

Trust and its significance in social epistemology

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Abstract. This chapter critically discusses the significance of trust and its theoretical cognates – distrust, trustworthiness and distrustworthiness – in social epistemology. Special focus is given to the following issues: (i) knowledge on trust; (ii) the entitlement to expect to be presumed trustworthy; (iii) the normativity of trusting; and the role of defective trust and distrust in cases of (iv) epistemic injustice; and (v) the uptake and spread of conspiracy theories.

1. INTRODUCTION

Suppose knowledge were the sort of thing that could be ‘auto-transferred’ from a speaker to hearer whenever the former knowledgeable tells the latter something the latter didn’t already know. Suppose further that we all told each other all and only what we knew, nothing else (and nothing less). If these over-simplifying assumptions held, then *social epistemology* – roughly, the branch of epistemology that studies (epistemically) good and bad communication¹ – would be straightforward. Knowledge would be the only currency in the system, and it would always travel, like osmosis, from the more knowledgeable towards the less knowledgeable, filling existing knowledge gaps until everyone eventually knows everything everyone else knows. Understanding the spread of knowledge through communication would then be like understanding the behaviour of a predictable and uncontaminated gas.

Of course, social epistemology is nothing like this whatsoever. It is more akin to theorising about an ecosystem riddled with all sorts of pollution. Moreover, within the polluted system, only some people are following good pollution-minimising rules,

¹This is of course a gloss. For an overview of some of the key themes in social epistemology, see, e.g., Goldman and Blanchard (2016).

and we don't always know who's only pretending. We are thus constantly at risk – when sharing information with others – of epistemic pollution exposure, and those who need the most help avoiding it are often unwilling to take that help even when we're able and offering to give it.

Broadly speaking, there are two overarching reasons why social epistemology is more akin to the study of a polluted, complex system than a predictable gas. These reasons have to do with (i) *ignorance*, which is a central theme also in individual epistemology; and (ii) *trust, distrust, trustworthiness, distrustworthiness*, which are inter-related themes in social epistemology in particular.

Regarding ignorance: Some of what we share with others is not knowledge but garbage², even if we are confident it's not. Remember Colin Powell's speech to the United Nations in February 2003. There he insisted that Iraq had developed weapons of mass destruction, the key claim upon which he built a case for invading Iraq. Powell was not lying³, nor was he unreliable, but due to his *ignorance*, he was sharing garbage, garbage with widespread (and high-cost) uptake.

Question: Would social epistemology's pollution problem be eliminated *if only* we could eradicate all ignorance everywhere on the part of would-be knowledge *sharers*? Importantly, the answer is 'no'. Some garbage will get disseminated nonetheless given that some knowers knowingly send garbage into the ecosystem. The problem here isn't ignorance, *per se*, but *untrustworthiness*. The speaker's own information isn't bad, but the *speaker* is bad, and so what she says, and thus what the hearer gets, diverges from what speaker knows. Purveyors of fake news are a case and point. But importantly, even if we could shore up any and all epistemic badness on the speaker's side (i.e., all ignorance, *and* untrustworthiness is controlled for – every speaker tells all and only what they know, no fake news, etc.), defects in the arena of trust/distrust and trustworthiness/distrustworthiness can still be expected to wreck social-epistemic practice. This is because, too often, we as hearers *distrust* when we (epistemically) ought⁴ to trust, often by projecting untrustworthiness on trustworthy information sources, thereby remaining (unnecessarily) in ignorance.⁵ The problem here – *defective distrust* – is not on the 'provider's side', but squarely on the receiver's side; defective distrust can wreck good communication no less than *defective trust*, e.g., as when we perceive trustworthiness when it's not there); both kinds of 'bad trusting' obstruct the flow of knowledge.

²I borrow this expression from John Greco (2020).

³For an critical overview of the role that ignorance played in Powell's reasoning, see Zarefsky (2007).

⁴Though, in cases of testimonial injustice, the relevant 'ought' will plausibly be moral as well as epistemic. For discussion, see §4.1.

⁵Compare: Even when there is a perfectly safe vaccine, baseless suspicions about its efficacy and side effects lead some to remain sick by opting not to take it.

The moral of the above considerations is a broad but important one: doing social epistemology well requires, inevitably, that we understand how to minimise the various ways that bad trusting, and untrustworthiness, wreck social-epistemic exchanges (and, conversely: how good trusting, and trustworthiness, can help to facilitate them).

Against this background, the remainder of this chapter will be much more specific. Each of the next three sections zeros in on the key contours of a particular area of philosophical debate about trust (and/or one of its theoretical cognates: distrust, trustworthiness, distrustworthiness) in recent social epistemology. §2 begins with critical overview of perhaps the most well-known such debate – in the epistemology of testimony – where we find disagreements about both (i) the conditions under which trusting a speaker is enough to give us testimonial knowledge, and (ii) about the conditions under which the speaker herself is entitled to expect to be presumed trustworthy. §3 turns to *norms* of good trusting, and examines what is required to trust *well*. §4, shows how trust (and some of its theoretical cognates) play important roles in (at least) two prominent strands of applied social epistemology, concerning (i) epistemic injustice; and (ii) the epistemology of conspiracy theories.

2. TRUST AND TESTIMONY

2.1 *Can we come to know through trust?*

Trusting a speaker's testimony is a special case of trusting more generally, viz., as when you might trust a neighbour to water your plants. Trust, construed generally, is difficult to characterise in a way that is substantively non-contentious.⁶ Here is an attempt: trust – of the interpersonal (three-place⁷) variety that philosophers are primarily interested in – is an attitude or a hybrid of attitudes (e.g., optimism⁸, hope, belief⁹, etc.) toward a trustee, that she will take care of something X as entrusted, and where by trusting the trustee with X the truster is incurring some (non-negligible) vulnerability that this trust is betrayed.¹⁰

⁶For some recent overviews, see, e.g., Carter and Simion (2020) and McLeod (2015).

⁷For some notable discussions of three-place trust (i.e., S trusts X to ϕ) and its relationship with two-place trust (i.e., S trusts X), see, e.g., (Horsburgh 1960; Holton 1994; Hardin 1992; cf., Domenicucci and Holton 2017.)

⁸E.g., Mollering (2006).

⁹See, e.g., Hieronymi (2008) and McMyler (2011).

¹⁰As Annette Baier (1986, 234) captures the idea: 'Where one depends on another's good will, one is necessarily vulnerable to the limits of that good will'. More generally, according to Carolyn McLeod (2015, sec. 1) 'trust [...] involves the risk that people we trust will not pull through for us, since if there were some guarantee they would pull through, then we would have no need to trust them'. For further discussion of vulnerability to betrayal as essential to trust, see Carter (2020b). Cf., Phillip (1995) for resistance to this idea.

If we go much beyond this, we get controversy. But for the present purposes we needn't do so. Just consider that in trusting the *testimony* of a speaker, there is a very particular thing you are entrusting the speaker to do. You are trusting them (in short) to tell you the truth on the matter at hand, perhaps, to tell you the truth knowledgeably¹¹; in trusting the testimony's speaker, you are making yourself vulnerable; you're risking the possibility of uptaking bad information, which is what will happen of the speaker is either incompetent or insincere beyond your detection.

The risk of being misinformed one incurs by trusting another's word is highlighted further when you consider that speakers often have practical incentives to lie. This raises a difficult epistemological question: How, if at all, can trusting a speaker – a speaker who will often enough have a practical reason to deceive you – give us justified beliefs and knowledge?

Here is an initial, albeit not entirely satisfactory answer: perhaps the practical reasons we have to lie are typically appreciated by us to be outweighed by weightier practical reasons to cultivate a reputation as a trustworthy speaker.¹² As this line of thought goes, provided speakers at least tacitly recognise the overriding value of a trustworthy reputation (and further that hearers know that speakers recognise this, and that bad testimony compromises such a reputation), the 'risk' in trusting a speaker's word and leaving with a false belief is minimal and rightly appreciated as such by the hearer.

The problem with the above line of reasoning is, in short, that many of our communicative exchanges are 'one-off' exchanges – consider: asking for directions to the bus station from a stranger, asking a shop employee whether a product is a good one, etc. – and, as such, there's little or no penalty on the speaker's side for non-cooperation. As Paul Faulkner (2011) notes, the situation here resembles a kind of 'prisoner's dilemma'¹³, given the apparent misalignments of speaker and hearer interests which imply for the speaker costs for the kind of blanket cooperation it is in the hearer's interest to receive. The hearer has a standing interest in learning only the truth, and thus, has an interest in the speaker telling the truth come what may. But, given that through testimony a speaker has the practically valuable power to influence, the best outcome for a speaker would be to receive an audience's trust while at the same time retaining the liberty to tell the truth or not as it suits. While mutual cooperation is the best decision-theoretic

¹¹If the trustee's taking care of things as entrusted involves, as some researchers maintain, doing so out of goodwill (e.g., Baier 1986; Jones 1996), or out of a belief that they have a commitment (Hawley 2014, 2019), this will presumably involve – in the special case of testimonial trust, where one is trusted for information – conveying not merely true information, but also conveying this responsibly, viz., on the basis of good evidence or knowledge.

¹²For some discussion of this idea, see Simion (2020b).

¹³See also Faulkner (2017, sec. 2), where the dilemma is explained with reference to an example involving a 'game of trust'.

outcome for both speaker and hearer¹⁴, it looks as though the speaker (at least, in these one-off exchanges) is always going to be better off ‘defecting’ whenever she stands to gain from betrayal. These considerations make it *prima facie* difficult to explain how knowledge (rather than, say, fortunate mere true beliefs) is ever gained by trusting others; and they also make it difficult to explain why there is not in fact more defecting by speakers than there actually is in one-off exchanges.¹⁵

Reductionists in the epistemology of testimony (e.g., Adler 1994; Audi 1997; Fricker 1994, 1995; Hume 1739; Lipton 1998) respond to the predicament above by simply denying that we actually do gain justified beliefs and knowledge by simply trusting others – at least – in the absence of additional positive testimony-independent reasons to think that the testimony is reliable. For the reductionist, there is no such thing as ‘knowledge on trust’; putative cases of testimonial knowledge are ‘knowledge on reasons’, reasons – independent of the testimony itself – for thinking the testimony is reliable. Reductionists who are not testimonial sceptics and think we actually possess these testimony-independent reasons often enough, disagree amongst themselves about what the reasons are meant to be.¹⁶ As for how to explain why we don’t simply have widespread speaker defection? The reductionist has the following answer available: because receiving testimony is fundamentally – for the hearer – a matter of inference from non-testimonial reasons, it’s not clear on what basis the speaker would be entitled to expect the hearer to simply take her word for it.¹⁷

Non-reductionists in the epistemology of testimony (e.g., Burge 1993; Coady 1973, 1992; Goldberg 2010; Graham 2012, 2016; Reid 1764; Simion 2020b; Simion and Kelp 2018) give a very different story on both counts. According to the non-reductionist, we have a default entitlement to believe what we are being told (absent defeaters – viz., absent positive reasons to think the testimony is unreliable).¹⁸ The burden for the non-

¹⁴Non-cooperation by a hearer will involve standing distrust toward a speaker, undermining the speaker’s would-be power to influence.

¹⁵Granted, there is plenty of lying and misleading; but – as Kant (1785) famously noted – this occurs always against a background where norms of trusting make doing this an exception. The existence of such a background, as the thought goes, calls for some explanation in light of cooperative dilemma noted. For discussion, see Korsgaard (1986).

¹⁶Global reductionists such as Hume, for example, maintain that the relevant testimony-independent reasons must be reasons to think that testimony, generally speaking, is reliable. A problem for this proposal is that it’s not evident that we possess a reason to think this that itself does not rely on testimony. Local reductionists by contrast think that the relevant kind of reason we need to have is a reason to think the particular testifier is reliable on the matter at hand, and that we needn’t first have some testimony-independent reason to think that testimony generally is reliable. The problem for the local reductionist isn’t that we can’t secure such a reason without relying on testimony, *per se*, but rather, that it’s hard to see how in many paradigmatic testimonial exchanges we’re going to meet this demand at all. For an overview of this debate, see Carter and Littlejohn (2021 Ch. 7).

¹⁷We will examine this issue in some more detail in §2.2.

¹⁸For some notable discussions of defeaters in the epistemology of testimony, see Lackey (1999,

reductionist is then to account for what the source of this entitlement is supposed to be – a burden that, if it is to be satisfactorily met, must account for why hearers should be thought to enjoy this entitlement even though speakers will sometimes have reasons to be non-cooperative that (at least in one-off exchanges) aren't going to be outweighed by reputational damage.

Here non-reductionists give very different kinds of answers about how to think about the source of this entitlement to trust. According to a strong form of non-reductionism defended by Tyler Burge (1993), a hearer is entitled to trust what a speaker says (absent positive reason not to) simply because they've said something we can make sense of, which – as Burge's argument goes – implicates a faculty of reason, and we know *a priori* that reason aims at truth.¹⁹ Burge's rationale for why we're *prima facie* entitled to trust what a speaker says is 'strong' in two ways. First, notice that there is very little burden on the testimonial recipient at all; simply comprehending what is said, absent defeaters, is enough for the hearer to get the goods. Second, Burge's view is strong in light of the fact that the argument is *a priori*; specifically, it relies on the strong *a priori* premise that the function of reason is truth, a premise the *a priori* status of which is contestable given the various purposes for which we use reason, including for purely practical purposes which may be furthered by lying.²⁰

By contrast, Peter J. Graham (2012, 2016) offers a non-reductionist answer about how to think about the source of this entitlement to trust that is moderate compared to Burge's answer in two respects: it places a more substantial epistemic burden on the hearer than Burge does – viz., mere comprehension in the absence of defeat isn't enough. For Graham, the relevant process on the hearer's side that grounds her entitlement to trust is what Graham calls 'comprehension-with-filtering', where filtering involves monitoring for signs of deception and incompetence on the part of the speaker. Comprehension-with-filtering is a process that, according to Graham – and on *a posteriori* rather than *a priori* grounds – has forming and sustaining true beliefs reliably as its etiological function.²¹ When something has an etiological function, then having that function explains (with reference to the thing's ancestors) why it was replicated, and so why the item exists now.²² Graham's view, then, is that comprehension-with-filtering, when functioning normally (e.g., in conditions under which it originally acquired its function) gives us the *prima facie* entitlement we have to trust a speaker's word.²³

2008).

¹⁹For a recent and careful reconstruction and critique of Burge's argument, see Graham (2018).

²⁰For a recent expression of this critique of Burge, see Simion and Kelp (2018).

²¹For a detailed overview, see Graham (2014).

²²So: it's comprehension-with-filtering's sustaining true beliefs reliably that explains why it is a process we continue to use.

²³For overviews of the differences between Burge and Graham, see along with Graham (2018), also

Whereas Burge's weak spot is generally taken to be his *a priori* premise, Graham is not without his own potential weak spot – one that targets his *a posteriori* premise. Here is the worry, which has been advanced in recent work by Simion (2020b) and Simion and Kelp (2018). The worry begins with an observation: if we are in fact not very good at detecting deception, then epistemically speaking, comprehension-with-filtering is not going to be doing much more work, on the hearer's side, than is mere comprehension. (And mere comprehension, as both Burge and Graham agree, is not enough ground an entitlement to trust a speaker without a further *a priori* premise about the function of reason). But at this point, the empirical work on deception detection seems to matter: *are* we reliable at detecting deception? Well-known studies by, e.g., Kraut (1980), Vrij (2000); Bond Jr and DePaulo (2006) suggest the answer is 'no', and that, as Simion (2020b) puts it, 'our prospects of getting it right barely surpass chance' (2020b, 6–7). If that is right, then it's hard to see why any entitlement to trust the speaker would be sourced in comprehension-with-*unreliable*-filtering. However – and this is good news for Graham – the more recent work on the reliability of deception detection has been comparatively more optimistic than earlier work.²⁴ Though the science of deception detection is far from settled.²⁵ And an implication is that the jury remains out regarding the empirical credentials of Graham's style of modest non-reductionism as a way to vindicate our (epistemic) entitlement to trust a speaker.

I want to conclude this section by returning full circle. Recall that both reductionists and non-reductionist views in the epistemology of testimony offer very different ways of responding to the fact, highlighted by Faulkner, that seems to make any entitlement we would have to trust what a speaker says *prima facie* suspect: speaker and hearer interests are often in misalignment in such a way that (in one-off exchanges at least) it looks like the optimal move for the speaker will often enough be non-cooperation. That said, Faulkner himself offers an interesting way out of this cooperative puzzle, one that is at least in principle open to either reductionists or non-reductionists to embrace. As Faulkner sees it, '*trust itself* can give reasons for cooperating' (2017, 9) Here is the idea in a nutshell.²⁶ Suppose you believe I can see you are relying on me for information about whether '*p*', and you trust me for this information; you are in believing this plausibly also making some other presumptions. For example, you presume that if I recognise your trusting dependence, then I'll recognise you will normatively expect me to prove informative – and that all else equal – I will do so. As Faulkner puts it, your taking the attitude of trust involves the presumption

Simion and Kelp (2018) and Carter and Littlejohn (2021 Ch. 7).

²⁴See, for example, Blair, Levine, and Shaw (2010). For discussion, see Simion (2020b, sec. 2.2).

²⁵Aside from empirical studies documenting our effectiveness at deception detection, there is also burgeoning research into how we can *improve* at deception detection through training. A recent meta-analysis of research on training in deception detection by Driskell (2012) is moderately optimistic.

²⁶See Carter and Simion (2020, sec. 2.b) for a more detailed summary.

that I'll prove trustworthy, a presumption that rationalises your uptaking what I tell you.

This kind of rationale – by which trusting is itself doing this kind of interesting epistemic work in explaining the entitlement we have to trust others – suggests how, as Faulkner puts it, 'acts of trust can create as well as sustain trusting relations' (2011, 156–7).²⁷ That is, we have an answer for why there is as much trust as there is, *despite* the incentives there are to defect. That said, Faulkner's rationale relies on a variety of claims about what one presumes when trusting that are themselves open to challenge. For some notable such challenges in the recent literature, see Graham (2012) and Simion (2020b).

2.2 What explains a speaker's entitlement to expect to be presumed trustworthy?

If I tell you I am from Missouri and your reaction is to distrust me, I'll be surprised (possibly even a bit offended!) My surprise should not itself be surprising. Very plausibly, speakers have a standing entitlement to expect to be presumed trustworthy.²⁸ What is it that generates this entitlement, though? Here we find a range of very different answers. Let's consider a few of them.

According to one very strong answer question to this question given by Allan Gibbard (1992, 172), an entitlement to be presumed trustworthy is generated by a fact about what you're doing when you tell someone something, which is making a *demand*. You are demanding what you say be accepted. If Gibbard is right that testimony is a demand by the speaker that that testimony be accepted through uptake as belief, then as the reasoning goes: (i) when I demand something of someone, I expect them to comply; (ii) when I testify that *p*, I in doing so demand that you believe that *p*; (iii) therefore, I when I testify that *p*, I expect you to believe me that *p*. Gibbard's answer is an elegant one. But it has a serious shortcoming, which is that the kind of authority that characterises the demand Gibbard thinks is implicit in telling someone something looks as though it is at most practical authority.²⁹ And it's not clear that practical authority ever entitles one to expect to be *believed*, in the absence of epistemic authority, which practical authority doesn't imply. A tyrannical king, for example, can demand his subjects believe he is trustworthy, and that what he says is true; that demand might entitle the king to expect *something* that looks like compliance (i.e., the king might on the basis of the demand rightly expect people refrain from behaving as though he is distrustworthy). But the king's practical authority doesn't entitle him to expect people actually regard him as trustworthy or believe what he says.

²⁷For another notable picture about how trust relations are initially developed, see Alfano (2016).

²⁸For a detailed discussion and defence of this idea, see Goldberg (2020 Chs. 4-6).

²⁹For a more developed presentation of this kind of worry, see Goldberg (2020, 72–75).

Different answers are given by Ted Hinchman (2005) and Richard Moran (2006). Hinchman maintains that telling someone something isn't a *demand* to be trusted as Gibbard thinks, but an *invitation* the speaker is entitled to expect the hearer will accept.³⁰ For Moran, telling someone something is neither a demand nor is it an invitation, but an *assurance*. It is an assurance for the reason that by telling someone something, on Moran's view, one is presenting herself as accountable for the truth of what she says.

As Sandy Goldberg (2020) has pointed out in recent work³¹, neither of these lines can be used to satisfactorily explain why a speaker is entitled to expect to be presumed trustworthy. Suppose, as Hinchman says, a telling is an invitation to be trusted. Even if this were right, it is not the sort of thing that would – even in principle – be able to explain why the audience ever *owes* it to the speaker to presume her trustworthy when she does. If I invite you to a party, you don't owe it to me to accept my invitation.³² Yet, if you distrust me without good reason to, there is a sense in which I'm not given credibility I'm owed. And an explanation of the entitlement we have to expect to be presumed trustworthy shouldn't leave this, as Hinchman's invitation account does, mysterious.

Another kind of problem arises for a Moran-style assurance view. Suppose Moran is correct and that when a speaker asserts that *p* to a hearer, her doing so gives her audience a right to hold her responsible for being trustworthy. There is, as Goldberg notes, a gap between the audience (i) having a right to hold the speaker responsible; and (ii) having a reason to actually believe that the speaker really is responsible. (Compare: it is common knowledge between you and your students that you have a right to hold them responsible for reading every word of the assigned material each week; but you also know many will not do it). But, as Goldberg says, 'it is the latter sort of reason that S would need to generate if she is to be entitled to expect A to presume her trustworthy' (2020, 82–83).

Goldberg himself offers yet a different answer to the guiding question, one that falls out of his wider theory of conversational pressure.³³ According to Goldberg, what generates the speaker's entitlement to expect to be presumed trustworthy is – in short – that the speaker, by telling the audience what she does, conveys that she has the relevant epistemic authority *vis-à-vis* the truth of a proposition she presented-as-true,

³⁰It's an invitation, Hinchman holds, because the audience is being addressed by a speaker who presents *p* as true through asserting that *p*, and in doing so intends to address the audience's need to know whether *p*, intending as well that this intention be recognised by the audience.

³¹See especially Goldberg (2020 Ch. 4).

³²See also Goldberg's 'The Chocolate Offer' example (2020, 79–80)

³³See Goldberg (2020); important to his view is the difference between interpersonal and epistemic conversational pressures, and how they relate to each other. See (2020, 61–70) for an introduction to these differences.

and her conveying herself as having this epistemic authority then places her audience under interpersonal (normative) pressure to treat her with the sort of respect due to one who conveys having this authority. This view (unlike, e.g., Hinchmann's 'telling as an invitation to trust' view) can make sense of the idea that the audience *owes* it to the speaker to treat her properly – where this is understood as treatment appropriate to one who conveys having the authority they do.³⁴ And unlike, e.g., Gibbard's and Moran's (respective) 'demand' and 'assurance' models, Goldberg's can squarely address why it is that the hearer is entitled to expect to be presumed trustworthy on the matter at hand (viz., the speaker is entitled to expect an *epistemic* presumption on the part of the hearer) – and this in virtue of the speaker's conveying herself as having the relevant epistemic authority, authority the appropriate response to which would be doxastic uptake.

Despite these advantages over the competitors, Goldberg's view might not be entirely in the clear. The problem – put generally – is that testifiers often freely testify outside their domains of expertise: what Nathan Ballantyne (2019) calls 'epistemic trespassing'. Relatedly, as Mikkel Gerken (2018) has highlighted, a subclass of epistemic trespassing, potentially with particular power to confuse hearers, takes the form of *expert* epistemic trespassing, where individuals with genuine expertise in one area testify *outside* their domain of expertise while continuing in doing so to convey expertise as testifiers. (Consider here, for example, Stephen Hawking's final book, *Brief Questions to the Big Answers* (2018), where Hawking transitions back and forth with no signposting from theoretical physics, where he is an undisputed expert, to philosophy and religion, where he is not). Moreover, epistemic trespassing is often something we have practical reasons to do (including in one-off exchanges where we're unlikely to suffer reputational damage): that is, speakers will often enough have practical incentives to appear more knowledgeable than they are, and also to take advantage of how hearers respond to genuine epistemic authority by pretending to have it when they don't.

The prevalence of conveying unearned epistemic authority – both in formal and informal domains – looks as though it poses a challenge for Goldberg's answer our guiding question. The worry, put simply, is that the mere fact that a speaker *conveys* they have the relevant epistemic authority is something we know to be compatible with either their having that epistemic authority or with their merely conveying that they have the relevant epistemic authority given practical reasons they might have to do so.³⁵ But then, given the interpersonal pressure the speaker places on the hearer

³⁴Note that Goldberg also maintains that we can't bet an explanation for this entitlement on the part of the speaker by deriving it from non-reductionism, and that's for the reason that non-reductionism at most explains a permission to treat the speaker a particular way, but not an obligation. See his (2020 Ch. 6).

³⁵Compare here with Goldberg's critique of Moran: there is a gap between the audience (i) having a

by conveying that they have the relevant epistemic authority, the speaker is entitled to expect to be presumed not simply trustworthy, but as either trustworthy or as merely conveying that they have the relevant epistemic authority. If that's right, then despite the merits of Goldberg's proposal over competitors, there is still work to be done.

3. SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE NORMS OF TRUSTING

This section zooms out from testimonial trust and considers a broader question about trust generally: what is it to trust *well*? Sending money to an internet scammer promising it is needed for them to release to you large inheritance from a stranger is an example of 'bad' trusting. And, importantly, that's the case even if the internet scammer has a crisis of conscience and comes through against the odds. Likewise, if you have debilitating gallstones, trusting a surgeon to perform a low-risk laparoscopic cholecystectomy (removal of gall bladder) is an example of 'good' trusting, even if yours turns out to be one of the improbable cases where there are complications.

Getting a clear grip on what exactly makes the difference between the kind of trusting we evaluate positively and negatively, as instances of trusting, matters for social epistemology in two ways. First, since testimonial trust is a species of trust, insights into how to trust well generally could potentially shine light on how we might better gain justified beliefs and knowledge through testimonial trust specifically. Secondly, as we'll see, giving a viable answer to what good trusting involves itself plausibly requires resources of social epistemology.

A helpful way forward here will be to combine two ideas: first, that (i) trusting is a kind of *performance*, one that is successful if and only if the trustee actually takes care of things as entrusted; and, secondly, that (ii) any performance with an aim is subject to three distinct kinds of evaluative norms – viz., norms that regulate what it takes for a token of a particular type of thing to be good or bad with regard to its type.³⁶ First, there is the norm of *success* (i.e., did the performance succeed in attaining its aim³⁷?); second, there is the norm of *competence* (i.e., did the performance issue from a disposition to succeed reliably enough when one tries when in proper shape and properly situated (for that kind of performance-type³⁸?); and third, there is the norm

right to hold the speaker responsible; and (ii) having a reason to actually believe that the speaker really is responsible.

³⁶See McHugh (2012, 9) for an overview of the distinction between evaluative norms and prescriptive norms; see also Simion, Kelp, and Ghijsen (2016) for a recent discussion of the importance of the evaluative/prescriptive norm distinction in epistemology.

³⁷The 'aim' of a performance will be internal to the type of performance it is. See, e.g., Sosa (2010) for discussion.

³⁸What counts as being in proper shape and being properly situated will differ across different performance contexts. 'Proper' in a given context is a matter of the conditions under which good performance

of *aptness* (i.e., is the performance successful *because* competent?)

Claim (i) is *prima facie* plausible for the reason that *regardless* of what kind of attitude one manifests when one trusts, one is – in manifesting that attitude – making a certain kind of *attempt*, and one that succeeds (given the kind of attempt it is, one that necessarily risks betrayal) if and only if the trustee actually takes care of things as entrusted. After all, if you trust your friend with a secret, there is clear sense in which your trust simply did not succeed if your friend spills the beans.

Claim (ii) just states a very standard approach (i.e., success/competence/aptness) for theorising about the normativity of performances generally, which has been developed in various places by Ernest Sosa (e.g., 2007, 2015, 2017), where – taking the idea that a belief is a performance that aims at truth³⁹ – Sosa has developed a sophisticated form of virtue epistemology, one that assimilates knowledge to apt belief, belief that succeeds in attaining its aim through competence.⁴⁰

Taken together, (i) and (ii) imply already something interesting about *trust*, and which doesn't depend in any way on whether accept a Sosa-style 'knowledge=apt belief' formula in individual epistemology. What it implies is that trust, *qua* performance, is evaluable in (at least) two ways that go beyond whether trust is (merely) successful: it is evaluable, *qua* performance, with respect to norms of *competence* and *aptness*.

To a first approximation, a given token of trusting – on a performance-theoretic model – is *competent*, regardless of whether it is successful, if and only if one's trusting issues from a reliable disposition – viz., a competence – to trust successfully. But, importantly, the kind of disposition that corresponds with a competence needn't be a disposition to reliably trust successfully come what may. Because our competence-discerning judgements need to keep track of who would perform well in situations where, as Sosa (2017, 205) puts it, 'human accomplishment is prized (or otherwise of special interest)', we restrict the conditions within which reliability matters to competence ascriptions to those where reliable performance most matters in the relevant

is valued. For example, it doesn't count against your archery competence if you would be unreliable underwater because those aren't the conditions under which we are interested in good archery. In some domains of endeavour, the relevant performance conditions are formalised, such as in professional sports, though this is the exception. For discussion, see Sosa (2017) and Sosa (2010).

³⁹A correlative idea, which Sosa has expanded on in more recent work (e.g., 2020), recasts the normativity of performances as the normativity of *attempts*. However, nothing said here turns substantively on this shift in terminology. A second point to note is that the claim that 'beliefs aim at truth' is a simple way to capture Sosa's picture, which is in fact more complex. This is because some kinds of beliefs – what Sosa calls alethic affirmations – aim at truth, and when apt are animal knowledge. However, another species of belief – *judgemental beliefs* – aim not merely at truth but at apt alethic affirmation; alternatively: judgemental beliefs aim at knowledge, not truth.

⁴⁰For two other variations on this idea, see Greco (2010) and Carter (2020a).

performance domain.⁴¹

By way of comparison: we index what counts as appropriate shape and situation to driving a car to the conditions under which reliable car performance is primarily valued⁴²; this includes, e.g., being on normal roads, having plenty of ambient oxygen, etc. Accordingly, we don't test whether one is a competent driver by considering whether you would drive successfully on abnormally slick roads or during earthquakes.⁴³

Likewise, as Carter (2020b) argues, something very similar plausibly holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for trust. It doesn't count, by parity of reasoning, against someone's having a competence to trust well if the truster too often would have her trust betrayed in conditions where the (a) risk to the truster is excessively high and gains of betrayal by the trustee are enormous; or where the level of (b) effort or (c) skill that would be required by the trustee to take care of things as entrusted is abnormally high. What this all means for us, *qua* theorists, is that getting a grip on what competent trust involves requires spelling out (a-c); that is, it involves a better understanding of the distributions of risk (to the truster - and gains of betrayal of trustee), effort, and skill (required of the trustee) that feature in the kinds of situations in which our competence-discerning judgements should be sensitive to reliable success. These are squarely questions for the social epistemology. And in this way, social epistemology is needed in order to better understand what it is to be a competent truster, and in particular, to understand the limits of the kind of reliability that competent trusting plausibly demands of us.

So far we've seen how to evaluate trust against norms of success and competence. What about the norm of *aptness*? One might initially expect that when trust is both competent *and* successful, it is thereby of the highest quality that should be of interest to us, given that the conjunction of 'success + competence' implies that the trustee succeeded in taking care of things as trusted, *and* that her (successful) trust issued from competence to trust successfully reliably enough. But this assessment is too quick. Just as justified beliefs can be luckily true, some competent trust will be successful, but only by luck. Consider the following 'Gettier' case that features successful and competent but *inapt* trust.

GETTIER TRUST: Inspector Pazzi is attempting to catch an art thief, and to do so, he relies on a museum curator, Dr. Fell, whom Pazzi knows has always been trustworthy (unlike some of the potential experts he could have relied on), to assist him. Dr. Fell, it turns out, easily could have betrayed Pazzi in this particular situation (the art thief, it turns out,

⁴¹See also Sosa (2010, 466).

⁴²(Sosa 2015, 73).

⁴³For discussion, see Sosa (2017, 191–2)

is his lover) but Fell decides ultimately by flipping a coin not to betray Pazzi. Here Inspector Pazzi trusts competently and successfully, but that he trusts successfully isn't because of the competence he has, it's because Dr. Fell's coin landed the way it did.⁴⁴

By evaluating our tokens of trust against the separate norms of success, competence and even aptness (i.e., aptness which is missing in GETTIER TRUST, even in the presence of successful and competent trust), we are in a position to distinguish trust *quality* in a way that broadly lines up with the way epistemologists, both individual and social, already assess the quality of belief against analogous evaluative norms.

4. TRUST IN APPLIED SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Sections 2 and 3 investigated some connections trust bears to themes in theoretical social epistemology. Trust also lies at the centre of debates in applied social epistemology. This section briefly overviews two such themes, which concern (i) *epistemic injustice*; and (ii) the *epistemology of conspiracy theories*.

4.1 *Trust, distrust, and epistemic injustice*

An important recent application of the tools of social epistemology has been to issues of social justice and injustice, topics traditionally explored in moral and political philosophy. However, a key insight due to Miranda Fricker (2007) is that certain kinds of injustices experienced by members of marginalised groups are *distinctly* epistemic in nature.⁴⁵ In particular, Fricker has drawn attention to two ways – what she calls *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice* – in which individuals are harmed specifically in their capacity as knowers. Both of these two varieties of epistemic injustice, we'll see, are related importantly to defects in trusting, where the former is plausibly brought about through defective trusting, and the latter, by contrast, gives rise to it.⁴⁶

To appreciate these connections between epistemic injustice and trust, consider first *testimonial injustice*, the species of epistemic injustice that occurs when a speaker is harmed in her capacity as a knower by receiving an unfair deficit of credibility from

⁴⁴For the original presentation of this case, see Carter (2020b, 2306–7).

⁴⁵For a sample of some recent work on epistemic injustice in social epistemology, see, e.g., Medina (2013), Maitra (2010), Carter and Meehan (2020), Fricker and Jenkins (2017), Coady (2010), Hookway (2010), Saul (2017), McGlynn (2019, 2020), Simion (2020a).

⁴⁶For some important though different takes on the relationship between epistemic injustice and trust, see Origg (2012) and Hawley (2014).

a hearer due to prejudice on the hearers' part. Our prejudicial dysfunctions in our testimonial practice fall into broadly two categories. Firstly, prejudice can result in the speaker receiving *more* credibility than she otherwise would have – *credibility excess* – or it results in her receiving less credibility than she otherwise would have – *credibility deficit*.⁴⁷ For reasons that go beyond what we can cover here, Fricker's position is that only credibility-deficit cases are genuine cases of testimonial injustice, even if credibility excess can harm one in other ways.⁴⁸

The popular example of testimonial injustice that Fricker presents is taken from Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, where Tom Robinson, a black man on trial after being falsely accused of raping a white woman, has his testimony dismissed due to the prejudiced preconceptions of the jury which are formed by their racial stereotypes. In this case, the jury has made a deflated credibility judgement of Tom Robinson, and consequently, he is unable to convey to them the knowledge that he has of the true events which occurred.

As José Medina (2011) has argued, the credibility deficit experienced by Robinson in this example case is plausibly explained by more than merely the jurors' attitudes toward Robinson, but also at least in part by the credibility excess that the all-white jury has given the to the white family, the Ewells, whose testimony contradicts Robinson's. But even if Medina's point is granted, there is an important sense in which the credibility deficit that constitutes the harm Robinson experiences is really inseparable from the defective distrust the jurors place in Robinson in a way that it is not inseparable from either, (i) the views the jurors have about the Ewells, or even from (ii) beliefs the jurors have about Robinson in so far as they come apart from how they place their trust. On the second point, it will be helpful to draw a comparison with Jennifer Lackey's (2007, 598) 'RACIST JUROR' case, in which a juror votes and asserts along with the evidence (that the accused is innocent, as the accused maintains) even though the juror's racism makes him privately confident the accused is guilty. Here, the confidence the juror has in the accused's guilt comes apart clearly from how the juror actually places his trust – by voting and asserting in line with the testimony of the accused; it is thus plausible that the juror in Lackey's RACIST JUROR case is not harmed epistemically via a credibility deficit from the racist juror in the way Tom Robinson is harmed by the jurors, even if we hold fixed the racism across the two cases. The difference that makes the Tom Robinson case one of testimonial injustice is the distrust he receives, an injustice that differs importantly from the treatment afforded to the accused in RACIST JUROR.

The situation is interestingly different when it comes to *hermeneutical injustice*,

⁴⁷For a more substantial overview of Fricker's view, and its connection to trust, see Carter and Meehan (2020).

⁴⁸For a notable criticism of Fricker's view on this score, see Medina (2011).

which occurs when the interpretive resources available to a community render a person's experiences unintelligible to her, due to the epistemic marginalization of that person or members of her social group. A notable example case of hermeneutical injustice that Fricker offers is that of Carmita Wood, who was the victim of sexual harassment, but who did not know that she was. Wood did not possess this knowledge, given that – lacking herself the concept of 'sexual harassment' – she was unable to interpret and understand the meaning of her experience, and this due to an unfair deprivation of interpretive resources.⁴⁹

Wood in this case was harmed in her capacity as a knower, but – unlike in the case of testimonial injustice – it is not because she was distrusted or given a credibility deficit. Rather, the direction goes the other way: it is due the hermeneutical injustice that Wood experience that she is not in a position to trust the experience she is having enough to report it. According to Fricker's description of the case, although Wood felt the treatment she received had impacted her negatively, she was 'at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed' when it came time to answer questions to an investigator. Denied the concepts needed to express her experience, she was left mistrusting whether the reason she left her job was merely 'personal' or due to problematic treatment, settling on the former answer.

In sum, then, trust – and in particular, *distrust* – is central to epistemic injustice. It gives rise to testimonial injustice and it is the product of hermeneutical injustice. Better understanding these forms of distrust in turn helps us to better theorise about epistemic injustice and by extension how to combat it.

4.2 *Trust, distrust, and the epistemology of conspiracy theories*

On 20 May, 2019 – months before the first case of Covid-19 – the United States FBI for the first time listed 'fringe conspiracy theories' as a domestic terror threat.⁵⁰ Post-Covid, conspiracy theories about the virus have flourished – including that world governments are hiding information that shows it is caused by 5G⁵¹, that democrats are lying about hydroxychloroquine's effectiveness in order to keep people sick so that Donald Trump loses the 2020 Presidential election⁵², and that Covid vaccines will include tracking chips designed by Bill Gates as part of a universal surveillance programme.⁵³ These conspiracies pose serious threats to health and life globally given their wide reach on social media, where (at least on Twitter) rumours have recently

⁴⁹(Fricker 2007, 150). See, however, Simion (2020a) for a recent argument according to which being a member of a marginalised group isn't necessary for experiencing hermeneutical injustice.

⁵⁰See Winter (2019).

⁵¹(Ahmed et al. 2020).

⁵²(Ermakova, Nurbakova, and Ovchinnikova 2020).

⁵³(Miller 2020).

been shown to circulate significantly ‘farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth in all categories of information.’⁵⁴

According to Quassim Cassam (2019), all of us are ‘conspiracy theorists’ in the uninteresting sense that ‘we all believe that people sometimes get together in secret to do bad things – but we aren’t all *Conspiracy Theorists*’ (my italics). We have good evidence for the historical existence of *bona fide* conspiracies. The more concerning kind of Conspiracy Theorist – the sort we often associated with various kinds of intellectual vice⁵⁵ – advances, as Cassam puts it:

a political objective in a special way: by advancing seductive explanations of major events that, objectively speaking, are unlikely to be true but are likely to influence public opinion in the preferred direction (2019, 20).

A natural reaction to conspiracy theories – by those who seek to combat their spread – is to provide clear and reliable evidence that they are not true. For example, the World Health Organization has added a comprehensive, evidence-based ‘*Myth-busters*’ section on its website, which as of September 2020 debunks 28 conspiracies about the virus. In the case of the 5G conspiracy theory, the WHO states: ‘Viruses cannot travel on radio waves/mobile networks. COVID-19 is spreading in many countries that do not have 5G mobile networks.’⁵⁶

Unfortunately, committed conspiracy theorists are unlikely to be swayed by even the most reliable debunking. For one thing – as Thi Nguyen (2020) has pointed out – the social-epistemic environment of a conspiracy theorist is often a kind of epistemic ‘echo chamber’, one that treats evidence that runs contrary to the conspiracy theory as actually *confirming* it, as such contrary opinion is taken by the conspiracy theorists to further demonstrate the scope of the conspiracy. For this reason, conspiracy theorists can be expected to take a default attitude of distrust towards those who seek to debunk them.

To complicate matters, conspiracy theorists often present themselves as trustworthy and well-informed, in a way that might easily deceive not only other conspiracy theorists, but also individuals who are unskilled at distinguishing trustworthy from untrustworthy sources. As Cassam notes:

Conspiracy Theorists who are quick to denounce mainstream academia for rejecting their theories nevertheless crave academic respectability. They

⁵⁴(Vosoughi, Roy, and Aral 2018).

⁵⁵As Mark Alfano and colleagues have reported in recent work, the vice of low openmindedness is the strongest predictor of both acceptance of COVID19 conspiracy theories and refusal to engage in physical distancing. See <https://icsmp-covid19.netlify.app>.

⁵⁶See <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/myth-busters#5g>.

set up pseudo-academic journals for the study of this or that alleged conspiracy and trumpet their PhDs, whatever their subject. They have a particular fondness for footnotes. [...] the footnote is so valuable to the amateur Conspiracy Theorist because it creates the impression that his theories are the product of reliable research into trustworthy sources. It's a pity, then, that these trustworthy sources turn out to be, for the most part, other Conspiracy Theorists (2019, 20).

The situation, thus, looks like the following: Conspiracy theories are seductive, designed to influence, and often dangerous. Their proponents generally aim to discredit the trustworthy sources that seek to debunk them, while deceptively propping up those who embrace them as trustworthy, through techniques (e.g., pseudo-academic journals, footnotes, touting credentials) that are designed to convey the marks of trustworthiness.

These features, taken together, make conspiracy theories especially easy to get caught up in, especially for those unskilled in distinguishing trustworthy from untrustworthy sources online. According to the Pew Research Centre, nearly half of all Americans with a high school diploma or less education (48%) maintain that the Plandemic conspiracy theory (according to which Covid-19 was intentionally planned, flu vaccines contain the coronavirus, and the Dr. Anthony Fauci bribed investigators to hide the truth about the origins of Covid-19⁵⁷) is 'probably or definitely true.'⁵⁸ Perhaps more concerning is that 25% of *all* Americans (including those with college educations) believe the theory is 'probably or definitely true' as of July 2020.

What all of this suggests for applied social epistemologists is the timely importance of better understanding reliable techniques and training methods for distinguishing trustworthy from untrustworthy sources, particularly online, where conspiracy theorists are most easily spread. A corollary task for the applied epistemologist is to better understand how arguments and evidence can lead individuals to denounce conspiracy theories that they have already accepted.⁵⁹

⁵⁷For a comprehensive study of how the Plandemic video spread online in the weeks following its initial upload, see Frenkel, Decker, and Alba (2020).

⁵⁸This is according to a Pew Research Study from 24 July 2020. See <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/07/24/a-look-at-the-americans-who-believe-there-is-some-truth-to-the-conspiracy-theory-that-covid-19-was-planned/>.

⁵⁹This work was conducted as part of the Leverhulme-funded 'A Virtue Epistemology of Trust' (#RPG-2019-302) project, which is hosted by the University of Glasgow's COGITO Epistemology Research Centre, and I'm grateful to the Leverhulme Trust for supporting this research.

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