Just where is the error? Or: epistemology as the history of error?

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Preamble

It would most likely be easier to write a "history of error" than a "history of truth". Not because error abounds and truth is still to prevail, but because the latter appears to be symbiotic, virtually parasitic on it. We speak of "overcoming error", "clearing up mistakes", "revising our views"; we experience doubt and uncertainty, the gnawing suspicion that things are not as they seem, that we have got it wrong, that scepticism with regard to our own beliefs and those of others is by no means unwarranted and unwise. Truth, it seems, is elusive, and it is usual to wonder whether it has carried the day, or whether error continues to trip us up, perhaps in ways that elude us, of which we are ignorant.

Still, even if truth is symbiotic on error, we do have an inkling of where the truth lies, so to speak, in which direction to go to find it and break the link with error. The "turn to the truth" that hopes to deflate the grip of error enjoys normative status, it is a value that can be experienced virtually as a call to obligation, at least for those alive to their conscience. One sometimes hears or utters expressions such as "to live in the truth" or "be true to yourself", and not forgetting the Socratic summons "know yourself". It may be that the "turn to the truth and away from error" is the existential bedrock that ensures truth-seeking has a point. Yet our fallibility and finiteness obtrude, our habits, dispositions to easy gratification and personal gain, obscure the path to the truth, and we continue to err in our ways. It can be painful to practice virtue, to stiffen the backbone, remain vigilant, conscientious, and consistently ward off the myriad fleeting desires that can trigger chaos in the soul. But all this is so

human, Seneca assures us, if indeed he is the source of the Latin phrase the editors have chosen to title this issue. Recall, however, the clause that follows the seemingly gentle assurance about the naturalness of error, a clause so often omitted – to persist (in error) is diabolical. It appears that our fallibility, a fact of nature, opens us to the "evil" that obscures, perhaps even shatters the existential bedrock of seeking and living in the truth. Consider the following random list of expressions revealing the tension at the heart of the discourse of truth (and error, falsehood):

– irrationality/ rationality
– ignorance/ knowledge
– doubt/ certitude
– confusion/ clarity
– wantonness/ righteousness
– vice/ virtue
– deceit/ honesty
– carelessness/ conscientiousness
– malice/ goodness
– suffering/ serenity
– ugliness/ beauty
– the base/ the noble… and so on.

It is as if the terms on the left are so many facts characteristic of all too ordinary human experience, whereas those on the right shine as ideals contrasting with the "grim" facts. To remain content to stay solely with the facts is to play dice with the diabolical; but to peer into the horizon requires hope and determination sufficiently resilient to withstand the downward tug of the base facts. Will the hope reap the dividends that "living in the truth" holds out as a promise?

How to philosophize truth and error?

The foregoing was written with the Platonic philosophy in mind as well as the medieval synthesis of Greek thought and Christian doctrine. Among the many strands in those traditions, think of the Platonic trinity of the True, the Good, and Beauty, coeval and co-responsive as they together sustain the One. The way out of ignorance and illusion – massive error, as in the Analogy of the Cave – is the ascent of the soul to the transcendent, timeless dimension of perfection in the One. Think, too, of the ontological foundations of alethic truth in Thomas Aquinas, truth as the mind's participation in Being abetted theologically by the Incarnation and Redemption, the affirmation of the divine in Man. "To live in the truth", then,

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had a metaphysical-theological bearing sustaining a high culture the erosion and disappearance of which Max Weber came to describe as *Entzauberung*, hard on the heels of Nietzsche's "revelation" that God is dead, that indeed there is no Truth, only an unexplained urge to Truth[1].

Among the things that eroded, whether they entirely disappeared or not, philosophy, too, came into question, repeatedly since the 17th and 18th centuries, as sceptical doubts troubled souls concerned with ultimate truth and error, on the one hand, while empirical science came increasingly to the fore, on the other. How far had philosophy moved from, say, the Platonic trinity by the time Kant produced his three critiques – the first narrowing the scope of the knowable by denying the possibility of metaphysics; the second restricting the good to the autonomous rational will; and the third locating beauty in the pleasure provided by the free, imaginative interplay of reason and the senses. There is no transcendent Oneness here, each critique moves within a self-sufficient orbit, although together they do carry an "anthropocentric" charge – advocacy of self-sufficient human rationality in the spirit of the Enlightenment. As "dogmatic" (doctrinaire) philosophy was disavowed as erroneous in conception and spirit, the need arose to re-examine just what knowledge is and how far its legitimacy extends. Disputes among philosophers – who admitted the force of the "critical" turn inaugurated by Kant – became increasingly concerned with "method", especially as the example of the natural and formal sciences increased pressure on them to defend their credentials[2]. Of course, Kant had drawn lessons from the arguments of the Empiricists (Hume) and Rationalists (Wolff; Leibniz) who had endeavoured to determine whether what there is to say about knowing and its reach requires a broader metaphysical framework or not: the Empiricists said 'no', the Rationalists 'yes' on the assumption that the mind can access truths to which worldly experience is blind. Kant's transcendentalism – turning attention to the "conditions of the possibility" of knowledge of any kind, not to the objects thereof – harkens back to the originator of the question of method – Descartes – who brought to view the self-sufficient Subject that Kant, later, by virtue of his "Copernican Revolution", invested with far greater powers than Descartes had

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1   Nietzsche was awestruck by the degree to which "Man" deceives Himself in holding to the Truth: "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms – in short, a sum of human relations, which have been enhanced, transposed, and embellished poetically and rhetorically, and which after long use seem firm, canonical, and obligatory to a people: truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are; metaphors which are worn out and without sensuous power…". *"On truth and lie in an extra-moral sense" (a posthumously published fragment)*, in: W. Kaufmann (ed.), *The Portable Nietzsche*, New York 1954 (1970), pp. 46–47.

2   Thus, Positivism, as well as the so-called "vulgar materialism", on the one hand, and the controversy over the claims that "explanation" (*Erklärung*) pre-empts "interpretation" (*Verstehen*), on the other. Mention could also be made of the rise of empirical psychology as a philosophical method.

imagined it to possess, viz., the power not only to conceive clearly and distinctly, with evidence, but to bring objects into conformity with that Subject's Reason.

To repeat the point underlying these loose historical reflections: philosophers in the modern period became obsessed with discovering the right, as opposed to the wrong, erroneous way to exercise their trade. Kant's three critiques already achieved a high point in this regard and remain an emblematic example of self-reflexive, critical philosophizing secure in the knowledge of its powers and limits. However, it should hardly come as news that matters did not stand still since Kant in any of these respects, that calls for "reform" in philosophy did not cease, that philosophers thrived on displaying fundamental errors of their brethren not only in regard to this or that argument or theory, but in the question of approach, philosophical "method". A smattering of salient examples from later modern philosophy and philosophy in the twentieth century includes:

– Husserl's vituperation of virtually the entire run of modern European philosophy, Kant included, and his call to recast philosophy as a rigorous science with scrupulous attention to experience within the limits of experience;

– the several currents – from Frege to Russell, the early Wittgenstein and beyond – converging on what became the "linguistic turn", away from mental pictures of the world to its linguistic "representation", not in ordinary language, however, but by means of ideal, logical language;

– the program of the logical positivists – the Vienna Circle and friends – making of philosophy the analysis – and prescription – of scientific method at the expensive of metaphysics cast aside on the whole as a tangle of meaningless pseudo-problems;

– the "soft" analysis of "ordinary language philosophy" – inspired in part by the late Wittgenstein's shift to language games – with its therapeutic ambitions to rid people of false conceptions rooted in mistaken usage;

– the pragmatists call to reform philosophy, from James to Dewey to the radical Rorty who enjoined the culture at large to rid itself once and for all of Truth and attendant myths and embrace instead Solidarity and Conversation within a democratic setting;

– cognitive science that moves concern with mind and its workings beyond the confines of "pure" philosophy to psychology, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, linguistics, anthropology, and more. The general setting is "naturalism", pride of place accorded to the 'scientific image' of the mind in the world.

Other examples can be readily cited of claims extolling this or that "method" of philosophy at the expense of others judged to be erroneous, misguided[3]. I chose

3 An additional one could be the once prominent "divide" between so-called Analytic and Continental philosophies, viz., the practice of philosophy in leading North American and British universities

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those that come closest to the interests and sense of identity of "analytic" philosophers in a broad sense, including those who have been ready to take phenomenology on board[4]. Some of these – and other – examples have been and remain under discussion, while others have dropped into the background (e.g. the program of the logical positivists; the therapeutics of Cambridge ordinary language philosophy). But this to say that it is a risky business to attempt an answer to the question "where is philosophy today?"; philosophy has become remarkably pluralistic, spread over any number of groupings and criss-crossing affiliations defying summary pigeon-holing.

The upshot of recalling appeals by philosophers over the course of the last century to review, critique, and reform their "methods" is that many have wondered and continue to wonder whether we can lay claim to possessing a viable, correct concept of knowledge and by extension a firm grip on how to assess knowledge for truth… or error. To raise philosophical questions about the concept of knowledge is to turn attention to what has been a preeminent concern of philosophy since the 17th century – epistemology, the theory of knowledge. There can be no question of treating here the many and complex issues debated by contemporary epistemologists who engage with the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mind, philosophy of science, metaphysics and ontology, and more. My ambitions are by far more modest being limited to a few illustrations. Here is an overview of the discussion that follows.

First, I present in succession two recent complementary critical reconstructions of a "picture", a "model" of mind and knowledge that has informed much of modern and contemporary philosophy. The first focuses on the picture of the "inner-outer", "subject-object", "mind-world" divide supposedly bridged by invoking mental items identified as representations. The second, close in kind to the first, raises questions about how that model conceives the passage from mere beliefs to objective knowledge, typically science. As in the first reconstruction, a critical light is cast on the construal of knowing and knowledge by a self-sufficient rational subject, the autonomous self who knows no authority other than Reason. Historical research reveals how institutionally situated and therefore interdependent knowers – scientists – have always been. The "social" dimension of knowledge production points

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contrasted with that in several European countries. It was not unusual that exponents of the former simply dismissed out of hand representatives of the latter: their so-called philosophizing was deemed to be no so much erroneous as mostly gibberish. This has changed considerably. One example: the rise of Hegel's reputation.

4   Not a few believe that, today, "analytic philosophy" has become a term of historical reference to a datable corpus of texts, the earliest of which are not Anglo-American, but German and Austrian. Moreover, those who continue to describe their activities as "analytic philosophy" are hardly tied hand and foot to that corpus and what it has to offer regarding "methods". Cf. Timothy Williamson, but also Rorty.

to reliance on epistemic authorities reinforced by relations of trust. In a following section I briefly examine a proposal for a so-called "communitarian epistemology" which ascribes central importance to reliable testimony.

Injecting history into the epistemological problematic makes it clear how often "today's" knowledge has turned out "tomorrow" to be mistaken, inaccurate belief, such that notions like continuity and progress in science, particularly the idea that over the course of its history science has been "converging on the truth", require scrutiny. Some have worried that in case the idea of continuity and convergence is given up, can the claimed objectivity, the realism of science be defended? Conversely, faith in objectivity and realism, and therefore convergence to the ultimately correct picture of the world, brings into view not only epistemological issues, but an ontological one as well, viz., just what the "reality" is that scientific knowledge has been steadily disclosing? Should it turn out that that reality is nothing else than "atoms in the void", what then to make of the everyday "folk" picture of the world? What about consciousness, minds, human persons, language, deities, numbers, artworks, marriages, goodness and evil, etc.? Are we in massive error in thinking that all these exist? In this context, I will briefly assay a much-debated position in recent moral philosophy, the so-called "error theory" of moral value[5].

Overcoming epistemology – Charles Taylor

"[I]t is becoming a new orthodoxy that the whole enterprise [of epistemology – E.M. S.] from Descartes, through Locke and Kant, and pursued by various nineteenth- and twentieth-century succession movements, was a mistake"[6]. So writes Charles Taylor, adding, however, that it has been less than clear just what it is about that enterprise that the "new orthodoxy" has been targeting. For many, the bogey man has been "foundationalism", that is, the belief that the epistemological project consists in identifying the non-inferential "true" knowledge that underpins inferential knowledge. To avoid the *petitio principii*, epistemology so conceived must be presuppositionless, resting on an unshakeable bedrock – such as Descartes' "*clara et distincta idea*" (or "*clara et distincta perceptio*"). Taylor points out, however, that objections to foundationalism pass over in silence a particular construal of what

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5　There will be no mention in this essay of fallacious reasoning and sophisms, nor of themes of interest to cognitive psychologists and sociologists, for example bias, false consciousness, and the like, all of which are of course causes of error.

6　Ch. Taylor, *Overcoming epistemology*, in: *Philosophical Arguments*, Cambridge–London 1995, p. 2.

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knowledge is, an understanding conveyed by Descartes' own expressions – "idea" and "*perceptio*": mental entities laden with "content" of some sort said to "represent" extra-mental things. Knowledge is taken to be "the inner depiction of an outer reality", "a correct representation of an independent reality". All the above terms convey a "picture" of knowing to which epistemology has long been in thrall: the picture of an opposition between "inner" (the mind) and "outer", (the "world"), where the "outer" is "independent" of mind and the "inner" consists in its "depiction" with the proviso that it be "correct". In short, on this picture the subject is construed "… as a self-sufficient mind related to the objects in the world by way of internal mental states that in some way represent those objects but in no essential way depend on them"[7].

A well-known contemporary statement of this "picture" defines knowledge as "justified true belief". Beliefs (conceptually laden propositional beliefs concerning XYZ) are clearly on the "inside"; they may in fact be true, that is, "represent" XYZ correctly, but they are not "knowledge" so long as they have not been shown to be correct, that is, so long as they are not justified. It follows that the onus falls on justification, more so, indeed, than on truth. What is required for justification is evidence, but given the "inner-outer" framework in which depiction, i.e. representation, has the task of bridging, mediating the gap between the "inner" and "outer", the required evidence can only be reflexive, of a piece with mind in tune with its own workings in the manner Descartes identified as certainty. To seek the evidence in the "outer" would be to commit the fallacy of *petitio principii*. "[C]ertainty, writes Taylor, is the child of reflexive clarity, or the examination of our own ideas in abstraction from what they 'represent' […] the ideal of self-given certainty is a strong incentive to construe knowledge in such a way that our thought about the real can be distinguished from its objects and examined on its own"[8].

Here as elsewhere in his many studies combining philosophical reflection with intellectual history, Taylor point out the wider cultural, social, indeed moral, anthropological significance of this "picture" of knowledge. "[T]he epistemological tradition is connected with some of the most important moral and spiritual ideas of our civilization – and also with some of the most controversial and questionable"[9]. For one thing, the ideal of self-certainty is tantamount to the idea of a self-responsible subject, rational and autonomous in his behaviour – I the knower and agent am duty-bound to myself to oversee and underwrite the worth of my

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7   Ibidem.

8   Ibidem, p. 5.

9   Ibidem, p. 8.

epistemic and practical behaviour; for another, it sustains the anthropocentric vision, so central to the culture, of human powers adapting, instrumentalizing the "outer", nature, to serve the demands and purposes of the subject; a third aspect of this view of subject-centred knowledge is an account of society in which, beyond biological ties, there are only autarchic individuals whose relations are external, conventional, as in the exceedingly influential social contract theories (Hobbes, Rousseau, et al.) and classical as well as contemporary liberalisms. Social atomism is paired with epistemological individualism. For Taylor, "[o]vercoming or criticizing these ideas involves coming to grips with epistemology"[10].

Can knowledge crumble?

In ways complementary to Taylor's questions about the modern project of epistemology, the historian of science, Lorraine Daston along with several colleagues focused on the social roots of the rise of epistemology in the 17th century[11].

» [T]he origins of what is distinctively modern in Western thought *tout court*, lie in a seventeenth-century diagnosis of pathological belief. The beliefs in question ranged from the theological to the astronomical to the geographical, from the anatomical to the natural philosophical[12].

Early modern thinkers were confronted with

» dramatic and disturbing examples of errors that had persisted for centuries on the authority of the very best minds. It is difficult to capture the enormity of this revelation of pervasive and enduring error for those who had been educated largely in the old systems of

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10 Ibidem. In his constructive proposal to retool epistemology Taylor draws on Heidegger, Merleau--Ponty, and Wittgenstein to argue that humans enjoy a pre-intellectual, pre-conceptual contact with reality evidenced in our bodily skills as well as in tacit background practices learned and exercised in the company of others. Although in our experience the world is first of all the world of meaning and significance, and in this sense relative to how we experience it, Taylor believes that we can come to understand and take distance from our meaning-posits, and in this way confront the world as it is. Thus, realism is retrieved. The full account is in: H. Dreyfus, Ch. Taylor, *Retrieving Realism*, Cambridge–Harvard 2015.

11 M.B. Campbell, L. Daston, A.I. Davidson, J. Forrester, S. Goldhill, *Enlightenment now. Concluding reflections on knowledge and belief*, "Common Knowledge" 2007, Vol. 13, Issue 2–3, Spring–Fall, pp. 429–450.

12 Ibidem, p. 433.

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thought – the sickening realization that so many respected authorities could have been so wrong for so long[13].

A critical example, and symptom, of the sense of shock compounded by the rising tide of scepticism about what had been regarded as knowledge is of course Descartes whose "methodical doubt" required that widely held beliefs be inventoried and tested for their degree of certitude; those that fail the test are to be discarded. The key term here is belief – which are the beliefs to accept and which to reject, and how to sort them? Daston and her co-authors draw attention to the circumstance that such questions signalled a change in the nature of belief itself.

> » Whereas belief had previously been conceived as an involuntary state and, in religious contexts, as a divine gift, by the late seventeenth century it had become a matter of voluntary assent – the "will to believe"[14].

However, the will to believe required the proper motivation reinforced by justification, warrant, viz., evidence aiming at certainty, perhaps even apodicticity. And so, of course, Epistemology becomes the *garde-fou* against error, "the vigilant monitoring of the match between belief and evidence, and the relentless rejection of beliefs that exceed their empirical and logical warrant…"[15]. The space of knowledge is henceforth characterized as a continuum ranging from as yet weakly supported beliefs to confirmed beliefs tantamount to knowledge or what is recognized as such, although in the empirical sciences what passes as knowledge "today" can turn out to be questionable, indeed false, belief "tomorrow"[16].

Given that the discovery of pathological, excessive belief came to be regarded "as an emotional, ethical, and medical as well as intellectual malady"[17], the appeal to evidence acquired a somewhat paradoxical hue. On the one hand, only that kind of evidence could be accepted for a belief claiming the status of knowledge accessible to all that is depersonalized and decontextualized. (One thinks here of Hans Reichenbach's distinction between the context of discovery and the context

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13   Ibidem.

14   Ibidem, p. 434.

15   Ibidem, p. 435.

16   This awareness prompted Karl Popper to construct his philosophy of scientific discovery not on the basis of the verification of hypotheses but, on the contrary, on their falsification. Science, then, is not imagined as *episteme*, the knowledge of first principles and causes, but as *recherche* which is ongoing and asymptotic in its aspiration to "truth".

17   L. Daston et al., *Enlightenment now…*, p. 433.

of justification: where knowledge is at issue, only the latter has any merit, the former being fraught with vagary and contingency). On the other hand,

> » the Enlightenment model portrays the responsibility for evaluating evidence as highly personal. […]The knower […] aspires to public knowledge, valid for anyone, anywhere, anytime; but the knower remains an autonomous individual, not a collective[18].

The insistence on autonomy in this model did not serve merely to underscore the importance of self-sufficiency in arriving at beliefs that may attain the status of knowledge, it was also, perhaps foremost a warning against deference to tradition or external authority. After all, a main explanation in the 17th century for the massive presence of pathological belief was the longstanding submission to vested authority[19].

Assessing this "standard model" of Epistemology that drew inspiration from Enlightenment ideals, Daston and her co-authors concede that the model is still relevant in several ways, though it is long since not seen as optimal.

> » […] in the domain that matters most from the Enlightenment perspective, the domain of truth and fact, the standard model has come to seem increasingly threadbare. It seems unable any more to cover instances of knowledge and belief (and their interactions) that are crucial to the functioning of daily life…[20].

Instances of such knowledge include personal (e.g. poetic, artistic) knowledge, social (e.g. trust and reliance, distributed knowing) knowledge, and non-propositional knowledge (e.g. "love's knowledge", emotional intelligence), all absent in the standard Enlightenment model of rational knowing. The reasons why these were overlooked, indeed banned from the standard model, were not without substance, as the authors recall.

> » In a situation of murderous strife [the reference is to the fratricidal religious wars that had ravaged Europe – E.M. S.], it was deemed

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18   Ibidem, p. 437. This mix requiring that knowledge be public yet acquired by the autonomous individual is a theme taken up by virtue epistemology with roots in Aristotle.

19   J.M. Bochenski provided a penetrating analysis of so-called epistemic authority (distinct from deontic authority), without however extending the analysis to epistemological questions *sensu stricto*. Cf. *Was ist Autorität? – Einführung in die Logik der Autorität*, Freiburg 1974. There is a French translation.

20   L. Daston et al., *Enlightenment now…*, p. 438.

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imperative to find common ground upon which combatants could meet and, ideally, come to agreement. The price of peace was, here as elsewhere in early-modern European intellectual life, a radical narrowing of what could count as knowledge and of how it could be discussed[21].

Is a "collective epistemology" the corrective?

A salient aspect of Taylor's and Daston's, et al. examination of the "classical" epistemological model is the doubt they cast on the idea that the only beliefs that may be certified as knowledge are those of the self-sufficient, rational subject reflexively in touch with and in control of his/her cognitional process. Taylor concludes that the model is simply mistaken; Daston et al. see it as incomplete, insensitive to modes of knowledge production beyond the power of scattered individuals. Implicitly, they concur that the traditional model minimizes and discounts, among other things, the mutual reliance of knowers on each other as generative of information, indeed knowledge. A key term here is testimony: epistemology in the modern tradition cited perception, memory, rational inference as the central sources of beliefs and knowledge, while placing testimony, viz., what others indicate, tell someone, well into the back rows. Clearly, it seems, whereas perception, memory, and reasoning go on "in my head" and I am (largely) in control of my head, testimony comes from without which is why quality control is less than secure. John Locke is often quoted in this respect:

> » For, I think, we may as rationally hope to see with other Mens Eyes, as to know by other Mens Understandings. So much as we ourselves consider and comprehend of Truth and Reason, so much we possess of real and true Knowledge. The floating of other Men's opinions in our brains makes us not one jot the more knowing, though they happen to be true. What in them was Science, is in us but Opiniatrety…[22].

It is only when each of us individually submits these "floating opinions" to rational control, checking them against the evidence of the senses, memory stores, whether they cohere with valid inferences, can these begin to qualify as knowledge. Locke reinforces his case against reliance on testimony by speaking not only of

21   Ibidem, p. 449.

22   John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, I iii 24, (1689).

truth but of comprehension, understanding – accepting a belief is conditional on understanding it which is, of course, tantamount to justification achieved with insight. On the one hand, therefore, to accept a belief based on someone's authority runs entirely against the grain of this epistemological model. And on the other hand, it is unimaginable that, based on this model, testimony could ever count as a means to generate knowledge should that mean that, in the company of others each takes on faith what the others report about this or that state of affairs such that, as a group, "we" collectively, not just each of us individually, lay claim to knowing so-and-so. Something like a genuine "plural subject" (We), i.e., a collective subject, a social subject of knowledge, both in respect of how knowledge is generated and "who" is properly said to be in possession of it, appears to be excluded *a limine*.

But do the facts on the ground not fly in the face of such refusal? Where the generation of knowledge is concerned, it is virtually impossible to conceive of scientific research other than as team effort involving any number of mutually interdependent workers not all of whom are even aware of what the others are doing. In the 1980s an experiment carried out at CERN, the high-energy physics research centre in Switzerland, resulted in a paper with 99 co-authors, many of whom did not know how a given measurement reported in the paper was arrived at. Nevertheless, only by exchanging information and taking each other's reports as evidence for measurements, etc. could the data be prepared for the authors' joint paper.

> » Empirically, it could not be otherwise. It is clear that such experiments could not be done by one person. None of the participating physicists could replace his knowledge based on testimony with knowledge based on perception: to do so would require too many lifetimes[23].

In a case like this, *who*, then, can be said to know the results put forward in the said paper? Who possesses the relevant knowledge? One philosopher very much critical of the classical model of epistemology reviews three possible positions ranging from the "classical" to the "revolutionary". First, "strict individualism" – knowledge is possessed only by the individual physicists and they alone singularly vouchsafe it, as in the classical model. Second, "relaxed individualism" – none of them effectively has the knowledge touted in the paper; none who took part in

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23 The passage is Martin Kusch's paraphrase of John Hardwig's argument in: J. Hardwig, *Epistemic Dependence*, "Journal of Philosophy" 1985, Vol. 82, pp. 335–349. Cf. M. Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement. The Programme of Communitarian Epistemology*, Oxford 2002, p. 48. Also: M. Kusch, *Social Epistemology*, in: S. Bernecker, D. Pritchard (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*, London–New York 2011, pp. 873–884.

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the experiment can entirely gather the evidence required to vouchsafe what their paper reports, and perhaps some may not even fully understand what they put forward in the paper. The third position is the favoured one – "communitarianism".

> [I]t is the community of physicists, perhaps the ninety-nine co-authors, that is the epistemic subject of the knowledge presented in the paper. Communitarianism allows us to retain the idea that a knower must be in "direct" possession of the evidence but breaks with the assumption that such a knower must be, or can be, an individual[24].

If this is acceptable, then perhaps it is legitimate to affirm "we, the community, know that *p*", where the community in question is not reducible to a class of individuals that would make of "we" no more than the standard count-pronoun. Can there be such a "we", a "plural subject" not reducible to a sum of individuals? The question spills over into complex issues of "social ontology"[25] about the existence of groups, teams, collectives, etc., which cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say, that should there be good arguments for the existence of such "social entities", the prospects for a correlative "social epistemology" would be greatly enhanced[26]. But one thing at least should be mentioned here about how a genuine "we" might come into existence. The above example involves testimony. How could testimony cement relations among the individual physicists such that they identify with the community? The answer is that the individuals perceive each other to be reliable

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24 M. Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement…*, p. 49.

25 John Searle who observed, in his pioneering study *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995), that (analytic) philosophers had neglected social ontology, the central concerns of which are – on Searle's original account, much discussed and elaborated since 1995 – how "institutional facts" come into being and are reproduced (e.g. money, marriages, scientific reports) by collective acceptance, that is, collective intentionality – the 'We'. The term 'social ontology' appears to have been introduced by Edmund Husserl – "Sozialontologie". An excellent, extensive overview of the state of social ontology today, including its historical roots, is: B. Epstein, *Social Ontology*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/social-ontology/.

26 Social epistemology, like its cousin social ontology, is much in vogue today, and comprises a wide variety of views and sources of inspiration, some reaching back to the 19th century (e.g. Hegel, Marx, Durkheim), perhaps earlier. For some, it is best represented by the sociology of knowledge, the social history of science (e.g. the "Strong Programme" in the sociology of science, but also historical epistemology of the kind practiced by Lorraine Daston), the philosophy of the social sciences (including Marxist, Hermeneutic, Phenomenological, etc. resources). In the Anglo-American context, it is largely the outgrowth of contemporary "analytic" epistemology (e.g., Alvin Goldman's influential study *Knowledge in a Social World*, 1999), although mention should also be made of the epistemological input of gender studies, as in feminist epistemology. The "analytic" perspective is reviewed in: A. Goldman, C. O'Connor, *Social Epistemology*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/epistemology-social/. A wider-ranging overview that is critical of Goldman's approach is M. Kusch, *Social Epistemology…*

which entails that they assess each other's characters in positive ethical terms[27]. They form a community of trust and on that basis their agreement to work together toward a common goal generates reciprocal entitlements and commitments, reasonable expectations and obligations[28]. In short, what binds them into a community is normativity, not first of all epistemic normativity governing truth (and error), but ethical, indeed moral, normativity that they jointly adhere to[29].

> » It remains true […] that ethical claims must meet epistemological standards. But if much of our knowledge rests on trust in the moral character of the testifiers, then knowledge depends on morality and epistemology also requires ethics[30].

Realism, antirealism, and "error theory"

So far, I have reviewed critical examinations of "models" or "pictures" of the epistemology dominant in European philosophy since roughly the 17th century. These draw out presuppositions, biases, some of which stem from sources – e.g., social, political, religious – external to but acting on Epistemology, the main concern of which was to establish how, under what conditions, belief (representation) could be certified as true and fixed knowledge, and how error is unmasked. A leading concern has been: Why so much preference for the self-sufficient, autonomous mind, distrustful of authority, responsible only to its own powers of reasoning to generate knowledge? To say that this all a "mistake" is of course risky business among philosophers (and not only – think of educators), though such criticisms and ensuing calls for reform in philosophy have been common (see the list of prominent examples above).

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27 M. Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement…*, p. 49.

28 The philosopher Margaret Gilbert has developed and applied across a broad range of areas the concept of "joint commitment", the source of "plural subjecthood", the core of "sociality". A representative selection of her work is gathered in M. Gilbert, *Joint Commitment. How We Make the Social World*, Oxford 2013.

29 Social historians of science have not infrequently demonstrated how far the classical model of individualist epistemology departs from concrete scientific practices and how they have been understood by those taking part. For instance, "English experimental philosophy [the reference is to 17th century Scottish Enlightenment – E.M. S.] […] emerged partly through the purposeful relocation of the conventions, codes, and values of gentlemanly conversation into the domain of natural philosophy". The gentleman was regarded to be a "natural truth-teller", a virtuous character honed to resist anything that would induce him to behave otherwise. The quoted sentence is from Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*, Chicago 1994, p. xvii, as cited in: M. Kusch, *Social Epistemology…*, p. 880.

30 J. Hardwig, *The role of trust in knowledge*, "Journal of Philosophy" 1991, Vol. 88, pp. 693–704, quoted in M. Kusch, *Knowledge by Agreement…*, p. 50.

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Now, even a survey as schematic as this would be incomplete without some words about the perennial, oftentimes bitter disputes about whether we can claim with assurance that our knowledge, in the strong sense of true justified knowledge, pertains to "the things as they are in themselves". This is the dispute about *realism*, often acknowledged to be something of minefield[31]. It involves several strands that move in a variety of directions. One is the epistemological strand: to be realist about knowledge claims is to hold that some X about which we are thinking and making claims is independent of our minds. The antirealist denies this; for instance, s/he believes that there is no access to the things that is not always already conditioned by how we consider them, how we conceive them, and so on. Another is the ontological (metaphysical) strand: what finally are the "things" that are/ are not independent of the mind? The man in the street is certain that s/he perceives trees, automobiles, other persons, hot dogs, etc., and that they "really" exist. S/he may be surprised to be told that, notwithstanding the "appearances", what really is "out there" is of an entirely different nature, is not typically accessible to perception. A further strand in the debate about realism has to do with the meanings of sentences: does sentence meaning depend on truth conditions – the realist – or does it derive rather from our reasons for asserting sentences in particular circumstances, as the antirealist holds?

Today, "analytic" philosophers tend to profess "naturalism", a position largely tied to an account of the "world" ("reality") sensitive to what science has discovered through empirical investigation. Virtually all the epistemological, ontological, and semantical issues mentioned above are taken up in debates for and against "scientific realism".

Science seeks an account of the world that is l i t e r a l l y t r u e.

– We a c c e p t scientific theories because we b e l i e v e them to be true.

– The truth of theories turns on their c o r r e s p o n d i n g t o the things the theories are about.

– Science c o n v e r g e s a s y m p t o t i c a l l y on the single true account of the world.

Of these, the last has proved especially controversial, and the discussions around it feed back into the other characteristics of scientific realism.

The idea that science "converges" on the one true account implies of course that science changes, it has a history. Does that history sustain the idea of convergence, viz., incremental movement toward an end point? Thomas Kuhn (and others) took exception to the idea, on the basis of historical research, and arrived at the view

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31   The Table of Contents of the on-line *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* demonstrates just how topical, and contentious, is the current discussion around realism(s) and antirealism(s).

that science "advances" by way of radical ruptures, so-called "scientific revolutions", which is to say it does n o t progress incrementally: successive "revolutions" amount to radical shifts of "paradigms", such that the history is discontinuous[32]. Out then goes the "mistaken" idea of convergence, out too goes faith in scientific realism. Hilary Putnam raised the spectre of pending – moral, epistemic, cultural disaster if the picture of discontinuous science is not avoided.

> »   What if a l l the theoretical entities postulated by one generation (molecules, genes, etc. as well as electrons) invariably "don't exist" from the standpoint of later science? […] how do you know you aren't in error now? But it is the form in which the argument from error is a s e r i o u s worry for many people today, and not just a "philoso-phical doubt". One reason this is a serious worry is that eventually the following meta-induction becomes overwhelmingly compelling: j u s t   a s   n o   t e r m   u s e d   i n   s c i e n c e   o f   m o r e   t h a n   5 0 (o r   w h a t e v e r)   y e a r s   a g o   r e f e r r e d ,   s o   i t   w i l l   t u r n o u t   t h a t   n o   t e r m   u s e d   n o w   […]   r e f e r s[33].

That is to say: one cannot hope to make sense of realism and cumulative growth of knowledge, even in some qualified form (e.g. probabilism), unless referents can be stably assigned to the terms of past science such that, even though past science has undergone critical revision, including revision of the terms picking out these referents, "our" science today maintains a tight grip on the latter. Failing that, we would be left in the dark with respect to the epistemic value of current (and future) theories – antirealism by default, so to speak, but compounded by corrosive scepticism.

A kindred issue about realism pertains to the "ontological commitments" of fundamental science compared with those of everyday experience and language. There are several ways in which the issue is stated: one is to ask about the relation, if any, between the language (theory) of microscopic objects – that of fundamental science – and everyday talk of macroscopic things; a related way is to inquire whether the "phenomenalistic" language of science – observation reports – supersedes the "physicalistic" language of the man in the street, the language of the "middle-sized" objects that make up the bread and butter of daily experience. In this latter form,

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32   The reference here is to Kuhn's "classic": *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago 1962.

33   H. Putnam, *What is realism?*, "Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society" 1976, Vol. 76, pp. 183–184. He resisted the meta-induction and sought a solution that saves realism and convergence. However, he changed his mind more than once.

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talk of middle-sized objects extends as well to: artworks, road networks, languages, deities, institutions, as well as to values. A reader not familiar with this contrast and the worries it has occasioned for not a few philosophers would perhaps like to ponder the following remarks Willard van Ormand Quine offered some 70 years ago that continue to attract the attention:

> » Physical objects are […] convenient intermediaries not by definition in terms of experience, but simply as irreducible posits comparable, epistemologically, to the gods of Homer. […] in point of epistemo-logical footing, the physical objects and the gods differ only in degree and not in kind[34].

That is, physical objects are myths, the product of the cultural imagination. However, though fictions they are useful in that they help "to expedite our dealings with sense experience"; they have "proved more efficacious than other myths as a device for working a manageable structure into the flux of experience". Notice, however, that "there is no likelihood that each sentence about physical objects can actually be translated […] into the phenomenalistic language" (the language of sense experience, i.e. of science, according to Quine – E.M. S.)[35]. But failure of "translation," i.e., reduction aiming to "eliminate" (reference to) physical objects, does not mean that the language of physical objects retains a realist cast after all[36].

But what, finally, about values – about right and wrong, good and evil, beauty and ugliness, love and hate? Along with truth and error, all these terms, and so many more, can be gathered under the heading 'normativity'. How does the philosopher sympathetic to naturalism – be it scientific realism, physicalism, or otherwise – handle normativity? For instance, when we say of some artwork that it is beautiful, and point out features of the work to sustain the evaluation, are we committing to objective beauty, a property of the work? Hume, an early "naturalist" – his empi-

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34 *Two dogmas of empiricism*, in: W.v.O. Quine, *From a logical point of view*, New York 1953/1961, p. 44.

35 *On what there is*, in: W.v.O. Quine, *From a logical point of view*, pp. 17–18.

36 Richard Rorty championed a view of this kind under the label "non-reductive physicalism", the position he attributed to Quine (among others). "[I] shall define a 'physicalist' as someone who is prepared to say that every event can be described in micro-structural terms, a description which mentions only elementary particles, and can be explained by reference to other events so described. This applies, e.g., to the events which are Mozart composing a melody or Euclid seeing how to prove a theorem. Then to say that [a given philosopher – E.M. S.] is an *anti-reductionist* physicalist is to say that he combines this claim with the doctrine that 'reduction' is a relation merely between linguistic items, not among ontological categories". It follows that we will probably go on forever talking about tables, persons, their beliefs and desires, etc., though it well behoves us to think with the learned even as we speak with the vulgar. Cf. R. Rorty, *Non-reductive Physicalism*, in: K. Cramer, H.F. Fulda, R.-P. Horstmann, U. Pothast (eds.), *Theorie der Subjektivität*, Frankfurt a/M. 1987/1990, pp. 280–281.

ricism is a fundamental tenet of naturalism – answered 'no'[37]. The statement "X is beautiful" in fact means "X is pleasing [to me]". What at first sounded "objective" turns out to be "subjective", a piece of personal psychology, such that the objective sounding statement, if taken literally, is false. This analysis, viz., a transposition into a context that disregards the surface grammar of the statement, has recently received the name "error theory"[38], mainly in moral philosophy and ethics. To many, it seems intuitively obvious that if the statement "X is courageous" is meaningful and true, that is because there is something, an objective value, named "courage in English", realized by X. Moreover, many admire X because s/he did his/ her duty, that is, thanks to moral insight s/he responded to the value of courage by acting in the appropriate manner. The moral value is prescriptive, not merely descriptive. But from a naturalist perspective, there are no and can be no moral values, for were there such things, they would be very "queer" indeed, never mind that they are found nowhere in perception. In short, if "X is courageous" is believed to be made true by reference to an objective value, then we are in error: so understood, the statement is literally false and talk of courage turns out not to be objective. Which doesn't mean that it has to be discarded as meaningless, no more than physical-object language needs to be discarded, despite such objects being so many mythical posits. Value-talk is inscribed in the form of life of a community where it can play crucial coordinating roles throughout a variety of institutions, and as the communities and forms of life may differ, so too do the "values" through which they are perceived. Far from being objectivist about value, we should embrace relativism[39].

In lieu of a conclusion

If we wish to end on a charitable note, commending the philosophers reviewed above – all keenly aware of the tortuous course of our culture – rather than lamenting how far their pronouncements appear to depart from good old common sense and the everyday world, then we could say that they wished to warn us, and themselves, not to succumb to the comforting excuse that "error" is just part of life, that we might just as well content ourselves with the "appearances". For this

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37 David Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757).

38 The salient source is John L. Mackie, *Ethics – Inventing Right and Wrong*, London 1990 (1977). For a thorough discussion, see R. Joyce, *Moral anti-realism*, in: *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), E.N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/moral-anti-realism/.

39 It is more accurate to say "relativity", since the relativism in question concerns the community, its form of life, not the individual and her likes and dislikes.

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reason, Descartes' *malin génie*, lurking somewhere in the mind's recesses, confounding appearance and reality, is a valuable fantasy that goes directly to the heart of the urgency to relinquish error for the sake of Truth. Not the fact about error, but the injunction to flee from it counts most: "…*sed perseverare diabolicum est*".

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This essay is not concerned with what philosophers have said about truth and error, but rather with how they increasingly turned their gaze back on their philosophizing itself, having grown suspicious that they are conducting their studies in the wrong way. The advent of modern philosophy came on the heels of the erosion of the 'classical' world view passed down from the Greeks and the

Medievals in thrall to transcendental Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Philosophical scepticism reared its head as the new science prompted doubts about the reach of human knowledge – how do we determine whether our beliefs about the 'world' amount to objective knowledge at all? The search for what were later to be called 'foundations of knowledge' began, a search that gave rise to 'epistemology'. Matters reached an early critical point in Kant's *Critiques*. Subsequently, it became rare to come across the philosophers who would not adopt, to some degree, a self-reflexive stance with respect to their 'methods'. The author of the article proposes a random sampling of some recent critical self-reflexion, the conclusion of which is that the epistemological turn in modern philosophy has been largely a mistake or at least is deficient in essential respects. Charles Taylor questions the 'representationalist' concept of epistemology stemming from Descartes; historians of science (Lorraine Daston, et al.) examine how the priority attributed to the image of the autonomous rational mind ran against the grain of concrete scientific practice. It is merely a step to consider a proposal for a 'communitarian epistemology' in which reliable testimony and trust displace the standard reliance on the perceptions and inferential powers of the individual knower. The author recalls Thomas Kuhn's controversial thesis concerning 'scientific revolutions' which put in question both the belief of science's 'convergence' on the truth and of the (im-)possibility of epistemological realism. Concerns about realism/ anti-realism also raise questions about the status of the things believed to exist: are most of us in error in believing that the everyday 'manifest image' of the world is consistent with the 'scientific image' advanced presented by physics? The author concludes with an account of 'error theory' in today's moral philosophy according to which the belief that value-statements have meaning insofar as they refer to objective values is false. But let the illusion be granted, for although it is an error to think such statements are true, they do enjoy a performative role within our communities.

In conclusion: the history of epistemology and its applications has been concerned with rooting out what cannot be correct in approaches to questions about knowledge, truth, and error. It remains to wonder whether we do 'know' what the correct approach is.

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Gdzie leży błąd? Lub: epistemologia
jako historia błędu?

Niniejszy artykuł nie zajmuje się tym, co filozofowie mówili na temat prawdy i błędu, ale raczej tym, jak stopniowo zaczęli się oni przyglądać swoim filozoficznym rozważaniom jako takim, pod wpływem swoich rosnących podejrzeń o to, że nie prowadzili swoich badań w należyty sposób. Współczesna filozofia nadeszła w ślad za erozją „klasycznej" wizji świata, przekazanej przez Greków i ludzi średniowiecza, pozostających w niewoli pojęć transcendentalnej Prawdy, Piękna i Dobra. Sceptycyzm filozoficzny dał o sobie znać, gdy nowa nauka sprowokowała wątpliwości odnośnie zasięgu ludzkiej wiedzy – jak zbadać, czy nasze przekonania o „świecie" są obiektywną wiedzą? Rozpoczęło się poszukiwanie, jak to później zostało ujęte, „podstaw wiedzy" – kwerenda, która dała początek „epistemologii". Wczesne apogeum wydarzeń wyznaczyły *Krytyki* Kanta. Od tamtej pory do rzadkości należeli filozofowie, którzy nie przyjęliby, do pewnego stopnia, postawy autorefleksyjnej w odniesieniu do swoich „metod". Autor artykułu proponuje losowy dobór przykładów współczesnej autorefleksji, której wynik wskazuje na to, jakoby epistemologiczny kierunek współczesnej filozofii był, w dużej mierze, błędem, lub przynajmniej jakoby był to kierunek niekompletny w kluczowych aspektach. Charles Taylor kwestionuje „reprezentacjonistyczną" koncepcję epistemologii wywodzącą się z nauk Descartes'a; historycy nauki (Lorraine Daston i inni) rozważają, w jaki sposób wartość nadrzędna przypisywana wizerunkowi autonomicznego, racjonalnego umysłu była niezgodna z konkretną naukową praktyką. To jedynie krok od uznania założenia „komunitarystycznej epistemologii", w której wiarygodne świadectwo i zaufanie wypierają standardowe poleganie na percepcji i sile dedukcji indywidualnego poznającego. Autor przypomina kontrowersyjną tezę Thomasa Kuhna dotyczącą „naukowych rewolucji", podających w wątpliwość zarówno wiarę w „dążenie" nauki do prawdy, jak i (nie)możliwość istnienia epistemologicznego realizmu. Obawy o realizm/ antyrealizm rodzą także pytania odnośnie statusu rzeczy, w których istnienie wierzymy: czy większość z nas jest w błędzie wierząc, że codzienny „manifestujący się obraz" świata jest spójny z „naukowym obrazem" prezentowanym przez fizykę? Autor podsumowuje artykuł przykładem „teorii błędu" w dzisiejszej filozofii moralności, zgodnie z którym fałszywe jest przekonanie, jakoby deklaracje wartości miały sens dopóty, dopóki odnoszą się do wartości obiektywnych. Pozwólmy jednak na tę iluzję, bo choć błędnym jest myśleć, że takie deklaracje są zgodne z prawdą, to jednak pełnią one performatywną rolę w naszych społecznościach.

W rezultacie: historia epistemologii i jej zastosowań skupia się na wykorzenianiu tego, co nie może być poprawne w podejściu do zagadnień związanych z wiedzą, prawdą i błędem. Pozostaje zastanawiać się nad tym, czy na pewno „wiemy", co jest poprawnym podejściem.

Słowa klucze: epistemologia, przekonania/ wiedza, podmiot/ społeczność, autonomia/ świadectwo, teoria błędu