistemically – viable option. For, as Kant puts it elsewhere, ‘we can often believe the testimony of others more than we can believe our own experience.’ (AA XIV: 560) In the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant uses the more abstract term ‘universal communicability’ (*allgemeine Mitteilbarkeit*) in order to identify a criterion for when empirical claims may be reasonably presumed to be grounded in objectivity.¹³ That ‘communicability’ must be grounded in the reality of communicative practices, becomes clear from remarks in Kant’s *Practical Logic* (published in 1998, henceforth *BL*), where he displays a keen awareness of the psychological importance of testing our judgments against those of others:

We do not only have a propensity to participate [in society] but also to communicate. Man only learns something so as to be able to communicate it to others. He does not trust his own judgment, unless he has told it to others. Everything is unimportant to us if we cannot communicate it to others. (BL: 55)

¹³ On this point see also John Zammito, who is one of the few authors to note the connection with ‘what we would today call a *social epistemology*’ (2002: 183).

These are hardly the words of someone who denies the reality of our epistemic interdependence, let alone of someone who wishes ‘to collapse testimony into the experiences of autonomous selves’.

What I suspect motivates some of the detractors of Kant, and of the Enlightenment in general, are the principled restrictions that are imposed on *certain kinds* of reliance on authority, in particular in relation to religious traditions and institutions that arrogate to themselves a privileged authority in matters of morality. When it comes to ‘truths of reason’ (*Vernunftwahrheiten*) – which include, amongst others, moral principles as well as a priori truths – Kant is clear that any such truth is only communicable *formaliter*, ‘namely when it is given to me by someone else and has not originated from my own [faculty of] reason’. (BL: 59) In matters of reason, unlike in the case of empirical cognitions, testimony – including the circumstances that accompany it (e.g., certain qualities of the testifier) – has nothing to contribute to the degree of assent the claim in question deserves; truths of reason, as Kant puts it, ‘hold anonymously’ (AA IX: 78). Accepting a purported truth of reason merely on the basis of someone’s say-so would amount to culpable reliance on ‘mere prejudice’ (AA IX: 77f.). Testimony that requires or invites suspension of one’s own rational faculties, on Kant’s account, is no more acceptable than testimony concerning the supersensible (whether the latter either has the supersensible as its subject matter, or is supposed to originate from it – hence Kant’s demand that ‘the person whom I am supposed to trust for her testimony must be an object of experience’; AA VIII: 397). It should perhaps be noted that, as far as moral testimony is concerned, neither of these restrictions rules out moral argumentation, instruction, or debate (as long as both parties exercise their own capacity to reason), nor do they preclude reliance on (empirical) testimony in concrete moral determinations that require a certain empirical input.

The overall picture that emerges from the present discussion is one that makes clear that Enlightenment thinkers leading up to Kant have held nuanced and varied positions concerning the epistemic status of testimony-based beliefs. Kant himself offers a strong endorsement of testimony as a source of (empirical) knowledge and acknowledges the centrality of epistemic interdependence to our cognitive lives. While he does exclude truths of reason from the class of claims communicable by testimony, it would be hasty to conclude that this necessarily conveys an overly narrow individualist conception of knowledge more generally. Indeed, as I aim to

show in the rest of this paper, elements of a social epistemology can be found in various places throughout Kant's work.

Kant on epistemic standards in a social world

As I have argued in the previous section, Kant acknowledges that epistemic interdependence is a central feature of our existence as finite rational beings and he issues a strong endorsement of the testimony of others as a source of knowledge. Beyond the general acknowledgment of our dependence on others for knowledge, does Kant also concern himself with the social dimension of knowledge in general, which testimony may be thought to introduce into our epistemic practices? In the present section, I want to suggest that he does. In a number of places, Kant provides succinct sketches of the social mechanisms that contribute to the success of testimony and give rise to shared epistemic standards. While these discussions do not amount to what we would nowadays call 'case studies' and are not necessarily intended to serve a systematic purpose, they do shed an interesting light on the question of how, according to Kant, the social world impacts our epistemic endeavours. In particular, I shall focus on two examples – the first relating to the social dimension of testimonial knowledge, and the second to the emergence of contingent epistemic standards.

The first example is based on a passage from Kant's essay 'What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?', in which he distinguishes different positive epistemic attitudes – i.e., different kinds of *assent* – and contrasts them with one another. As far as defining the various types of assent is concerned, Kant's discussion here largely parallels the more elaborate taxonomy found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (especially in the "Canon of Pure Reason", A820/B848ff.). Thus, Kant characterises 'all believing' as a 'holding-to-be-true' (*Fürwahrhalten*) that is 'subjectively sufficient, but *consciously* regarded as objectively insufficient' (AA VIII: 141). As such, 'it is contrasted with knowledge', which we cannot but consciously regard as objectively sufficient. (ibid.) Different kinds of assent are not immutable, however: 'When something is held true on objective though consciously insufficient grounds, and hence is merely *opinion*, this *opining* can gradually be supplemented by the same kind of grounds and finally become a *knowing*.' (ibid.) The idea, simply, is that when we form opinions on the basis of objective grounds, even

when we are not subjectively certain of them, we may become so – and in the process acquire knowledge – as new objective evidence becomes available to us and is recognised by us as such. Interestingly, Kant subsequently claims that institutional testimony can furnish the objective grounds necessary to acquire knowledge:

Historical belief, e.g. of the death of a great man, as reported in some letters, *can become a knowing* if his burial, testament, etc. are announced by the local authorities. Hence what is held true historically based on mere testimony [...] can be believed, and yet someone who has never been there can say *I know* and not merely *I believe* that Rome exists. (AA VIII: 141; italics original)

What is significant in this passage is the fact that Kant uses standard examples – the death of a great man, and the indubitability of the existence of Rome – in a novel way, by arguing that social mechanisms can supply objectively sufficient grounds for knowledge, even when we cannot directly check the asserted facts in question. In other words, such knowledge as we have in matters of geography, history, and science, necessarily carries with it a social component. The idea here is not that the truthmakers of such claims are necessarily social, or that knowledge is essentially a social status; rather, it is the case that our knowledge of the social world, and of the epistemic practices it contains, often furnishes objectively sufficient grounds for knowledge in a wider sense.¹⁴ Given what we know – from our own experience as well as from the testimony of others – about how deaths are officially certified, and how historical knowledge is passed on, we can take ourselves as acquiring objectively sufficient grounds for knowledge in such situations, without having to undertake any further first-hand inquiry into the facts in question.

The second example I wish to discuss concerns the emergence of epistemic standards over time. In the *Vienna Logic*, one finds a sharp contrast between the epistemic standards that Kant regards as prevalent during his own time and those of previous ages. One of the features of his discussion is the rejection, familiar from other Enlightenment thinkers (and echoed in the *Critique of Judgment*, §53), of persuasion by means of rhetoric.¹⁵ Thus, he scolds the ancients for not limiting themselves to tellings truths, but instead ‘always aiming at writing beautifully’; as a result, ‘they all accept rumours, without investigating them’ (AA XXIV.2: 898f.).

¹⁴ Hence Kant’s remark in the *Critique of Judgment*, B458f., that ‘the objects of history and geography’ belong ‘not to the realm of belief, but to the realm of facts’.

¹⁵ Kant is here again indebted to G.F. Meier, e.g. in (Refl 3444, AA XVI: 840); see also (Pozzo 2005: 191).

Interestingly, Kant does not content himself with merely noting how epistemic standards have improved in his own time, where everyone has ‘come to see that it is necessary not to violate the truth in the slightest’ (ibid.). He also explains the origins of the new demand for truthfulness and accuracy, by tracing it to the emergence, in particular, of science (‘experimental physics’) as well as improved means of communication and information: ‘Not until the beginning of the previous *saeculum* did people realise that it is necessary to tell the whole truth, and everyone thus had to be wholly accurate in his reports, and if someone swerved from the truth only a little in his writings: then he would be shamed and dishonoured.’ (ibid.) According to Kant, science with its goal of ‘exactly determining the phenomena through observations and experiments’ established a new ‘accuracy in the reporting of experience’, which ‘was then transferred from natural science to history’ (ibid.). Improvements in the publication and communication of reports contributed to this development: ‘The printing presses, and also the gazettes, immediately reveal where someone has erred in his writings’; unlike in ancient times, ‘one can no longer get away with telling merely anecdotal stories [*Histörchen*]’ (ibid.). Equally important, according to Kant, were improvements in the speed with which reports are being communicated: ‘Whereas in ancient times it would take three years for someone to travel from one country to another, thanks to the establishment of the postal service [*die Posten*] a report from one place reaches another in a few days’ (ibid.); this improvement in speed, Kant claims, naturally counteracts the tendency of report ‘to grow along the way’, through embellishment: ‘Nowadays, the postal service acts as a remedy to the immense augmentation of rumours.’ (ibid.) (Evidently, Kant did not envisage an age of electronic junk mail!)

Whereas the first example shows clearly that Kant believes in the capacity of the social world to furnish objective grounds for knowledge, even in cases where direct first-hand experience of the facts concerned is out of our reach, the second example demonstrates his awareness of how epistemic standards may themselves be contingent upon the existence of certain epistemic practices and collective projects such as science. The dual move of rejecting merely rhetorical means of persuasion, while endorsing a quasi-scientific standard of accuracy and precision, is also indicative of the broader intellectual changes – mentioned in the previous section – that led to a re-evaluation of testimony as a source of knowledge. Advocacy of a plain style, which was meant as a safeguard against distortion and the misuse of words,

became more vocal in the 17th century¹⁶, and both coincided with, and was motivated by, an advocacy of science, which conceived of itself as an alternative source of knowledge. This, together with the long-term decline of hermeneutics as a privileged method of ascertaining truths, opened up a realm of genuine epistemological debate, including about the status of testimony as a source of knowledge.¹⁷ The fact that Kant, in the quoted passage, discusses science and rhetoric jointly, including the moderating influence the former had on the latter, in this sense may be seen as both a historically astute observation and itself a commentary on the history of the epistemology of testimony.

The management of knowledge and its social applications

In the present section, I wish to add another layer to my reconstruction of Kant's contribution to social epistemology. What emerges from the previous two sections, is a detailed theoretical account of how we can rely on others for knowledge and of the way in which the social world shapes our epistemic standards. Whether or not one finds this account compelling, it is clear that, by the lights of Kant's own position regarding the relation between theoretical and practical reason, any such account would have to be regarded as incomplete without a proper consideration of its practical dimension. In what follows, I shall focus on three interrelated challenges that emerge in Kant's discussion of what might properly be called *applied social epistemology*. The first concerns the methods and goals of *education* as the principal institution by which knowledge is passed on from one generation to the next. However, given the obvious logistical and psychological constraints on how much knowledge can be disseminated and individually acquired, this leads to the further question of which knowledge merits inclusion and how one should handle the ever-increasing volume of knowledge. Finally, as a direct consequence of the overall growth of knowledge, one can expect a high degree of specialization and division of epistemic labour. This gives rise to the third challenge I wish to discuss, namely, the

¹⁶ This is perhaps best exemplified by Thomas Sprat's *History of the Royal Society* (1667), where he advocates a 'return back to the primitive purity, and shortness, when men deliver'd so many things, almost in an equal number of words' (1667: 113).

¹⁷ Danneberg puts this nicely when he writes: 'While the [literal] truth of the texts is surrendered, it is crucial that what is being held on to is their "capacity to truth".' (1997: 274; my translation.)

question of which principles should govern the epistemic relations between experts and non-experts. As I hope to show, Kant has insightful things to say on each of the three domains in question: education, the growth of knowledge, and the role of expertise.

A full account of Kant's views on education is well beyond the scope of the present paper. Education, for Kant, serves a variety of goals, of which the imparting of (factual) knowledge is but a small part. At the most general level, education is as much a necessity as it is a duty. On the one hand, as Kant puts it in his *Lectures on Pedagogy*, 'the human being can only become human through education'¹⁸ (AA IX: 443); on the other hand, it is only in virtue of education that 'each generation, provided with the knowledge of the preceding ones, is ever more able to [...] develo[p] all of the human being's natural predispositions proportionally and purposively, thus leading the whole human species to its vocation' (AA IX: 446). Education, thus, has an essentially moral character, for 'good education is exactly that from which all good in the world arises' (AA IX: 448). What makes education 'the greatest and most difficult thing that can be given to the human being' (AA IX: 446) is the fact that, although we all, by necessity, depend on it for our upbringing as human beings, education 'does not take place by itself' – i.e., through natural processes – but is an 'art' (AA IX:447), the character of which varies across different societies: 'For how differently do people live!' (AA IX: 445) In order for education to truly contribute to 'a better condition of the human species', not only must the art of education 'be transformed into a science', but also 'the design for a plan of education must be made in a cosmopolitan manner' (AA IX 447/448).

Kant's commitment to education as both a future science and a cosmopolitan enterprise is a response, at least in part, to what he regards as the failings of traditional education, which is too often 'mechanical' (in Kant's sense of 'being without plan and ordered by given circumstances'), not least because parents 'educate their children merely so that they fit in with the present world, however corrupt it may be' (AA IX: 447). For the art of education to move beyond such narrow prudential concerns, it must become a science, 'for insight depends on education and education depends on insight' (AA IX: 446). Part and parcel of this view is a commitment to the possibility of the growth of knowledge. Education, Kant writes, 'can only move forward slowly

¹⁸ All subsequent quotations from Kant's *Lectures on Pedagogy*, as well as from the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, follow the Cambridge edition (2007).

and step by step, and a correct concept of the manner of education can only arise if each generation transmits its experience and knowledge to the next, each in turn adding something before handing it over to the next' (ibid.). An echo of this can be found in the preface to the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, where Kant invokes parallels with education from the very beginning: 'All cultural progress, by which the human being advances his education [*seine Schule macht*], has the goal of applying this acquired knowledge and skill for the world's use.' (AA VII: 119) The application of acquired knowledge to the human being – 'the most important object in the world' (ibid.) – gives rise to anthropology 'considered as *knowledge of the world*, which comes after our *schooling*' (AA VII: 120). Anthropology, in turn, qualifies as *pragmatic* only 'when it contains knowledge of the human being as a *citizen of the world*' (ibid.). Robert Loudon characterises this sense of 'pragmatic' nicely when he describes it as referring 'to the capacity of human beings to set ends for themselves and to act in accordance with these ends' (Louden 2002: 69). In particular, it applies to what the human being 'as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself' (AA VII: 119). Education, which faces the challenge of 'how one can unite submission under lawful constraint with the capacity to use one's freedom' (AA IX: 453)', in this sense has a distinctly pragmatic purpose. In order for education to become a 'coherent endeavour' (AA IX: 447) and fulfill its pragmatic and cosmopolitan ambitions, it must draw on the knowledge of both man and nature; indeed, the two are continuous with one another: 'Knowledge of the world is knowledge of Man.' ('*Weltkenntnis ist Menschenkenntnis*'; Refl 1482, AA XV: 659).¹⁹ However, mere accumulation of knowledge does not suffice: As Kant puts it in one of his *Reflexionen zur Anthropologie* (Refl 904, AA XV: 395), it is 'not enough to know many different sciences; one needs the self-knowledge of understanding and reason'.

What Kant hints at in these *Reflexionen*, is a second, important problem, not only for education, but for any form of scholarly activity: the overall increase in factual knowledge and potentially available information. As Kant puts it with reference to the scholarly output of the sciences, 'it is not the weight that burdens us, but it is the *volume* that constricts the space of our knowledge.' (Refl 1998, AA XVI: 189) While Kant recognises the need for erudition (*Gelehrsamkeit*) and factual

¹⁹ On this point see also (Zammito 2002: 285).

knowledge across many of the sciences, he worries about the excesses of *polyhistory*, which derive from the misguided belief that the appropriate way of managing the ever-growing volume of knowledge is to try to simply absorb as much of it as possible. The result of such a strategy would be a kind of ‘cyclopean learning’, and its adherent would be a mere ‘cyclops of a scholar: who, despite [being] otherwise of great erudition [*Wissenschaft*], lacks an eye primarily for philosophy, yet nonetheless passes judgment on everything’ (Refl 2020/2021, AA XVI: 198). What is needed instead is ‘critique of reason, history, and historical writings, a general spirit [*Geist*] that aims at human knowledge *en gros*, not merely *en detail*’, through which one can reduce the volume of knowledge ‘without diminishing any of its content’ (Refl 1998, AA XVI: 189). Cultivating such an attitude requires steering a middle path between, on the one hand, taking too much pride in one’s own scholarship (which can only lead to *pedantry*) and, on the other hand, seeking approval by merely pandering to popular taste. Pedantry indicates a lack of practical knowledge of the world; in this sense, the pedant is the opposite of the ‘man of the world’ (*Weltmann*), since unlike the latter he either lacks the ability ‘to communicate his scholarship to the man in the street’ or is altogether unaware of its practical significance. (Refl 2062, AA XVI: 217) While Kant dismisses both pedantry and populism in relation to science, he seems to have more patience for the (learned) pedant, ‘for at least one can learn something from him’ (AA VII: 139). By contrast, mere *populism* – ‘the art, or rather the facility, of speaking in a social *tone* and in general of appearing fashionable [...] particularly when it concerns science’ – more often than not ‘cloaks the paltriness of a limited mind’ (ibid.). Critique and judgment are essential in combating pedantry and populism. First, ‘critique of the sciences diminishes pride’, which Kant identifies as the root cause of pedantry (Refl 2016, AA XVI: 196). Second, a properly cultivated power of judgment (*Urteilkraft*) will function as both a safeguard against mistaking popular approval for general validity, and as a tool for selecting from the cumulative stock of knowledge those cognitions that lend themselves to ‘purposeful application’ (AA VII: 184).

The figures of the ‘pedant’ and the ‘populist’ also help to shed light on the third set of questions to be discussed in this section, concerning the relation between laypersons and putative experts. While it would be anachronistic to expect from Kant a detailed discussion of the role of scientific expert testimony, along with its institutional and ethical dimension, he nevertheless discusses close analogues of the

general problem of when an expert deserves our trust. A good scientific expert should not only exhibit *competence* and *sincerity* – which, after all, are required of any trustworthy testifier – but, in addition, should be able to tell whether or not a given problem is relevant from a practical point of view. Also, he must be able to make himself understood to those who lack his level of expertise. The scientific pedant fails this test: He either lacks the skill to communicate his knowledge appropriately, or is carried away by ‘technicalities’ (*Formalien*) as opposed to ‘what is useful’ (Refl 2062, AA XVI: 217). Though he may well be genuinely interested in the truth, he lacks the requisite ‘knowledge of the world’ (*Weltkenntnis*) that would be needed to bring his theoretical knowledge to bear on practical problems. Whereas the pedant lacks the (meta-)competence to communicate relevant knowledge effectively, the scientific ‘populist’ lacks *sincerity*, insofar as he lacks a sincere commitment to the search for truth in general. He typically does so by arrogating to himself a degree of scientific competence and authority he in fact lacks. In this respect, the populist resembles the figures of ‘the quack and the charlatan’, as well as – in Kant’s colourful phrase – ‘the apes of genius’ in general, who declare ‘that difficult study and research are dilettantish and that they have snatched the spirit of all science in one grasp’ (AA VII: 266). By mimicking some aspects of science, without actually putting in the cognitive work necessary for research, this type of impostor proves ‘very disadvantageous to progress in scientific and moral education’, in particular ‘when he knows how to conceal his poverty of the spirit by dogmatizing from the seat of wisdom in decisive tones’ over various (scientific and non-scientific) issues (AA VII: 226).

The behaviour of the scientific ‘populist’, as Kant sees it, not only impedes scientific progress, but must also be treated with moral suspicion. For, in arrogating to himself an epistemic authority that he in fact lacks, the populist also disrespects the authority of those who are real experts. The audience, however, often enough is complicit with such pseudo-experts, who after all are merely pandering to the prejudice of a ‘well-to-do caste [*vornehmer Stand*], who, if they do not actually claim superiority, at the very least claim equality in their insights with those who must exert effort on the thorny path of learning’ (Br, AA XI: 141; my translation). In doing so, they collude with the populist in attempting ‘to make imperceptible the blatantly obvious inequality between loquacious ignorance and thorough science’ (*ibid.*). Typically, this desire to blur the line between science and pseudo-science manifests

itself in an unwarranted enthusiasm for astrology, clairvoyance, alchemy, and similar belief systems. In order to make their case, proponents of pseudo-science resort to confronting their opponents (represented by Kant in the figure of the ‘cautious scientist’) with anecdotal evidence: ‘how would such a scientist explain, say, the fulfillment of this or that dream, this intimation, astrological forecast, or transmutation of lead into gold?’ (ibid.) Given that the cautious scientist will typically admit that he lacks sufficient evidence to explain any particular occurrence of the alleged kind, the enthusiast will then conclude that ‘one person is as ignorant as any other’, and that ‘he therefore has the freedom to make all sorts of judgments about things in which neither he nor his opponent can do any better’ (ibid.). Such a move is doubly problematic, however. Not only does it amount to an epistemically blameworthy strategy – since it conflates mere opinion with objective grounds for belief – but it also constitutes a moral failure, since, by ‘giving one’s ignorance the veneer of science’ through a mere ‘sleight of hand [*Kunstgriff*]’ (Br, AA XI: 142), it *de facto* disrespects the epistemic authority of those who are *objectively* better placed to ascertain the facts. If, as Kant argues in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, arrogance among equals amounts to the morally blameworthy demand ‘that others think little of themselves in comparison with us’ (AA VI: 465), then it may not seem too far-fetched to speak of an instance of (epistemic) arrogance whenever an ignoramus, or pseudo-expert, demands that those who are genuine experts should think of themselves as, epistemically, on a par with him. For Kant, however, the real evil (*Übel*) is when ‘this mania spreads from one to another, and out into the community’ (Br, AA XI: 142; my translation). As a cure, Kant proposes that education should focus on the ‘thorough learning of a few things’ (as opposed to teaching ‘a little bit of everything’ [*Vielerleilernen*]), and that it should even instill a sense of disgust (*Ekel*), on the part of the student, towards matters that do not contribute to ‘a net gain of insight’ (ibid.).

What emerges from the preceding examples is a very real concern, on Kant’s part, for applied social-epistemological problems. While some of the goals and solutions he identifies at first sight seem to have a distinctly individualist flavour – e.g., his emphasis on self-knowledge and moral character in education, or the significance of insight and understanding as epistemic goals of the individual – they must properly be understood against the backdrop of Kant’s far-reaching acknowledgment of our overall epistemic interdependence. Hence, education is not only a tool for individual self-betterment, but is a collective endeavour through which

humanity at large is meant to realise its vocation. Similarly, when Kant advocates ‘thorough learning of a few things’ as an effective remedy against the excesses of pseudo-scientific enthusiasms, he is not suggesting that individuals should limit themselves to what they can know entirely off their own bat; rather, he intends to strengthen methods of belief formation and common standards of evaluating expertise that make possible the collective pursuit of ‘thorough science’.

Conclusion

As I hope to have shown in the present paper, Kant and the German Enlightenment tradition provide a rich source of material for social epistemology. Kant in particular has insightful things to say on a variety of social-epistemological issues. In addition to offering a well-developed and coherent theory of testimony – which is based on the distinctly Kantian insight that, all else being equal, the hearer’s desire for epistemic justification must be balanced with the speaker’s legitimate expectation to be believed – Kant also comments extensively on the social dimension of our epistemic practices more generally. Thus, he is acutely aware that even our best epistemic practices, as embodied in the empirical sciences, are deeply contingent, insofar as they depend for their validity on the presence of shared epistemic standards. In keeping with his overall philosophical commitments, many of Kant’s discussions have a distinctly normative flavour, especially in matters of applied social epistemology, for example where these concern education, scientific expertise, and the challenges posed by an ever-growing volume of knowledge. However, even when Kant adopts a more moralizing tone, as he does in his dismissal of the ‘shenanigans’ of ignorant pseudo-experts (which he thinks are best treated with ‘contemptuous silence’; Br, AA XI: 143), this must be understood in the light of Kant’s recognition of our deep-rooted need for sociality, even in epistemic matters. While contemporary social epistemologists may wish to take issue with any number of Kant’s pronouncements, social epistemology at large can ill afford to ignore his views – and, indeed, may even wish to embrace Kant as a historical ancestor of a discipline that may not be quite as young as it thinks it is.

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