

The Philosophy Café. Introduction to Philosophy in Society

Sunday 11 October 2020



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## Introduction

Social philosophy could be described as the study of questions about social behaviour and interpretations of society, and about social institutions in terms of ethical values rather than empirical relations (Wikipedia entry, read 1 October 2020). It is a broad definition which takes social philosophy as a wide set of social contexts for political, legal, moral, and cultural questions. However, that is fine if you want something very vague. It is true, there has been an unclear field of learning in philosophic thought on politics and ethics which goes back to Plato and Aristotle, if not elsewhere, and one can mark key places in the development of social philosophy with Kant, Marx, Mill, and Russell. It is better to see social philosophy as simply philosophic thought in discourse on society.

For the vague definition, that is understood when a list of a list of contemporary topics would include:

- Agency and free will
- The will to power
- Accountability
- Speech acts
- Situational ethics
- Modernism and postmodernism
- Individualism
- Crowds
- Property
- Rights
- Authority
- Ideologies
- Cultural criticism

Of course, the list here is far from exhaustive, and there is significant overlap between different areas of knowledge, particularly ethics and sociology, and importantly, with social psychology. If you consult the *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* there is no entry as such as social philosophy, but there are references which demonstrated a much better, constructivist understanding to how ordinary people think in philosophic terms without directly understanding those lines of thought. The philosophy of language and social epistemology are subfields which overlap in significant ways with social philosophy. The entries from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* provide four topics which well-structure a philosophic overview on society and social relations:

- Social Ontology
- Social Epistemology
- Social Institutions, and
- Social Networking and Ethics

The later discussion of the essay will follow that natural order. First, though, lets consider a formal history of social philosophy.

### Formal History of Social Philosophy

There is no attempt to be extensive. Work on the origins, on when social philosophy had origins in a formal history, is a bigger task than what can be done here. However, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) appears from the contemporary literature as an agreed starting point. The entry from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Rauscher 2017) needs to be quoted in full on the point; to get to the depth of the philosophic history:

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*“Social philosophy,” can be taken to mean the relationship of persons to institutions, and to each other via these institutions, that are not part of the state. Family is a clear example of a social institution that transcends the individual but has at least some elements that are not controlled by the state. Other examples would be economic institutions such as businesses and markets, religious institutions, social clubs and private associations created to advance interests or for mere enjoyment, educational and university institutions, social systems and classifications such as race and gender, and endemic social problems like poverty. It is worth noting a few particulars, if only as examples of the range of this topic. Kant advocated the duty of citizens to support those in society who could not support themselves, and even gave the state the power to arrange for this help (“Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View” 6:326). He offered a biological explanation of race in several essays and also, certainly into his “Critical” period, held that other races were inferior to Europeans. He supported a reform movement in education based on the principles presented by Rousseau in “Emile”. I will not provide detailed treatment of Kant’s views on these particular matters (some of which are scant) but only focus on the nature of social philosophy for Kant.*

*Kant had no comprehensive social philosophy. One might be tempted to claim that, in line with natural law theorists, Kant discusses natural rights related to some social institutions. One might read the first half of the “Doctrine of Right” as a social*

*philosophy, since this half on “Private Right” discusses the rights of individuals relative to one another, in contrast to the second half on “Public Right” that discusses the rights of individuals relative to the state. Kant even offers an explanation of this difference by claiming that the opposite of state of nature is not a social but the civil condition, that is, a state (6:306). The state of nature can include voluntary societies (Kant mentions domestic relations in general) where there is no a priori obligation for individuals to enter them. This claim of Kant’s, however, is subject to some doubt, since he explicitly links all forms of property to the obligation to enter the civil condition (see section 5 in the original entry), and his discussion of marriage and family comes in the form of property relations akin to contract relations. It is thus not obvious how there can be any social institutions that can exist outside the civil condition, to the extent that social institutions presuppose property relations.*

*Another approach to the issue of social philosophy in Kant is to view it in terms of moral philosophy properly speaking, that is, the obligations human beings have to act under the proper maxims, as discussed in the “Doctrine of Virtue” (see section 1 in the original entry). In the “Doctrine of Virtue” Kant talks about the obligation to develop friendships and to participate in social intercourse (6:469–74). In the ‘Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason’ Kant discusses the development of an “ethical commonwealth” in which human beings strengthen one another’s moral resolve through their participation in the moral community of a church. He also holds that educational institutions, the subject of his book ‘On Pedagogy’, should be designed to provide for the development of morality in human beings, who lack a natural disposition for the moral good. In these cases, Kant’s social philosophy is treated as an arm of his theory of virtue, not as a freestanding topic in its own right.*

*A third approach to social philosophy comes through Kant’s ‘Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View’. Kant had envisioned anthropology as an empirical application of ethics, akin to empirical physics as an application of pure metaphysical principles of nature. Knowledge of the general characteristics of human being as well as particular characteristics of genders, races, nationalities, etc, can aid in determining one’s precise duties toward particular individuals. Further, this knowledge can aid moral agents in their own task of motivating themselves to morality. These promises of anthropology in its practical application are unfulfilled, however, in the details of Kant’s text. He does little critical assessment of social prejudices or practices to screen out stereotypes detrimental to moral development. His own personal views, considered sexist and racist universally today and even out of step with some of his more progressive colleagues, pervade his direct discussions of these social institutions.*

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The German Romantic philosophers in the century later (early 19<sup>th</sup> century) flip many of Kant's ideas in Social Philosophy. Much of that flip came from Kant's contemporary, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and the much later Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831). These German romantic philosophers tended to take the negative or positive side in what became known as the Pessimism Controversy (German: *pessimismusstreit*) from around 1860 to 1914. The controversy first arose as a response to Arthur Schopenhauer's growing posthumous public recognition in the 1860s. The movement had much stimulus from Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann (1842-1906), who elaborates on Schopenhauer's pessimism (Hartmann's *Philosophy of the Unconscious*, 1869) and reflexively from the neo-Kantian and neo-Hegelian critics of von Hartmann. Agnes Taubert (Hartmann's wife) published *Der Pessimismus und seine Gegner*, in 1873, in response to criticism of her husband, which had a strong influence on the controversy. Generally speaking, those who followed:

- Kant took a highly rationalist and optimistic view in social philosophy;
- Rousseau took a highly naturalistically and optimistic view of human nature, but a highly negative view in the social philosophy, since society imprisons that nature with what is unnatural;
- Hegel took a position which flipped Rousseau – a highly rationalist view (in absolute logic beyond Kant) but a negative view of human nature in binary patterns of conflict, however, as a providential view in the social philosophy, there are great optimism in the end of history as the Absolute, a perfect resolution of all conflict from the logic of history and the Will of God (who is assumed to be perfect good);
- Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, in a sense flip Hegel in seeing the Absolute as the Buddhist reality of 'the void', a perfect negation, however, there is a return to Rousseau's naturalism without the optimism – nature and society, and all its suffering, is an illusion; the social philosophy is a 'good' pessimism since we find perfect peace in the void – the absence of all struggle and conflict.

That is a description in broad-strokes but the arguments are much more complex and nuanced in its conclusions for the social philosophy. Von Hartmann is not an unmitigated pessimist. In his 'Unconscious' he appears to bring a combination of the metaphysics of Hegel and Schopenhauer. According to von Hartmann, neither Idea or Reason were subordinate to Will nor Will subordinate to Idea or Reason; on the contrary, neither can act alone, and neither is the result of the other. The endless and vain striving of the Will necessitates the great preponderance of suffering in the universe, which could not well be more wretched than it is. Nevertheless, it must be characterized as the best possible world, for both nature and history are constantly developing in the manner best adapted to the ending of the world; and by means of increasing consciousness the idea, instead of prolonging suffering to eternity, provides a refuge from the evils of existence in non-existence. The individual's happiness is indeed unattainable either here and now or hereafter and in the future, but von Hartmann does not despair of ultimately releasing the Unconscious from its sufferings. He differs from

Schopenhauer in making salvation collective by the negation of the will to live depend on a collective social effort and not on individualistic asceticism.

This a particular important point as we can see two directions of the social philosophy in the twentieth century, one as of a pessimistic Nietzsche -inspired libertarianism, and the other in the tragic existentialism of Sartre's socially-obligated humanism. Revealingly, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) made a scathing criticism of von Hartmann, calling his philosophy "unconscious irony" and "roguery", in the second of his *Untimely Meditations*, 'On the Use and Abuse of History for Life'. Nietzsche saw von Hartmann's social philosophy as too unscientific, and lacking the positivism required. It is somewhat ironic given the influence of von Hartmann in Sigmund Freud's psychology of the 'unconscious'. Von Hartmann also influenced the educational theories of Rudolf Steiner.

Another German philosopher, Philipp Mainländer (1841-1873), in his *The Philosophy of Redemption or The Philosophy of Salvation* (German: *Die Philosophie der Erlösung*), produced a highly radical system of pessimism, working on the thought that life is absolutely worthless, and that "the will, ignited by the knowledge that non-being is better than being, is the supreme principle of morality". And yet the Mainländer work was also critical of von Hartmann's conclusions. Mainländer attacked von Hartmann for not starting his philosophy with an epistemological research. The point here is that epistemological research became crucial in the social philosophy, and, in particular, the epistemology became a focus of Anglo-American philosophy during the twentieth century. In 1899 William Caldwell produced two papers in *The Philosophical Review*, entitled, 'Von Hartmann's Moral and Social Philosophy, I. The Positive Ethic' and 'II. The Metaphysic'. Here Caldwell explained Hartmann is led to the rejection of the idea of social development as the supreme ethical standard. Caldwell, in the English papers, explained the connections in von Hartmann's social philosophy; where it becomes influential for 20<sup>th</sup> century pessimistic libertarians, as well as pessimistic communitarians. As Caldwell presents, von Hartmann has a four-stage exposition and discussion in the 'Unconscious':

- a. Morality of Hedonism
- b. Subjective Morality
2. Rational Morality
3. Social Morality (ethics of the common good, seen in positivist terms)
4. Morality of Social Citizenship, or of Social Democracy ('Morality of the End')

This last stage of the end of history is more mystical in its conclusion than its positivist analysis suggests. While, "Hartmann would say, the very pith and essence of the Social Democratic programme is just this general happiness idea; or, rather, 'the Social Democratic programme

is the necessary consequence and development of the kernel of the principle of universal hedonism', Caldwell see this as merely a 'democratic sanctions' of the pleasure principle (Caldwell I: 472-473). For von Hartmann, the principles of hedonism are all illusory. In fact, social democracy is an illusion. Von Hartmann does not believe in the social development for general happiness. What von Hartmann is saying has a wider appeal for the true that the struggle for happiness is illusory, however, implicit in von Hartmann's ethic is a rejection of democratic value. Von Hartmann would be widely supported in the view that "that the struggle for 'development' and true culture does not require the happiness idea to support it" (Caldwell I: 477). However, there is a hopeless and biologically deterministic naturalism in what von Hartmann concludes, one that is today politically and socially unpalatable for all excepted the hard-minded libertarians or the most cold-hearted, urban-rejecting, absolute-naturalistic environmentalist:

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*A social world order is to him nothing in itself—merely the ideal of the self-perfection of humanity. It is itself only a means to a further evolution, the furtherance of the real, objective, ends of the world-process. The end of the 'family' is by no means the welfare of its individual members, but the welfare of the 'community,' and the end of the community is not the welfare of its members but that of the province, and the end of the 'province' is not its welfare but that of the 'country,' and the end of the country is the welfare of 'mankind', and the end of mankind is "something that takes us altogether beyond this present world." Thus to Hartmann, neither in the happiness, nor in the culture and development, nor in the social perfection of humanity, can the ethical end be found. With his perception that the welfare of any state always seems to be in clashing conflict with the welfare of another state, we may associate a reflection regarding what he thinks of as the welfare of humanity as different from the welfare of the races and peoples and divisions of the human family. In support of his contention that the latter is different from the former, we may reflect upon the apparent obstacle, that is to be seen in the very nature of our 'environment' (the surface of this earth), to a general development of all races and peoples and families of mankind into one greater humanity. The last dream of democracy—a general world-wide civilization with comfort and culture for all—is impossible; for this reason, if for no other, that surface of our earth is not calculated to foster or sustain a general and uniform level of civilization. It has an environment (the 'temperate' or more favored regions) for only one favored or dominant race. In the language of a well-known thinker on social evolution, it has "but one general environment" and not several equally good environments. "Attempts to preserve lower types of men, or to bring them into organic relations with higher types, tend to make a society static, and thus check its progress." "The science of human progress must remain a study of the dominant race in its most favorable environment." In other words, every thing seems to point to the conclusion that humanity will some day exhaust its environment on the face of this planet, so that changes in the nature of the earth, or the transplanting of men and races to a different environment, will have become a fundamental necessity. Verily,*

*humanity has on this present earth 'no continuing city', whether for happiness, or culture, or general development (the three things that men by the logic of their nature inevitably tend to desire). (Caldwell I: 478-479)*

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Hartmann's ethic, for all its appearance of positivist social evolution, is framed in a metaphysic of cosmic development, absolute and mysterious (Caldwell II: 589-590). It is not merely unpalatable but untenable when, during the twentieth century, much of the Hegelian doctrines were philosophically rejected, even among contemporary religious philosophy which retains something of the providential progressivism from these German romantic schools of thought.

Hence, Anglo-American philosophy took a different set of directions on social philosophy. At the outbreak of World War I, Harry Overstreet, the chairman of Department of Philosophy and Psychology at City College of New York, wrote:

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*Modern philosophy in its regnant aspect is, for all its pride of universality, an exceedingly one-sided affair. It is essentially the outcome of the remarkable nineteenth-century development of the mathematical, physical, and biological sciences. Its "philosophical" function has consisted in subjecting the concepts employed by these sciences to an inspection more penetrating than could be given by the workers in the special fields. Thus where the physicist swiftly marshaled atoms and electrons, energies and matters, spaces and motions without critical thought of their wider implications, the philosopher, free of the stress of immediate experimental necessity, examined these concepts for the more far-reaching meaning which they held. For several generations now philosophy has concerned itself almost wholly with such concepts as cause, action, matter, mind, truth, mechanism, organism, number, class, infinity, objective, subjective. One need not doubt the true philosophical character of such concern; yet one may not escape the conviction that in restricting itself to these interests philosophy has fallen short of its adequate task. Indeed, among philosophers themselves there has been manifest of late the feeling that philosophy has lost much of its proper reach and power, that it has relinquished in somewhat woeful manner its ancient prerogative of "spectator of all time and all existence." Yet it would be unfair to blame philosophy or philosophers for this restriction of the scope of inquiry. Philosophy, like every other human enterprise, is, in main degree, the product of its time. Nay, more, if it is to be true to its scientific spirit, if it is to make no proud effort to build itself out of its own imaginings, but is to hold itself to the task of faithful, searching criticism of the dominant concepts of its day, philosophy may never depart very far from the spirit and interest of its particular age. Contemporary philosophy, in short, has,*

*without blame to itself, been one-sided because the scientific age just closing was itself one-sided (Overstreet 1914: 533)*

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These remarks of Harry Overstreet came from a paper in *The Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, sub-titled, “The Function and Scope of Social Philosophy”, and it is an interesting combination of the approach of social science, particularly economics as a ‘non-evaluative science’, and the humanities’ concept of ‘organism’. Overstreet stated: “Philosophy, like every other human enterprise, is, in main degree, the product of its time... The aim of the social philosopher is to get a whole view of social life... The task of the social philosopher, in all these matters, is to find the broader, the organic view...The first task of social philosophy, then, is to make an inventory of the master concepts employed by the social sciences and to arrange these in some manner of organic relationship.” (Overstreet: 533, 537, 539, 540).

The problem in the humanity’s ‘organism’ view might be the providential progressivism where persons foolishly put too much ethical weight upon the concept of ‘progress’ during the mid-twentieth century. However, Overstreet presented a much more naive and dangerous belief of the good – that the state or government were the arbiters of truth, although Overstreet expressed the view ambiguously:

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*Government, in short, exists wherever there is power to organize and direct life destinies. Preeminently the truth finders and the truth appliers are the government. But if this is so, citizenship takes on a far wider meaning, being related now not simply to the secondary functions of voting and legislating, but to the primary functions of truth discovery and application (Overstreet: 538).*

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Overstreet appears to be saying that citizens are ‘truth discoverers’ and act truthfully, but he stated clearly that government is the ‘truth finders’ and the ‘truth appliers’. The logic slides, such that citizens are not differentiated with the will of government. The Third Reich demonstrated that the logic does not work well for social philosophy.

In these types of social philosophy discussions third-way solutions, or triad logic, is often attempted. During the twentieth century, the concept of 'community' and communitarianism played this role between the problems from the libertarians and statist. A few years after Overstreet's paper, in the same journal, Morris Cohen, also a Professor of Philosophy at CCNY (1912-1938), wrote his piece, 'Communal Ghosts and Other Perils in Social Philosophy', warned of the third-way problem:

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*With regard to the nature of the community I can not claim any special knowledge; and not being ambitious to share the fate of Socrates I make no allusions to other people's knowledge... Some years before the war began to turn the center of gravity of our discussions from epistemology to sociology and politics I urged the philosophic fruitfulness and importance of social theory, and I have not changed my mind in this respect. But like all other things which are valuable social philosophy has its dangers which its candid friends will not hide or minimize.*

*The first, foremost, and all-inclusive danger is that, becoming absorbed in the passionate social problems of the day, we may forget philosophy altogether and become partisan journalists, propagandists, economists, reformists or politicians – anything but philosophers. I am not lacking in respect for the competent journalist, preacher or statesman; but philosophy has its own function distinct from all these; and we who are its official custodians must beware of the danger of being solicited by sentimental sympathy to abandon the hard path of philosophy for more popular pursuits. In these days of waning faith in philosophy the latter course may seem to some not a danger but rather a change devoutly to be wished.*

*They may put it in their own terminology by saying that philosophy ought to abandon the fruitless search for an impossibly impartial truth, to abandon its aloofness from the issues which divide and absorb our fellow citizens. It would' take us' far afield to defend on this occasion the value of pure or theoretic philosophy. Moreover, there is in this issue as in others an element of fundamental preference and faith which arguments alone cannot settle. Arguments at best point to human experiences. They can not compel faith in philosophy in those to whom its keen joys, and the zest of navigating alone the uncharted seas of being, are impossible or look thin and pale in comparison with the more voluminous comforts of being shoulder to shoulder with our fellow beings and having their approval reinforce our echoes of their sentiments. It is therefore merely an expression of legitimate and defensible – yea invincible – experience to assert that pure philosophy, the true love and fearless pursuit of fundamental truth for its own sake, is in itself one of the greatest blessings of human life, and, therefore, never to be entirely subordinated to the solution of social problems- whatever the words solution and social may mean. (Cohen 1919: 677, 678).*

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The point may appear unrelated to community, but what Cohen is saying is that, as the individual and the state has no clear direction in understanding the social philosophy, neither should it be expected that there is any community who can place similar demands upon the thinking. Charles Sanders Peirce's (1839-1914) triadic logic is useful for balancing out tensions but there is no putting that balance permanently upon any social institutions or communities, let alone, the monadic state or the dyadic individual. Pierce's formal semiotics was rooted in the social principle, with the first principle, the sole rule of reason, being, *to learn*; one needs to desire to learn and desire it without resting satisfied with that which one is inclined to think. That is difficult challenge for any individual, community, or state.

From 1920 there came a revolution in the field of social philosophy, once liberated in a fallibilistic epistemology, from the legacy of the early American Pragmatic philosophers, Charles Peirce, and William James. None of those philosophers' conclusions could be really harmonized but there was now a logical liberty, not to be constrained by traditional metaphysics. What was important was to see how the logic worked for imperfect-but-reasonable social conclusions. Delisle Burns in 1926 ('Practical Issues and Social Philosophy', *Journal of Philosophical Studies*) saw social philosophy as examining "the vast amount of new social experience which is to be found in the practical issues of political, economic, and cultural life". Almost immediately social philosophy constrained under the widening disciplinary fragmentation of the humanities and the social science. Social philosophy could be economics, the field of ethics, or politics with a sociological-turn. The year before Everett Goodhue had articulated 'Economics as a Social Philosophy' (*International Journal of Ethics*). As Henry Wright discussed in these same years (1926), there were two ideologies that was significantly shaping: behaviourism and applicable political science,

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*Ethical thought in English-speaking countries has been strongly affected for the past few years by two influences. One is the general concern over the application of ethical principles to problems of social and political organization which was a natural consequence of the war. The other is the recent dramatic swing of psychology away from the analysis and description of mental processes to an experimental study of behavior, in whose motivation and control ethics is profoundly interested. So powerful, indeed have been these two influences in English-speaking countries that the ethical theory of the present period is less interested in the rational grounds of moral judgment than in the interaction of the human individual with his natural and social environment. As a consequence, the boundaries between ethics and sociology, politics and economics seem not as well-defined and certainly are not as well-observed as formerly; much present-day thought on these subjects proceeds on the assumption that the philosophy of practice is fundamentally one field within which ethical, social, political, and economic theory represent merely differences of interest and emphasis.*

*The war has not simply directed attention to pressing problems of political and economic organization; it has led, at least in the countries now under consideration, to a widespread movement away from idealism in ethics and in political and social theory. This has been due in part to the belief prevalent in the war period that Hegelian idealism supplied a theoretical justification for the excesses of German nationalism, and in part to the spiritual exhaustion and disillusion of the post-war years. (Wright 1926: 627-628)*

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Traditional study of politics in the social philosophy did not cease, and indeed has never completely disappeared. In the very same year (1926) John Mackenzie argued for the vitality in the traditional concepts for social philosophy ('The Present Outlook in Social Philosophy', *Journal of Philosophical Studies*):

1. The Conception of Organic Unity;
2. The Group Mind;
3. The General Will;
4. The Common Good;
5. Co-operative Purpose;
6. Creation;
7. Leadership;
8. The Place of Imitation;
9. The Three-fold Commonwealth;
10. The Problem of Sovereignty;
11. Problems of Family; and
12. The Problem of International Unity

In 2020 ('now') Harvard philosopher, Michael Sandel, has produced a best-selling book and powerful social critique called *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?*

By the 1930s there was something of a reaction on the fragmentation of social philosophy into technical disciplines, without the approach of synthesis which had been the hallmark of both late nineteenth century idealism and positivism. In 1933 Hardy Hoover summed up well that reaction and a call for integrity, if not synthesis ('Social Philosophy--A Challenge', *International Journal of Ethics*):

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*In certain ages, we learn, philosophy was “barren.” This must mean that it produced few or no results, or that these results were of little practical use in or to the ages indicated. No one will deny to philosophy the right to be useful, if it can. A somewhat outmoded view held the philosopher to be the spectator of all time and all existence. With the advance of specialized knowledge, we are told to regard Leibnitz, Leonardo da Vinci, Aristotle, and Goethe as myriad-minded thinkers of ages, the comparative simplicity of which allowed, as this age does not, all-inclusive knowledge. This modern agnostic temper in the philosopher is seemingly supported by the present mystification of physicists and astronomers as to the nature of the physical universe. These disciplines being baffled, metaphysics, which in part at least evaluates the main findings of science, must be baffled too. Thus philosophers who specialize in, let us say, mathematical logic, epistemology, neo-scholasticism, English empiricism, and so on, are individually and collectively, allowed what seems to be the only and proper accolade of philosophy. The age seemed to tell them, “Specialize, young men,” and they did.*

*Where are the technical philosophers who have chosen, for their province, world problems, that is to say, those of the people of this globe? These thinkers, true, might saddle philosophy with the onus of being directly, socially useful, but they would be right in seeing, as against the usual demurrer made here by philosophers, that the integration of these world-problems is the proper task of the philosopher...(Hoover 1933: 205).*

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One solution to bring social philosophy back to synthesis was and investment in historiography. Charles Witse made such an attempt in 1935 in a paper called, ‘History as Social Philosophy’ (*International Journal of Ethics*). 46(1), 49-63. According to Wiltse: “It is history which supplies the empirical data of life in society; social philosophy which orders this data, postulates from it principles of interpretation, makes of it an instrument for present use and future gain. In this sense, social philosophy may be identified with the philosophy of history. For history as intimately depends on social thought.” That assessment is not accurate when his history does not simply supply data but is also one of its interpreters.

In the 1930s and 1940s the need for social philosophy as a holistic enterprise was again emerging. Of particular concern was that the approach of the social science was failing, both in disciplinary sense of a unified field, and in the understanding of science as a social presence or reality. At the same year (1935) that Charles Witse spoke of history, J. L. Stocks delivered his Presidential Address for the Aristotelian Society, entitled, ‘The Need for a Social Philosophy’:

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*...The point is simple and probably obvious; some profound disturbance of the social and intellectual climate is required to bring philosophy into general attention; at other times it remains in the background, respected perhaps, but ignored by those who manage the affairs of men. These trite reflections have a certain actuality. For we are at the moment living through a period of profound disorder and disturbance; and if there is any truth in what has been said, these disturbances should have produced or be producing an increased demand for the services of the philosopher in the regions affected by the disturbance, if not an unusual outburst of philosophical speculation in matters relevant to it. ...*

*It is, in fact, difficult to point to any considerable portion of the field of thought and conduct which is wholly untouched by the radical scepticism and instability characteristic of the time through which we are passing. Everywhere is fluidity, insecurity, lack of final authority and of untroubled certainty. Perhaps one is inclined in retrospect to exaggerate the complacency and stability of the late nineteenth century. But though there were problems then, and though pessimistic observers of politics, like Leonard Hobhouse, saw the presage of disaster to democracy in the hectic imperialism of the Boer War, and acute interpreters of scientific thought, like James Ward, saw signs of growing weakness in the imposing façade of scientific orthodoxy, yet they were far from carrying everyone with them; and even they must have been surprised before they died at the scope of the revolutions which they saw in progress round them. (Stocks 1935: 3)*

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Nevertheless, the philosophy of science had become an important field in the late 1940s in the shadow of the atomic mushroom cloud and the fears embedded in ‘the technological age’. Already in 1943 H.G. Schrickel was asking the critical questions in a paper called, ‘Philosophy of Science and Social Philosophy’ (*Philosophy of Science*). Among a series of questions of significance for social scientists, Schrickel asked, “how can we synthesize scientific data on human relations so that this knowledge can be applied to the solution of current social problems?” His answer was the tasks of constructive social philosophy, and he contrasted that school of thought with ‘critical social philosophy’, which Schrickel reduced to conceptual analysis. He brought the two together by stating, “Social philosophizing is evaluative and factual thinking about which utilizes scientific and other logical methods in its search for social facts and values and an adequate societal design for living.” How well that is balanced is contentious. Most persons do not think in terms of ‘societal design for living’ and rather turn to other existential terms (what life would be if a person were not an architect).

A new school of social philosophy emerged Post-World War II. Looking back nearly 30 years, from the standpoint of 1967, Nicholas Haines, in a paper called ‘Philosophy as Social Philosophy’ (*Philosophy*) described the history:

*Just before the second world war, in a paper read to the British Association, Morris Ginsberg talked about the failure of social philosophy and the social sciences to work together in the universities 'toward the rational ordering of society'. Some time after the war Alexander Macbeath complained to British sociologists of his own vain search for a social philosopher who could teach in a course on public administration. Then a few years later A. E. Teale told an inter-professional conference at Keele that people who teach and train teachers, those who train social workers of all kinds, were disappointed when philosophers professed themselves unable to help those who had to*

*'equip students with the skill to change prevailing moral attitudes and standards'.*

*Each of these remarks was addressed to professional philosophy obliquely. Macbeath was assured by the philosophers he consulted that they were 'not now training' social philosophers in his sense. Teale's disappointment was provoked by a paper read by P. E. Nowell-Smith in which the latter claimed that logic was 'in a sense' the 'whole of philosophy'. In both cases the professionals turned away appeals for help. On the other hand, in this 'proposed university' such refusals by professional philosophers to get involved in social action might seem acceptable. For we are more exposed to temptation and attack than in older universities where the schools are buttressed by other, more-or-less friendly, disciplines equally opaque to commerce, social struggle and the demands of the gross national product. ...*

*Personally, I believe that cohabitation with technologists (on the one side), psychologists and social scientists (on the other) may prove as fruitful as it must, to some, appear unseemly. For since philosophy as I understand it is a form of social life with claims upon all other forms our critics are right to complain if they find professional philosophers treating social problems with indifference. On the other hand we are right to welcome a teaching situation which if it does nothing else puts us constantly in mind of our social objects. As for the tradition called 'social philosophy', in which I have a special interest, this has no excuse to persist without direct, exclusive and effective interest in social problems. Its end, as Aristotle said of politics, is not knowledge but action.*

*I propose now to say how I understand social philosophy and then to relate this to what has just been said about philosophy generally. The primary aim is to promote thought about the arrangement of philosophical studies as well as about methods in teaching. In doing this we can hardly help but reflect on the significance of philosophy generally in contemporary society. (Haines 1967: 37)*

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Haines had provided a sensible way forward for social philosophy: multi-disciplinary engaged on social issues but technically focused in teaching the one discipline.

Unfortunately, the post-war mid-century had brought a hardening of the division between the humanities and the social science. Social philosophy was pulled in two directions: the aesthetic and the technology. There was a tendency to research in either one direction. For example, in 1947, Manuel Olguin was “mainly concerned with the problem of the relations between social philosophy and literature, taking the term ‘relations’ both in a particular or historical sense and from a more general or philosophic view point.” Alexander Macbeath described the problem for social philosophy in 1955:

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*...Thus, what specialists see they see clearly, but they don't see it in its proper perspective and therefore the conclusions at which they arrive are apt to be one-sided, only partially true. If they regard these conclusions as the whole truth or even the only important truth about the situation they fall into the error of mistaking a partial or half truth for the whole truth, and that is the most dangerous form of error, for the element of truth in the partial view gives it plausibility. Specialists are so prone to commit this mistake that we might well call it the specialist's fallacy. Today we live in an age of specialists, an age in which the condition of success, whether in the theoretical or the practical sphere, is concentration, narrowing one's range, and therefore we are all liable to commit the specialist's fallacy. Accordingly we tend to be lop-sided individuals, over- developed on one side, under-developed on others, our views on life distorted, one-sided, out of focus. (Macbeath 1955: 99-100)*

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Increasingly, though, social philosophy became a thematic discourse in the study of politics, if not the new discipline of ‘political science’. A good example is Frank Knight in 1959, who in ‘The Social Philosophy and Institutions of the West’ (*Philosophy East and West*), discussed the theme problem of “intelligent action, chiefly group-action, and chiefly political action (by a sovereign State but on internal problems) and centering on economic policy.”

In the 1960s there came a view that the discipline of sociology had transcended social philosophy and the only work for the philosophers was conceptual analysis as a handmaiden for the sociologist. In 1965 Donald Hodge was concerned about the direction for social philosophy (‘And the Withering Away of Social Philosophy’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*):

*...the actual death of political philosophy, both as a guide to conduct and as a social metaphysic, is about as imminent in our time as the withering away of the State. There is no escaping the fact that statesmen, lawyers, administrators and citizens in general expect from social philosophers answers to questions that transcend the limits of human knowledge, but there is reason to believe that they will continue asking them within the foreseeable future. If professional philosophers abdicate their once cherished position as counsellors to kings, then in all likelihood others less wise will seize the opportunity to take their place, or, otherwise, philosophers themselves will give advice in an ex-officio capacity. It is also difficult to relinquish the notion that philosophers, by virtue of being wise, are qualified to rule over the world of intellect. Why, then, has social philosophy become so impoverished that, having once been queen, it is now little more than a chambermaid of the social sciences?*

*At least two answers suggest themselves. Social problems in our time have become, too complex and too serious in their consequences to be adequately treated by philosophers. By far the greatest threat to, social philosophy is from sociology and sociologists, who are better equipped by their practical training in the field, research methods and the like, to pass judgment on social, issues. C. Wright Mills has popularized the notion that the problems of sociology, like those of classical social philosophy, are directly relevant to urgent public issues and insist human troubles. Furthermore, he argues that sociologists have inherited the mantle of classic social analysis in surmounting the boundaries of academic disciplines: "In their works [the classic sociologists] what are now called political science,, social psychology, economics, anthropology and sociology are all used - and integrated so as to form a master view of the structure of society in all its realms, the mechanics of history in all their ramifications, and the roles of individuals in a great variety of their psychological nuances." In addition to the normative and metaphysical tasks of social philosophy, sociology has also appropriated its function as a metascience, i.e., a philosophy of the social sciences. ... (Hodge 1965: 463-464)*

By the 1970s, sociologists and philosophers (or some leading thinkers among them) were realising the problem of the technological agenda within the disciplines. The technicians were making themselves more irrelevant, divorce from Peter Berger's 'Social Reality'. In 1972 D.W. Gotshalk was pointing to the grounding work of John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (Harvard, 1972) as an important counterpoint to the technology agenda, as the significant return to moral theory ('Social Philosophy', *Journal of Thought*). Gotshalk had asked:

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*...But does a social technology ever operate without a theoretical base, good or bad, assumed or explicit? Indeed, can it do so successfully? What Hitler ordered in Germany, Mussolini in Italy, Stalin in Russia, was social technology. Each dictator had court procedures set up, laws enacted and enforced, individual and institutional energies channelled into certain grooves. But their social technology operated from a base in social philosophy, a theory of society, a bad one to be sure, and this gave it point, influence, and effective direction.*

*It may be said that we already have a social philosophy, and a good one. The corrections of our social processes just mentioned as recognized necessities testifies to that. Now, it may be that we have an intuitive version of a social philosophy. ... (Gotshalk 1972: 144)*

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Indeed, the problem of social technology became the research topics for a number of social philosophers. In 1987 Paul Durbin wrote a paper called, 'Toward a Social Philosophy of Research and Development' (*Revue Internationale De Philosophie*). In the paper Durbin took the R&D problem and examined in the frames of the American Pragmatists — William James, George Herbert Mead, and John Dewey, as well as in the perspectives of the Marxian and the liberal Aristotelian-Thomistic views. While research methods were fragmenting across the universities, strangely the new social revolution in learning found commonality between diverse ideologies.

The last decade has seen a focus on social philosophy and its relationship to social theory, particularly of the schools of critical theory and pragmatism. Theory in the last half century, since 1970, has been the great locate of the commonality that brings together alliances between participants from different intellectual ideologies; and opposition to anti-intellectual forces which wish to isolate problems on one side of politics. The aim is not a totalising all-in approach for social philosophy, but to find common ground, albeit in technical debates. Roberta Frega's 2014 paper, 'Between Pragmatism and Critical Theory: Social Philosophy Today' (*Human Studies*) is a good example:

*This paper aims at renovating the prospects for social philosophy through a confrontation between pragmatism and critical theory. In particular, it contends that the resources of pragmatism for advancing a project of emancipatory social philosophy have so far been neglected. After contrasting the two major traditions in social philosophy—the analytical and the critical—I proceed to outline the main traits of a pragmatist social philosophy. By inscribing pragmatism within the tradition of social philosophy, my aim is to promote a new understanding of pragmatism as one of the central Euro-American traditions in social and political philosophy, deserving to be on an equal footing with critical theory and political liberalism. And, furthermore, one whose critical and radical force may be of great help in the wake of the dismissal of the metaphysical certainties upon which the critical program of social philosophy had once set its hopes of social emancipation. (Frega 2014: Abstract, 57)*

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Emmanuel Renault's 2017 paper, 'From ["Political Ethics"] to ["Social Philosophy"]: The Need for Social Theory' (*Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*), also is a good example of the contemporary work, providing a generic account of John Dewey's project of social philosophy. Renault points out that: "Dewey began lecturing on social philosophy when he became aware that society cannot be considered as a social organism and that a philosophical approach to social problems should bring various social sciences into alignment. As a result, social philosophy should be grounded not only in a social psychology, but also in a social theory."

Finally, in the last decade, there are been a focus on the postmodernist critique of progressivism. While taking on-board the truths of the critique, there is now a more nuanced evaluation. Karen Momdjan asked), 'Does Current Social Philosophy Develop Progressively?' (*Metaphilosophy*, 2013). The answer is not straightforward:

*This article begins with clarification of the notion of progress. The author believes that it is possible to consider progress objectively, if by progress we understand a positive change in the effectiveness of something. He mentions two types of progress: progress of improvement and progress of augmentation. He then distinguishes evaluative from reflective philosophy. Evaluative philosophy gives answers to the second and third of Kant's famous three questions; reflective philosophy answers the first, dealing with the limits of human knowledge. Progress in evaluative philosophy takes the form of augmentation. But in reflective philosophy it could take the form of improvement. The author believes, however, that it is not an easy task to improve contemporary social philosophy. Three main obstacles are: the "anthropological turn" in philosophy, the challenge of postmodernism, and the turning of social philosophy into a kind of useful knowledge. (Momdjan 2013: Abstract, 19).*

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The sweeping and preliminary formal history of social philosophy provides the twists and turns in how the field has been understood over time. A better structure, philosophically, is to go to the four allied fields of philosophical enquiry: social ontology, social epistemology, social institutions, and the ethical enquiry into social networking. These sub-fields form an internal scaffolding, within the scope of social philosophy. In order not to stray too far into the depth of wider considerations, beyond understanding the scope of social philosophy, I will refer to the Stanford entries, and only a little more in the vast literature.

## Social Ontology

Brian Epstein, in his Stanford entry (2018), stated that “Social ontology is the study of the nature and properties of the social world”. Many of the questions asked here are the same questions seen in the social philosophy of traditional studies in politics:

- Do social groups exist at all? If so, what sorts of entities are they, and how are they created?
- Is a social group distinct from the collection of people who are its members, and if so, how is it different?
- What sorts of properties do social groups have?
- Can they have beliefs or intentions?
- Can they perform actions? And if so, what does it take for a group to believe, intend, or act?

These are questions described by John Mackenzie in 1926 as ‘The Group Mind’. Other entities investigated in social ontology include money, corporations, institutions, property, social classes, races, genders, artifacts, artworks, language, and law.

These questions pertain to the idea or concept of constituents, or building blocks, of social things in general. The theories are argued then from different stances within the ontology. There are theories which argue that social entities are built out of the psychological states of individual people, while others argue that they are built out of actions, and yet others that they are built out of practices. Or theorists can deny that a distinction can even be made between the social and the non-social. Once the constituents are identified, then there are questions on pattern or design. How are social categories are constructed or set up? Are social categories and kinds produced by our attitudes? By our language? Are they produced by causal patterns? And is there just one-way social categories are set up, or are there many varieties of social construction?

## Social Epistemology

Like ontology, epistemology is an ancient field of enquiry. The difference is that ontology has a much longer history in discussing social relations. Alvin Goldman and Cailin O'Connor in their very recent Stanford entry (2019) only defines social epistemology as that which “seeks to redress this imbalance [heavily individualistic in focus in traditional epistemology] by investigating the epistemic effects of social interactions and social systems.” Much of what they discuss in the entry is bring the epistemic conditions to the discussion of ‘The Group Mind’, as framed in the political studies discourse; and, specifically, on the proper functioning of democratic societies.

Although an ancient discourse, social epistemology has only a formal history from the 1980s, about forty years. Steve Fuller, in 1996, described the history as follows:

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*Social epistemology first appeared as the name of a proposal for making librarianship more “scientific” by having facts about the production, distribution, and utilization of knowledge impinge more directly on the organization of libraries (De Mey 1982, pp. 111-12). Writing three decades ago, Jesse Shera's (1965) call for cataloguing schemes that reflect contemporary divisions in the knowledge enterprise and his sensitivity to the material dimensions of knowledge growth were roughly contemporaneous with Machlup (1962) on the “economics of knowledge” and presaged the more broadly gauged Rescher (1979) on “cognitive systematization.” Though ignorant of Shera's precedent, the first philosophical book explicitly devoted to “social epistemology” (Fuller 1988) had largely this orientation, but its theoretical basis was in recent philosophy, history, and sociology of science.*

*Contrary to expectations, social epistemology has yet to find much favor in sociology, including most sociology of science. Five rather different reasons may be offered. (Fuller 1996: 149)*

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Fuller goes to explain the historical epistemic problems in sociology, which are circling back to philosophy.

Alvin Goldman has become a clear leader in the field of Social Epistemology. In 1999 Goldman made the following statement in article for *Crítica: Revista Hispanoamericana De Filosofía*:

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*Epistemology has historically focused on individual inquirers conducting their private intellectual affairs independently of one another. As a descriptive matter, however, what people believe and know is largely a function of their community and culture, narrowly or broadly construed. Most of what we believe is influenced, directly or indirectly, by the utterances and writings of others. So social epistemology deserves at least equal standing alongside the individual sector of epistemology. **I do not challenge the integrity or propriety of individual epistemology.** I am prepared to concede that much of our perceptual knowledge, memorial knowledge, and introspective knowledge is achieved on a purely individualistic basis. But given the weight and significance of social causes for a very large sector of our beliefs, these social causes should receive a much larger proportion of epistemological attention than they have traditionally received. Social factors play an increasingly important role in current theories of semantical concepts, types of theories that lie outside the scope of the current essay. A rising interest in social factors is also visible in the recent epistemological literature, but as yet there is no consensus on how the field of social epistemology should be constructed or conceived. (Goldman 1999: 3-4)*

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Where I have added the emphasis in the statement, Goldman's key point, meant that 'Synthesis' became possible in the social epistemological research. By 1999 several philosophers had already moved in this direction. Steve Fuller had in a 1987 paper, 'On Regulating What Is Known: A Way to Social Epistemology' (Synthese), said his...

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*...paper lays the groundwork for normative-yet-naturalistic social epistemology. I start by presenting two scenarios for the history of epistemology since Kant, one in which social epistemology is the natural outcome and the other in which it represents a not entirely satisfactory break with classical theories of knowledge. Next I argue that the current trend toward "naturalizing" epistemology threatens to destroy the distinctiveness of the sociological approach by presuming that it complements standard psychological and historical approaches. I then try to reassert, in Comtean fashion, the epistemologist's credentials in regulating knowledge production. Finally, I consider how social epistemology may have something exciting and relevant to say about contemporary debates in the theory of knowledge. (Fuller 1987: Abstract)*

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The idea of the epistemologist regulating knowledge production appears to prevent a negative interpretation of historicism. Historicism has come to mean two different 'ideologies': the first is a positive view that all we know *in* or *of* knowledge is history – there is no stepping out of the limits of history to understand. The negative view is to make knowledge production *only* history. In this view all other disciplinary perspectives are

negated, for a narrow view that 'knowing' is only the production of historical interpretation. Fuller is right. 'Knowing' is killed if there are no epistemic principles.

Goldman had been investigating a synergy, in the mid-1990s, between 'Interpersonality and Epistemic Principles'. It reflects the same direction that Queensland philosopher, Jack McKinney, took in his work, *The Structure of Modern Thought* (1971). Goldman's synthesis was the 'argumentation' from the sociology of knowledge and 'speech act' from analytical philosophy of language:

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*...the paradigm of a good argument is a sound argument.*

*The foregoing construes an argument as a set of sentences or propositions, abstractly considered. In another sense of 'argument', however, an argument is a complex speech act in which a speaker presents a thesis to a listener or audience, and defends this thesis with reasons or premises. More precisely, such a speech act by a single speaker is a **monolectical** argument. A **dialectical** argument is a series of speech acts in which two (or more) speakers successively defend conflicting positions, each citing premises in support of their position. Whether monolectical or dialectical, this is an interpersonal or social sense of 'argument', quite different from the abstract sense; and it seems likely that criteria or norms of goodness for this sense of 'argument' differ from the criteria cited above. This social sense of 'argument' is what I shall call **argumentation**, and it is the topic of the present paper. People can argue over what to **do** (practical argumentation) as well as over what to **believe** or **disbelieve** (theoretical, or factual, argumentation). The present discussion is confined to the latter topic. (Goldman 1994: 27).*

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Recently, Tim Kenyon had identify the challenge in **interpersonality**, which from the work of McKinney represents a synthesis between cognitive sociology and traditional epistemic principles. The problem which might arise comes from a certain application of the social epistemology that encourages fragmentation, or what Kenyon calls...

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*False polarization (FP) is an interpersonal bias on judgement, the effect of which is to lead people in contexts of disagreement to overestimate the differences between their respective views. I propose to treat FP as a problem of applied social epistemology—a barrier to reliable belief-formation in certain social domains—and to ask how best one may debias for FP. This inquiry leads more generally into questions about effective debiasing strategies; on this front, considerable empirical evidence suggests that intuitively attractive strategies for debiasing are not very effective, while more effective strategies are neither intuitive nor likely to be easily implemented. The supports for more effective debiasing seem either to be inherently social and cooperative, or at least to presuppose social efforts to create physical or decision-making infrastructure for mitigating bias. The upshot, I argue, is that becoming a less biased epistemic agent is a thoroughly socialized project. (Kenyon 2014: Abstract)*

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Much of this direction would go internally to consciousness and the consciousness of perceived others. It is informative but not complete and the external direction has to also be examined. Questions of realism are never too far, and that is shaped by the dual consideration of ‘natural reality’ and ‘social reality’. That is certainly is a false polarisation, but convenient categories to find synthesis. Goldman thought he had a satisfactory answer in the mid-1990:

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*I start from the familiar assumption that epistemology centers on belief and the further assumption that belief ‘aims’ at truth and error avoidance. As John Searle puts it, belief is a state that has a “mind-to- world fit”: If it fails to be true of the world, it needs to be changed. A detailed theory and to what extent, belief aims at truth is not yet available. I shall make remarks about this in due course, though not all problems will be since this would take us too far into philosophy of mind. I’ll proceed on the assumption that belief aims at truth and error avoidance, where truth and falsity are construed in a “realist” fashion. (Goldman 1995: 171-172).*

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That does get to some place in the social epistemology, but it comes up with further problems when the challenges of rationality are thrown into the equation. Nearly two decades later, Conor Mayo-Wilson, Kevin Zollman and David Danks explained the internal and external dilemma between individuals and social groups for rationality:

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*Several philosophers of science have argued that epistemically rational individuals might form epistemically irrational groups and that, conversely, rational groups might be composed of irrational individuals. We call the conjunction of these two claims the Independence Thesis, as they entail that methodological prescriptions for scientific communities and those for individual scientists are logically independent. We defend the inconsistency thesis by characterizing four criteria for epistemic rationality and then proving that, under said criteria, individuals will be judged rational when groups are not and vice versa. We then explain the implications of our results for descriptive history of science and normative epistemology (Mayo-Wilson, Zollman and Danks 2011: Abstract, 653)*

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The 'four criteria for epistemic rationality' referred to are theorems and there is a potential for misapplication. The analysis here is of the rationality of scientific models in the discourse between individuals and social groups, as philosophy of science. However, not all truth or reasoning can be of the 'model kind'.

Discussions on science and rationality raises question of 'rational authority'. In the current political sociology of 'Covid and the President Trump' we have the situation where the rational authority of science can be easily dismissed in social power. This was a problem that Miranda Fricker explored, back in 1998, in a reasoned synthesis of rational authority and social power for social epistemology:

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*This paper explores the relation between rational authority and social power, proceeding by way of a philosophical genealogy derived from Edward Craig's **Knowledge and the State of Nature**. The position advocated avoids the errors both of the 'traditionalist' (who regards the socio-political as irrelevant to epistemology) and of the 'reductivist' (who regards reason as just another form of social power). The argument is that a norm of credibility governs epistemic practice in the state of nature, which, when socially manifested, is likely to imitate the structures of social power. A phenomenon of epistemic injustice is explained, and the politicizing implication for epistemology educed. (Fricker 1998: Abstract, 159)*

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By the new century research topics of 'applied social epistemology' were opening up. Goldman had been continuing the foundations of a democratic social epistemology. What was at stake is what significantly a stake today:

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*Knowledge and the exercise of cognitive capacities play central roles in democracy. Ignorance defeats democratic government and undermines its democratic credentials. When many citizens are ignorant of what is going on in their society, the ideals of democracy are betrayed, or so I shall argue. Alvin Goldman's program of veritistic social epistemology directs us to study the kinds of institutions that efficiently bring about true beliefs in citizens relevant to the purposes people pursue. (Christiano 2001: 67)*

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This is the assessment of Thomas Christiano who foresaw that more was needed to protect democracy in epistemic principles:

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*I will argue that Goldman's conception of what citizens ought to know is a part of the right answer. I argue that citizens ought to have moral knowledge in an optimally functioning democracy in addition to the knowledge Goldman requires. Furthermore, I argue that democratic social epistemology should be concerned with more than true belief; in some cases, democratic norms require that citizens be in possession of a more robust kind of knowledge that includes the element of justification. And I argue that a democratic social epistemology should describe circumstances under which citizens have equal access to certain kinds of knowledge whether they use it or not. So the purpose of the paper is to argue that the class of true beliefs that citizens ought to have for optimal democratic functioning must be expanded and it argues that optimal democratic functioning requires that the class of epistemic states citizens ought to have, include, in addition to true beliefs, justifications for at least some true beliefs as well as equal and adequate access to certain kinds of knowledge. Finally, I suggest that in some cases, the kind of knowledge Goldman describes may not even be a necessary condition of optimal democratic functioning. (Christiano 2001: 68).*

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Few educated persons would disagree, so what is the conflict? Where is the opposition? The conflict opposition is in the tradition of rhetoric, the art of persuasion which has little concern about 'false belief', and only concerned for the appearance of truth. Allen Buchanan (2004) did well to explain the real danger and the prudential risk in this approach:

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*Socially inculcated false beliefs can not only put one at moral risk, they can also endanger one's well-being – they can put one at what I shall call **prudential** risk. False beliefs about an international Jewish conspiracy, about the inherent superiority and imperial destiny of the German nation and the infallibility of the Führer helped motivate Germans to support policies that resulted in their own deaths by the millions, and the destruction and division of their country.*

*The moral and prudential risks of socially inculcated false beliefs are exacerbated by the systematic nature of the cognitive distortion. A person brought up in a racist society typically not only absorbs an interwoven set of false beliefs about the natural characteristics of blacks (or Jews, and so on), but also learns epistemic vices that make it hard for him to come to see the falsity of these beliefs. For example, when a child, who has been taught that blacks are intellectually inferior, encounters an obviously highly intelligent black person, he may be told that the latter “must have some white blood.” Along with substantive false beliefs, the racist (like the anti-Semite and the sexist) learns strategies for overcoming cognitive dissonance and for retaining those false beliefs in the face of disconfirming evidence. (Buchanan 2004: 96).*

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This is where appearance or aesthetics judgement goes wrong, as Jon Robson explained six years ago:

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*How do we form aesthetic judgements? And how should we do so? According to a very prominent tradition in aesthetics it would be wrong to form our aesthetic judgements about a particular object on the basis of anything other than first-hand acquaintance with the object itself (or some very close surrogate) and, in particular, it would be wrong to form such judgements merely on the basis of testimony. Further this tradition presupposes that our actual practice of forming aesthetic judgements typically meets, or at least approximates, this ideal. In this paper I target this descriptive claim and argue—by appeal to some empirical work concerning belief polarization and echo chambers in aesthetics—that our actual practice of forming aesthetic judgements is heavily dependent on social sources such as testimony. I then briefly consider what normative implications this descriptive claim may have. (Robson 2014: Abstract).*

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It raises questions of trust. What we cannot trust epistemically is what Harry G. Frankfurt (2005) first described as ‘bullshit’. Joshua Wakeham recently has extended this idea into social epistemology:

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*Bullshit is a widely recognized problem. While philosophy has given the topic some consideration, the analysis it offers is limited by an individualistic understanding of knowledge and epistemology. This article reframes bullshit as a problem of social epistemology, drawing on philosophical work on social epistemology as well as related research in psychology and the sociology of knowledge to explore the problem of epistemic vigilance. The article then draws on interactional sociology as well as Glaeser's recent work on understanding and institutions to delineate those social forces that undermine the task of epistemic vigilance. The article then examines several different types of bullshit in light of this tension between the individual pragmatic need to have true beliefs and the social pragmatic need to get along. (Wakeham 2017: 15)*

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Considering the survey of the literature described on social epistemology, we arrive at the year 2020 to a highly practical and relevant understanding, what Mark Navin articulated in 2013:

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*Recent increases in the rates of parental refusal of routine childhood vaccination have eroded many countries' "herd immunity" to communicable diseases. Some parents who refuse routine childhood vaccines do so because they deny the mainstream medical consensus that vaccines are safe and effective. I argue that one reason these vaccine denials disagree with vaccine proponents about the reasons in favor of vaccination is because they also disagree about the sorts of practices that are conducive to good reasoning about healthcare choices. Vaccine denials allocate epistemic authority more democratically than do mainstream medical professionals. They also sometimes make truth ascriptions for nonepistemic reasons, fail to recognize legitimate differences in expertise and competence, and seek uncritical affirmation of their existing beliefs. By focusing on the different epistemic values and practices of vaccine denials and mainstream medical professionals, I locate my discussion of vaccine denialism within broader debates about rationality. Furthermore, I argue that gender inequality and gendered conceptions of reason are important parts of the explanation of vaccine denialism. Accordingly, I draw upon feminist work—primarily feminist social epistemology—to help explain and evaluate this form of vaccine refusal. (Navin 2013: Abstract, 241).*

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I disagree with Navin's view that democratic undermining of public health rational authority is an epistemic virtue; his attempt at picking out the 'speck' of epistemic vice in the eye of the medical establishment does not allow one to see the 'log' of epistemic vice. In saying that vaccine denier communities/individuals "make truth ascriptions for nonepistemic reasons",

is to infer an argument that one is legitimate in that vaccine denialists fragment truths between their passions for their children and public health which includes the welfare for their children. It is not a consistent logic nor does it enable social cohesion for the common good.

## Social Institutions

Discussions in social philosophy often turn to the rational authority of institutions, as we have seen in the last section. In his recent Stanford entry (2019) Seumas Miller struggles to provide a comprehensive definition for the term, 'social institution'; [it] "is somewhat unclear both in ordinary language and in the philosophical literature." What Miller is able to do is gather the perspectives of leading social philosophers on a definition:

- Jonathan Turner (1997: 6): "a complex of positions, roles, norms and values lodged in particular types of social structures and organising relatively stable patterns of human activity with respect to fundamental problems in producing life-sustaining resources, in reproducing individuals, and in sustaining viable societal structures within a given environment."  
Anthony Giddens (1984: 24): "Institutions by definition are the more enduring features of social life."
- Rom Harre (1979: 98): "An institution was defined as an interlocking double-structure of persons-as-role-holders or office-bearers and the like, and of social practices involving both expressive and practical aims and outcomes."

However, many theories come across in the way institutions are seen, for example, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, John Searle and David Lewis. The philosophical literature on social institutions raises and examines different set of questions, such as individualist theories of social institutions based on rational choice theory, notions of coordination equilibria, collective acceptance theories of social institutions, and the teleological account of social institutions. However, Miller sees the issues of agency brings to the subject of social institutions far more significant questions, and I would agree. These are questions of:

- In what sense, if any, are institutions agents (French 1984; List and Pettit (2011); Tollefsen 2015; Epstein 2015)?
- Is there an inconsistency between the autonomy (or alleged autonomy) of individual human agents, on the one hand, and the ubiquity and pervasive influence of institutions on individual character and behaviour, on the other (Giddens 1984; Bhaskar 1979)?

From my own research I see three concept which work between the agency of the individual and social institutions:

- Obligation
- Responsible Belief
- Cultural Power

Bernard Williams makes a distinction between ordinary obligations and moral obligations. The difference is that the latter is absolute in its obliging demands, and usually emanating from social institutions. Ordinary obligations do not have such onerous demands, a Kantian sense of 'duty', and are connected to a person's ordinary passions. One way to see ordinary obligations involving social institutions is those planning for the future with sufficient care. This is what I read in the 2014 article of *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* from Elizabeth Victor and Laura Guidry-Grimes:

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*We argue that we have obligations to future people that are similar in kind to obligations we have to current people. Modifying Michael Bratman's account, we argue that as planning agents we must plan for the future to act practically in the present. Because our autonomy and selfhood are relational by nature, those plans will involve building affiliative bonds and caring for others. We conclude by grounding responsibility to future others by the way we plan through our social institutions. Our account fills out the story of responsibility to future generations by referring only to ourselves, our practical identities, and practical reason. (Victor and Guidry-Grimes 2014: Abstract, 122)*

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The relationship of the individual and social institution involved, not only beliefs, but beliefs where responsibility must be taken. René van Woudenberg (2009) described the challenge this way:

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*The idea that we can properly be held responsible for what we believe underlies large stretches of our social and institutional life; without that idea in place, social and institutional life would be unthinkable, and more importantly, it would stumble and fall. At the same time, philosophers have argued that this idea is strange, puzzling, beyond belief, false, meaningless or at any rate defective. (Van Woudenberg 2009: Abstract).*

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René van Woudenberg introduces what she calls, “deontological epistemic expressions”, i.e. expressions in which deontological and epistemological notions (both broadly construed) are combined; examples are ‘obligation to believe’, ‘not permitted to forget’, ‘right to know’. The ubiquitous use of these expressions, van Woudenberg argues, is linguistic evidence for the claim that the contested idea indeed pervades our social life. The challenge is that linguistic evidence can be frail and misleading. Van Woudenberg puts the case that it may not be permitted to conclude from the ubiquitous use of deontological epistemic expressions that there really are doxastic obligations (and hence doxastic responsibilities). This is important because it provides a measure for true responsible belief from social institutions, institutions of education and law.

The existentialist-type critique we get from Williams or van Woudenberg are not with criticisms from other directions. The most troubling come from those who maximize on cultural power. This is troubling not for the strength of epistemic claims, but the way cultural power whitewashes the individual agency out. Morse Peckham, in his book, *Explanation and Power: The Control of Human Behavior* (1979), explains the challenge well:

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*For human beings, the world consists of signs, and it is impossible for human beings to consider the world, or themselves, from a metasemiotically point of view or position. The world is an immense tapestry of innumerable threads, emerging and disappearing in the presentation and evanishment of indefinitely innumerable designs, and human beings themselves form some of those same threads and patterns. We are figures in the tapestry we observe, and respond to, and manipulate. The old notion that the world is an illusion is sound, for no sign (configuration) dictates our responses. But it is sound only up to a point... (Peckham 1979: 155)*

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Peckham’s solution is to see the individual as a conjunctive category, one which subsumes a set of all members of the individual identity. As a technical argument, it may or may not work, but the argument does point to an important truth, which is, that it is normative that social institutions are members of the category we recognised as personal identity. Not only are persons subsumed by social institutions, but social institutions are subsumed by persons.

## Social Networking and Ethics

Shannon Vallor, in 2016, introduced and composed the entry for “Social Networking and Ethics”. No topic is likely to top the list in social philosophy than this one. As Vallor said, “ In the first decade of the 21st century, new media technologies for social networking such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and YouTube began to transform the social, political and informational practices of individuals and institutions across the globe, inviting a philosophical response from the community of applied ethicists and philosophers of technology.” Vallor goes on to describe the history and working definition of social networking services (hereafter referred to as SNS) and identifies the primary ethical topic areas around which philosophical reflections on SNS have, to date, converged:

- privacy;
- identity and community;
- friendship, virtue and the good life;
- democracy and the public sphere; and
- cybercrime.

There are other issues of SNS and ethics are explored in the literature. Leigh A. Clark and Sherry J. Roberts in the *Journal of Business Ethics* explore, ‘Employer’s Use of Social Networking Sites: A Socially Irresponsible Practice’ (2010),..

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*The Internet has drastically changed how people interact, communicate, conduct business, seek jobs, find partners, and shop. Millions of people are using social networking sites to connect with others, and employers are using these sites as a source of background information on job applicants. Employers report making decisions not to hire people based on the information posted on social networking sites. Few employers have policies in place to govern when and how these online character checks should be used and how to ensure that the information viewed is accurate. In this article, we explore how these inexpensive, informal online character checks are harmful to society. Guidance is provided to employers on when and how to use these sites in a socially responsible manner. (Clark and Roberts 2010: Abstract, 507)*

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There is a vast literature in this direction. For example, an article in *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics: An International Journal*, ‘The Potential Influence of Internet-based Social Networking on the Conduct of Clinical Research Studies’ (2012). Or

another article in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, 'Exploring the Security of Information Sharing on Social Networking Sites: The Role of Perceived Control of Information' (2016).

### Concluding Thoughts

When coming to defining social philosophy, there are two dimensions, individual behaviour and the society, with institutions being an intermediary. Overlap is inescapable in this process, but an important way to organise an array of topics is through the examination of:

Social Ontology

Social Epistemology

Social Institutions, and

Social Networking and Ethics

The formal history of social philosophy appears to start with Kant. From Kant we get an important question for our times: can be any social institutions that can exist outside the civil condition, to the extent that social institutions presuppose property relations.

Answers in questions of moral philosophy, or Ethics, are a rudder in the discussion. Anthropological perspectives necessarily follow in that line of thinking. Here the German Romantic philosophers provide a high naturalistic view of humanity in the ethic. The problem is that French, German, and British philosophers flip-flop between themselves on the stance to take— what was natural, what was rational, what was optimistic, and what was pessimistic. The nineteenth century ended with a great push for Synthesis.

The question we get from these philosophers is whether social democracy is an illusion? Finding answers in the mystical and providential progressivism has failed, and, in many ways, produced the conditions of our times. Meanwhile, Anglo-American philosophies aim at either the analytic approach, specifically conceptual analysis, or the organic, holistic, systems approach. In these views we have didactical or triadic arrangements, citizens versus the state, or citizens, state, and communities/institutions competing in different agendas.

The turning point for a solution came in fallibilistic epistemology – practical answers could be forthcoming from philosophy without loss of rigour in thought. New problems arose from the shift: positivistic-inspired behaviourism and a statistically-driven 'political science'. With that

thinking came the machines of war. Fortunately, the alternatives continued, ethics, and the humanistic studies in politics.

The question of Synthesis still stands as the critical direction. Historiography is a tool for synthesis, albeit and imperfect one. Other social philosophers have turned to architecture, natural science, social science, and technology, as the paradigm. However, it means balancing multidisciplinary research and integral disciplinary teaching. The thinking was unfortunately poisoned by shallow aesthetics and unrefined technology.

While research methods were fragmenting across the universities, strangely the new social revolution in learning found commonality between diverse ideologies. There are challenges but there is hope for modest progress.

The hope is balancing out the discourses with veracious virtue, and in this case, between history and philosophy. The metaphilosophy enables the synthesis from the diversity of historical topics, into four umbrella approaches to social philosophy. These are the traditional questions of what exists, what is known, what is the organising authority, and the relations or networks between us. That last thought gives us the clue to a touchstone of interpersonality.