

Individual or Group: Who is the Subject of Knowledge? What Can Group Epistemology Give Us?

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Knowledge is one of the most dramatic topics in the history of philosophy. In addition to the complexity of the subject, the reason for this dramatism is the fact that the phenomenon of knowledge is connected to the most important concepts of social life, such as power and responsibility. Knowledge brings power, but knowledge is also the main condition for responsibility. It is in this social and political context that the question of the subject of knowledge becomes more and more important. On the one hand is the instrumental importance and role of knowledge in centralized and shared (decentralized) power structures, and on the other is an interesting direction of research such as the responsibility that knowledge brings with itself in such structures. The latter in particular—the phenomenon of collective responsibility—is a matter that automatically gives rise to the discussion of whether groups can be viewed as subjects of knowledge.

But what is new about the question of whether groups are subjects of knowledge?

Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, a new direction in epistemology began to appear more and more clearly: social epistemology. In this initial phase, the questions of social epistemology were mainly aimed at investigating the influence of social factors on knowledge. At that time, knowledge was still seen as an individual mental phenomenon in accordance with the Cartesian (Descartes) tradition, and social

epistemology tried to investigate the influence of social factors on the phenomenon of knowledge understood at this individual frame. The subject of knowledge remained an individual. As research progressed, the direction of social epistemology also began to cover the ontological status of the subject of knowledge. The social character of knowledge was not limited to the influence of social factors on the individual phenomenon of knowledge, but began to include the idea that the subject of knowledge can not only be individuals, but also groups. The direction of social epistemology that examines knowledge from this perspective is called group epistemology.

Let us paraphrase this shift in focus in social epistemology research in simpler terms. *Who* in the question *Who knows?* usually includes individuals.

1. Who knows?

2. Socrates/Sayyara, Rovshan and Bahruz/a programmer/a taxi driver/ a student/a doctor/a child/a human etc. knows.

We can also use collective nouns (literally or figuratively) at the beginning of this answer sentence: "A Jury / board / scientific council / people / board of directors / government / university / audience, etc. knows." In the second example, we speak of these subjects knowing something only in a metaphorical sense, at least according to the traditional approach. For example, if we say *that the jury knows*, it is meant that those who actually know are the individuals who make up the jury. Or if we say that *the nation knows*, then it is accepted that the people who know are the individuals who make up the nation, and so on.

But when we think about the subject source of knowledge in detail, it begins to appear that certain knowledge cannot be created at all on a purely individual level. For example, the production of most scientific knowledge requires complex and group mental activity, and a corresponding division of labor.

This is the main thought-provoking point mainly at the level of knowledge creation (production). The situation regarding knowledge consumption is not much clearer. Most of our knowledge, and the part of it that is considered important (for example, scientific knowledge) is simply trust-based. That is, if we trust that the information given to us by others is true, and if we characterize that information as our own knowledge, then we have to be content with referring to the information provided to us by others as justification. For example, most of the knowledge we receive during our education cannot be created by ourselves, and there is no need to do so. Most of the knowledge passed on to us in school textbooks, we cannot empirically verify ourselves. For example, we study only the history and reconstruction of the *discovery of America* or the *invention of the electric light bulb*. We personally do not repeat the journeys and experiments necessary for the emergence of this knowledge. In most cases, we have only one way to verify the accuracy of this information: to compare it with other information in our knowledge system. For example, by examining the details of the discovery of America from different sources, we can compare the results and come to a decision about which source's information is true and which is false.

The question may arise, what does it mean to be a subject of knowledge? The answer to this question can be thought of in two ways. On the one hand, to be a subject of knowledge is to create and produce knowledge. Let's call this "active knowing," and accordingly, "active knowledge." On the other hand, to "be a subject of knowledge" is to acquire already produced knowledge, to consume it. Let's call it "passive knowing" (and "passive knowledge"). Passive knowing is our assimilation of knowledge produced before us and also in our time. So we learn this knowledge, but we don't recreate it when we learn it. We don't need to do it, and we don't have the opportunity. Passive knowledge also constitutes our collective body of knowledge, our epistemic conventions in

common circulation and use.

Active knowing is the discovery of matters that are not yet known. This includes scientific inventions, discoveries, as well as new non-scientific content, for example, some new discovery in cooking, the invention of a new trick to increase performance in sports, etc. Active knowledge, that is, knowledge production, is usually seen as the achievement of individuals, in the authorship of individuals (Mushdiyeva 2018). Active knowledge is knowledge whose author and subject coincide. The subject of passive knowledge is usually not the author of that knowledge. The challenge facing group epistemology is to verify whether groups are active subjects of knowledge, i.e. producers, rather than individuals.

In general, if we look at the history of the concept of knowledge, we see that the definition of knowledge that has been thought about and discussed the most, and that has led to various other definitions, is the definition of justified true belief. This is called the three-condition definition of knowledge in the history of philosophy. This three-condition definition has many different metamorphoses. In addition, there are approaches in epistemology that claim the impossibility of defining knowledge, that is, of analyzing knowledge. Since I cannot touch on all these variations within the scope of this short article, let's stick to the classic three-condition definition of knowledge. If we analyze this classic three-conditional definition, that is, if we look at the known three conditions in it—belief, truth, reasoning—we see that only one of these three conditions—belief—expresses an individual mental state. The other two—truth and justification—cannot be understood simply on an individual level. These two conditions show that it is impossible to see knowledge as a purely individual mental phenomenon. For this, it is enough to contemplate what truth and justification are because both imply that belief, which is an individual mental event, can qualify knowledge as depending on non-individual factors.

In short, the idea that knowledge is not a purely individual phenomenon, and that social factors are related to the basic conditions of knowledge, is not new. What is new is the idea that, in addition to individuals, groups can also be seen as knowledge subjects (In English-language literature: *intellectual agents*).

The political context of the question about the subject of collective knowledge

Political contexts also played an important role in the raising of the question of whether knowledge with a group subject is possible. In countries with a functioning democratic system, voters vote for candidates who blatantly lie to them; well-known *post-truth* discussions center around the claim that the truth is not important, the increasing popularity of conspiracy theories, and other such events, all of which have increased attention on epistemic issues in social and political processes. The interesting aspect of this approach, also in relation to our society, is the political context. The question of whether groups can be subjects of knowledge becomes relevant within the framework of collective (political) responsibility. The political character of the context has two directions. Firstly, the government can direct attacks on rational contexts and engage in lies and propaganda. On the other hand, there is citizens' loyalty to the government, and their duties (or failures to full them) are knowing the lies of the government and not being interested in what is true, even blocking their own access to the truth.

Collective responsibility is one of the most important questions related to societies living in authoritarian systems and subjected to repressive rule. On the one hand, this means that these societies create the conditions for certain political authorities to interfere in their will, but on the other hand, that they consent to (or at least do not reject) participation in political crimes (various collective crimes

such as mass corruption, electoral fraud, etc.). In other words, in authoritarian societies we are held responsible as a group both for injustice done to ourselves and for participating in injustices done to others. To be able to talk about this collective responsibility in a meaningful way, we automatically face the question of whether collective knowledge is possible. Thus, responsibility is a concept closely related to the concept of knowledge. On an individual level, you are usually not held responsible for something you have no knowledge of. But how is it on a collective level? To talk about collective responsibility, it becomes important for us to think about what collective knowledge is, and whether such a thing is possible at all.

Active, passive and reactive knowledge

In order to consider the question of whether groups are subjects of knowledge or not, it is first necessary to make a few clarifications about the process of creation of knowledge. The first specification is related to the active and passive form of knowledge. The answer to the questions *Would the group(s) know? / Can the group(s) have knowledge?* can be sought in two epistemological directions: creation/production of knowledge (for example, any scientific invention) and sharing/consumption of knowledge (study of this invention, reflections on it, etc./information used in most high school textbooks, academia) (Mushdiyeva 2018). The two are not the same epistemic event. Moving forward in this direction, we can talk about active, reactive and passive forms of knowledge. Let us call the creation/production of knowledge an active epistemic event, and the sharing/consumption of knowledge a passive epistemic event. Reactive knowledge is somewhere between these two. For example, if a scientific invention is active knowledge, learning and understanding it, teaching it to others (school children, students, etc.) is passive knowledge, then criticism of this invention is reactive knowledge. (By the way, distinguishing forms of knowledge into active, reactive, and passive would also provide a basis for

solving many examples of the Gettier problem, as these three distinctions eliminate most Gettier examples. But they are beyond the scope of this paper.)

Knowledge is an evolutionary phenomenon

I understand knowledge as an evolutionary phenomenon and accept approaches that explain knowledge as a form of survival. In this sense, knowledge has an insurance function in our relationship with the world. Knowledge is the result of our attempt to secure both our individual and our collective memory of the world. We are confronted with the world in one form or another and are therefore exposed to a certain wave of information (stimulus) about this world. Knowledge is the product of our attempt to secure this information content in two directions.

First, we must check whether the information we are exposed to is consistent with what we call *objective reality*, which is usually understood as actual reality independent of us. In other words, we must ensure that the information we are exposed to is not the product of, say, a hallucination, but has an objective reference. In the classical three-conditional definition of knowledge, this is expressed by the truth condition. That is, we compare our information about the world with the facts of this world (as far as our access allows). If they match, we consider that information to be *true*, and if they do not, we consider it to be *false*. Also, we check whether this information coincides with our previous knowledge system (collective memory) or not (Mushdiyeva 2021).

On the other hand, we must ensure the information about the world to which we are exposed at the social-intersubjective level. In the three-condition definition, this need is expressed by the *justification* condition. We must be able to justify the information we are exposed to, both to others and to ourselves, within the framework of social conventions (agreements) and the corresponding codes.

Viewed at the individual level, knowledge generation/production fully (i.e., successfully fulfills all three conditions) and actively embodies the *assuring* function of knowledge. The creation/production of knowledge is evolutionary and survival is an active and offensive act of struggle. The form of knowledge sharing/consumption shows this in an incomplete (usually, all three conditions are not met) and passive way.

Deformation of active knowledge into active non-knowledge

So far, we have looked at knowledge in a positive sense—that is, when knowledge exists. However, when observing the epistemic behavior of some groups, a strange thing is noticed: the struggle for survival, not the creation (production) of knowledge as an evolutionary/evolutionary act, but the sabotage of knowledge, the organization of non-knowledge (ignorance) is observed. This is a common phenomenon in authoritarian societies, including ours and most post-Soviet societies.

The claim that the epistemic behavior of groups in the post-Soviet space/authoritarian societies is active non-knowledge/knowledge sabotage actually needs to be investigated and determined through surveys or other appropriate social research tools. But I do not currently have the resources to conduct such research, and it is risky for those who wish to conduct such research, and it is not safe in the current political situation. In addition, individual or group epistemic behavior of people can be very different in authentic conditions and artificial conditions (surveys, interviews, etc.). Therefore, at the present stage of the work, I have to content myself with keeping this claim—active knowledge is deformed into active non-knowledge in authoritarian societies—only as an observational generalization and hypothetical statement.

Meanwhile, collective epistemic deformations are not just a

phenomenon found in authoritarian societies. Three concepts that attempt to explain collective ignorance will be presented below, which attempt to analyze the forms of collective non-knowledge (ignorance) in predominantly democratic Western societies: *epistemic bubble*, *echo chamber*, and *epistemic bunker*. In the numerous literature written in this field, again, mainly democratic societies are seen as the point of focus.

Thus, based on our observations, our conclusion is that the epistemic behavior of groups in authoritarian societies is characterized by the fact that they actively strive for the creation/production of non-knowledge rather than the creation/production of knowledge. I mentioned above that knowledge is divided into two types, active and passive, and I associate this division with the fact that knowledge is a phenomenon within the framework of evolution. Active knowledge (knowledge production) emerges in more intensive evolutionary situations, that is, in more critical situations of struggle for survival. Passive knowledge, on the contrary, is found in less intensive, more relaxed evolutionary conditions. These evolutionary situations are different in societies with a high index of freedom and in authoritarian societies with a low index of freedom. For example, if the evolutionary situation in free (and correspondingly higher welfare) societies is competition for better (individual welfare, economic, scientific, etc.) results, the evolutionary situations in societies with a low index of freedom often prioritize people's security concerns. Accordingly, not the production of knowledge as an active evolutionary act, but the production of non-knowledge, the organization of active ignorance takes place. (A question for further investigation: Why is it absolutely important to maintain active knowledge? That is, why is the mere denial of active knowledge (i.e. the denial of knowledge production) for security reasons not enough in authoritarian societies? Could this be because knowledge is an evolutionary phenomenon? For example, if evolution, on the one

hand, requires the provision of security, on the other hand, for some reason, it also requires the active production of knowledge, leading to active ignorance as a version of the deforming anomaly. What could be the reason for this? What could be the corresponding evolutionary situation?)

Forms of active non-knowledge

There are many studies on collective non-knowledge. From these studies, we are interested in the three concepts I have already mentioned above: *epistemic bubble*, *echo chamber*, and *epistemic bunker*. Let's see how these concepts explain some forms of collective ignorance.

An *epistemic bubble* (C Thi Nguyen, 2020) is a collective epistemic situation in which a group of people is deprived of certain knowledge because they do not have access to the necessary information. It is assumed that as soon as access to the necessary information is provided, this state of non-knowledge will change to a state of knowledge.

Unlike the *epistemic bubble*, the *epistemic echo chamber* (C Thi Nguyen) does not describe the collective non-knowledge caused by the mere availability of information. In the situation of collective non-knowledge described in the epistemic echo chamber, the cause of this non-knowledge is not the lack of access to the necessary information of the groups that share it, but the fact that they generally accept information from the environment in a selective and biased way. Such groups are usually composed of individuals who are epistemically homogenous, i.e., accepting each other's positions and existing knowledge systems, and these individuals usually only *hear* each other's voices and only accept information that confirms and echoes each other's perspective.

The concept of *epistemic bunker* (Katherine Furman, 2023) tries to explain what the function of the collective epistemic behavior (mainly the echo chamber) described in these two concepts is. The concept of epistemic bunker presents this

function in an evolutionary framework and describes how group members isolate themselves from potentially threatening information for security purposes.

What do these three concepts give us to explain the (trans)deformation of active knowledge into active non-knowledge? The advantage promised by the above three concepts in this aspect is that they emphasize the evolutionary aspect of knowledge, even though it is intuitive and implicit, mainly in the concept of *epistemic bunker*. The epistemic bunker, in turn, can be seen as a continuation of the previous two concepts—the *epistemic bubble* and the *epistemic echo chamber*—as it is a continuation of the reaction to them and the idea expressed in them.

But what is lacking in these concepts for an epistemically sufficient explanation of the (trans)deformation of active knowledge into active non-knowledge? The main thing missing for epistemic analysis in the above three concepts is that the epistemic context (background) is not clear. The concept of knowledge is more intuitive. It is not known what is meant by knowledge in these concepts, and which concept of knowledge is used.

Against this background, the reason for turning to group epistemology in order to explain the (trans)deformation of active knowledge to active non-knowledge is that all three concepts mentioned above describe and represent the epistemic behavior of groups, but do not explain the essence of the main event—knowledge—at the center of this behavior (and therefore the question of the subject of knowledge). The main point here is that the collective epistemic behavior represented in all three concepts is a phenomenon that departs from the individual-focused approach of traditional epistemology. However, the knowledge that is the product/result of this deviation is presented in the context of traditional individual-focused epistemology. There is therefore no separate explanation of the framework of the concept of

knowledge from which the authors start.

Active non-knowledge in the context of group epistemology

These three concepts can only partially describe collective epistemic sabotage behavior in authoritarian societies. Collective non-knowledge due to unavailability of information (*epistemic bubble*), selective information consumption and collective non-knowledge due to selective trust behaviors are also observed here. But authoritarian societies also experience a slightly different form of collective epistemic sabotage: abolishing the epistemic conditions that would make the conclusion necessary. It is a kind of epistemic self-destruction. This type of behavior may seem similar to the behavior described by the *epistemic bubble*. So, knowledge does not take place because there is no access to the necessary information here. But the difference between this and the non-knowledge in the *epistemic bubble* is that the lack of information, which is the cause of the non-knowledge in the *epistemic bubble*, is a condition experienced by epistemic subjects (people who have knowledge) and is caused externally. Even in epistemic self-cancellation, the cause of ignorance lies in the unavailability of necessary information. But here it is organized by the epistemic collective itself. People deliberately block their access to information sources, or the access of information sources to themselves, so that they cannot gain knowledge about certain topics (for example, the behavior of not reading the news). This differs from the behavior described in the *echo chamber*. Thus, the residents of the *echo chamber* do not refuse information, they evaluate it in a selective form (that is, they classify the information they want to hear as true, and the information they don't want to hear as false). In epistemic self-cancellation, you block your own access to information.

The epistemic mechanism and structure of these behaviors are different, and the above three concepts (*epistemic bubble*, *echo chamber*, and *epistemic bunker*) cannot explain them, or

can only partially explain certain aspects. In order to be able to analyze the behavior of epistemic self-cancellation, we need a separate concept that can also provide us with the relevant concepts that will be needed for the analysis. For this, I will first refer to the research conducted in the field of group epistemology that we presented above. Then I will present my own concept to explain the behavior of collective epistemic self-cancellation. You can read more about this in a separate article.

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