

9. Polyphonic Knowledge

Considering the mind-boggling scope and volume of what is known, and the resources committed to learning more, the condition of knowledge is paradoxical today. As the result, in part, of its quality and its sheer mass, the foundations and moral authority of knowledge have never seemed shakier. The knowledge in our libraries seems helpless to inform either our public choices or our serious private ones. Outside the “hard” sciences, the progress of knowledge seems to bring confusion rather than certainty. It does not liberate us from superstition as the Enlightenment *philosophes* had hoped; nor does it guide us toward wise and confident choices. Rather, it seems to multiply the confusions and anxieties. “There is an over-production of Truth that cannot be consumed”, as Otto Rank once put it – and the literatures in every field have only swollen since Rank’s time, while the tempo of knowledge production is many times faster.

But volume and tempo are not the real problems. The whole idea of knowledge involves a concept of intellectual authority that has become politically suspect – even as our addiction to specialized knowledge has continued to increase. In an increasingly technologized society with a depleting environment that must be exploited ever more intensively and with much more stewardship than in the past, we rely ever more heavily on expert knowledge and on the good faith of experts. From a public viewpoint, the case is worse: Non-sectarian education and rational, democratic government are not possible, not even intelligible, unless policies and curriculum choices can be grounded in secure, impartial knowledge. Without a valid concept of authoritative public knowledge, notions of objective decision-making, impartial government, public education, and even honest news reporting, are scarcely tenable.

Since a lifetime is not long enough to learn more than a fraction of the skills and knowledge that actually run today’s society, we are increasingly dependent on specialized experts, who advise and perform their functions from within the paradigms and institutional frameworks of their respective disciplines. Inevitably, these experts will be influenced by the interests that fund their work, and by their own interests as well. Often too, they become committed to one side or another in the political conflicts of their time. Whether as draftees, mercenaries or true believers, experts will find themselves pulled in different directions, and will rarely advise on any issue with a single voice. Paradoxically, they become increasingly *less* able to do so, the *more* they come to know.

Indeed, experts can always be found on every side of every important question we put to it. This has become something of a joke to the man-in-the-street; and for decision-makers, it is a source of frustration. That, indeed, was the starting point of our discussion: We are forced to grapple with the ambiguities of polyphonic knowledge because it is the only honest knowledge we can hope for.

In its instrumental role, as background to the decision process, knowledge plays, and must continue to play, a double role: On one hand, we collect knowledge as an aid to planning; and what we plan are lines of action to achieve our aims. The fact is that most people, most of the time, value knowledge because it can help them get what they want.

On the other hand, and more subtly, knowledge also sets limits to what we can do and want. To learn is to discover new possibilities for action in the world, but also new sources of complication, limitation and difficulty. All the great results of mathematics and physics are statements of necessary relationship and constraint. In the realm of affairs, “the facts” are what vying parties must accept, regardless of their interests. But “speaking truth to power” is notoriously difficult; and unpleasant facts are resisted as long as possible, and longer. King Canute could order the tide to retreat. Governments of industrial states today pay lip service only – if that – to what is known about degrading of the environment. The lesson that knowledge is humility as well as power never came easily to rulers.

What we mean and have always meant by “*knowledge*” is a kind of cognitive capital that individuals and groups must accumulate and deploy intelligently as a pre-requisite to purposeful activity; and it is clear that the “ownership” of this “capital” must be discussed on two levels: On one level, we say that a person *knows* algebra, or knows how to repair automobiles. In this sense, knowledge is conceived as a kind of personal possession or achievement. On another level, we say that the charge of the electron *is known*. Here what we mean is that the knowledge in question is available to a whole conversation. Knowledge in this second sense is public property. It need not belong, in the personal sense, to anyone at all if it can be found in a library when needed.

So conceived, the fund of public knowledge has two crucial properties: First, like a Swiss bank account, it has been purged of ethical concerns. Packaged for convenient use by anyone with the necessary intellectual background to acquire it, or the cash to hire pre-certified experts who already possess it, it is neutral between its users and their purposes. Second, and not at all like a Swiss bank account, it is not depleted, but rather enhanced, when drawn upon.

Today, however, our public knowledge seems less like a fund in a Swiss bank than like a whole economy of competing business firms. In most areas we care about, where differences of value and interpretation are rife, we do not arrive at a body of true statements, but at a tensegrity of opinions and arguments advanced by various knowledge cultures. As we have seen, this sort of knowledge is less easily packaged, and its application less straightforward than the classical kind. But there is no going back: The classical, “universalist” knowledge, when taught or applied coercively as the Truth, forfeits both moral and intellectual authority – there being no very good reason why people should buy into interpretations that set them up for a screwing. At the very least, if knowledge is to be public in any authentic sense, integrity requires that it fairly reflect the diversity of viewpoint and opinion at the table.

More generally, in a diverse, global society we are forced to a distinction between the *privately-held* knowledge of individuals and like-minded groups, as against the *publicly-held* knowledge of the world’s libraries, and other knowledge systems. These represent such different phenomena that it is confusing to use the same word for both. Let’s use the slang word *savvy* for the sort of knowing that individual people have, and reserve the term *knowledge* for the codified, artifactualized representations that we find all around us in our abodes and workplaces and cities, but primarily in books, libraries, universities, and so on. *Savvy* is a matter of personal cognitive competence, comprised of experience, skill, insight and memory. *Knowledge*, by contrast, is represented externally, in the artifacts of a culture, including its language and its books. *Savvy* is some person’s achievement and possession. *Knowledge* is impersonal, held collectively, and demanded sometimes of individual persons by the conversations to which they belong.

We can put it this way: *Savvy* is what you know. *Knowledge* is what will make you look like a fool if you don’t know.

Language and discourse now, are domains where *savvy* and knowledge overlap. Thus, I – the writer of this book – might be said to have, a degree of *savvy* about epistemological philosophy, as you do after reading it. But the book’s status as an artifact of *knowledge*, is a policy question for certain pragmatic conversations concerned with the compilation of course reading lists, the training of civil servants, and similar issues in the deployment of intellectual authority.

The distinction between *savvy* and knowledge has no meaning in a classical epistemology, where the Truth must be true for everyone. But it becomes indispensable, when we renounce the Platonic fantasy of Absolute Truth, and accept truth’s polyphonic character. We need the distinction if we are to think seriously about the role and prerogatives of public knowledge as this informs but also imposes upon the autonomy of individual knowers. Thus,

it will be seen that epistemology, the philosophy of knowledge, now divides into two branches: The epistemology of savvy – personal knowledge – is concerned with the warrant or “backing” for personal knowledge claims. Its basic questions are: “What can I know?” and “What are sufficient grounds for my own, or anyone’s claim to know something?” By contrast, the epistemology of public knowledge becomes a crucially important aspect of political *ethics*: Its central questions have to do with the authority of knowledge, with the prerogatives of that authority, and with the grounds on which that authority may be claimed and recognized.

9.1 Knowledge Cultures

Individuals, then, may have *savvy* of something, but *knowledge* in its normative and disciplinary sense is held by specialized sub-cultures, each with its trained and certified adepts, its “mysteries”, and its methods for winning recruits and revenue from the world outside its discourse. Fields like grain agriculture, high-energy physics, Chinese medicine, pottery, deconstructionist criticism, and modern dance might serve as examples. Each of these must be imagined as a self-sustaining “bubble” of discourse and practice, an identifiable conversation, with its masters and novices and clients, its practices and standards, its concepts and beliefs, and its outstanding issues. Each derives from and is characterized by a seed idea – *building shelters, raising a crop, curing wounds and sickness*, etc. Each begins simply, but tends to become more complex and specialized with time.

People who live, work, play a game together, already constitute the beginnings of a small, specialized knowledge culture. We can speak of a group’s *lore* whenever the savvy of its individual members is regularly compared and shared. As soon as lore becomes a standard of competence and acceptability, we can begin to speak of knowledge. Once it has been externalized in artifacts and institutions, there is no longer any doubt. By a kind of sedimentary chemistry, the accumulating expressions of savvy, both tangible and intangible, become a pool of more or less obligatory cultural knowledge.

Conversation is a unity in principle, but this unity is too large to talk about except in the vaguest terms. In practice, we cannot help but distinguish many distinctive conversational groupings, each with some collective autonomy of its own – however much they overlap. In a complex society, there will be many complementing and competing knowledge cultures, and on no issue can it be expected that they will speak unanimously. Each will have its own story to tell, and its own causes to advance in the society as a whole. Thus, it is approximately correct to think of each recognizably autonomous sub-conversation and knowledge culture as an entity unto itself. We only need to remember that their autonomy is imperfect – that all these sub-conversations

bleed into one another, so to speak.

For our purposes, each knowledge culture can be thought of as a more or less encapsulated tradition of paradigm and practice, opening onto the outside world for various purposes: for winning and serving clients; obtaining needed supplies and equipment; arranging political protection or toleration; recruiting and training apprentices to carry on its tradition. Its autonomy is marked by an identifiable sphere of interest, by a domain of competence, and by an *episteme* (as Foucault called it) – a meta-cognitive schema for argument, inference and embarrassment, through which each such culture determines its own canon of acceptable doctrine and practice. Each knowledge culture talks principally to itself, and secondarily to its patrons and clients, in a jargon of its own. Each scolds and disciplines, and finally comes to terms with and makes room for its own dissidents and heretics. Thus, all such cultures have in common a self-preoccupied character of auto-stimulation and satisfaction, that can be irritating to outsiders.

It is likely too that all such cultures have certain features in common that follow from the necessities of their position in society and from the necessity of training their neophytes into competent adepts. For example, each will be defined by its centre of concern and by its posture of response to that concern. The priest at his altar, the physicist in his laboratory, the farmer in his field, the teamster in his truck, the musician in a symphony orchestra have in common that they are responding to a some particular human need (or complex of needs), from a certain definitive stance or intention. The knowledge culture they belong to is defined by those needs and that stance; from these evolve a repertoire of practice, a rich body of lore and group knowledge – a shared understanding. All these elements taken together are what we mean by a knowledge culture; and the adept of any one of them is much like the adept of every other in having achieved a certain standard of competence and consistency of performance that makes him acceptable to his peers.

Now, perceiving that knowledge is organized primarily within such “bubbles” of specialized culture is undoubtedly a useful insight, for it helps us to understand why experts from different fields are so alike in their performance *as experts*, why they often confuse policy makers with radically conflicting advice, and why they sometimes fail to ask obvious questions that would occur to any intelligent layman who does not share their preconceptions. On the other hand, too much has made by Foucault and other writers, of the incommensurability of knowledge cultures – of the necessity of judging each on its own terms. In particular, Foucault’s idea that differences of *episteme* make fields of knowledge wholly incommensurable even with themselves at different points in time can be pushed to absurd lengths. But then Foucault was intent on sabotaging public knowledge as an instrument of coercive power; our purpose,

by contrast, is to think through how the knowledge project must reorganize and reorient itself under post-modern conditions.

We have accepted the Nietzschean principle of interpretive freedom: that each knowledge culture is entitled to its own concerns and its own validation criteria. We accept the structuralist view that any system can be viewed not only diachronically (as an historical process) but also synchronically – as possessed of a certain structural integrity, at any point in time. But it does not follow that each knowledge culture should be judged exclusively according to its own criteria, nor that the concept of advancing knowledge is meaningless because of radical discontinuities in the objects and criteria of knowledge. A mistaken assumption that the norms of distinctive cultures are *sui generis*, not subject to evolution and comparison, has been inserted by rhetorical sleight-of-hand and is a gross over-statement of such structural integrity and autonomy as such cultures actually enjoy. *Pace* Foucault, it does not seem improper to draw comparisons between knowledge cultures, and of a given knowledge culture with itself over time. Knowledge cultures are only partly constituted by their norms of validation. At least as much, they are constituted by their spheres of interest, by those of their clients, and by their relations with other cultures. Most of all, they are constituted by their own histories.¹

To illustrate both the relative autonomy of knowledge cultures and also their availability to each other's scrutiny and evaluation, the legend of Saladin's sword may bear retelling as a parable of the relation in which knowledge cultures stand to each other. The story goes that sometime during the Third Crusade, a truce was arranged for the great enemies, Saladin and Richard Lionheart, to meet and negotiate. At one point in these talks, to over-awe his opponent, Richard sent for an iron bar, placed it across two blocks, and chopped it in half with his broadsword. In reply, Saladin sent for a feather pillow, tossed it into the air, and sliced it through with his scimitar.

Richard's sword is good at what it was designed to do; Saladin's is good at what it was designed to do. The swords are products of different knowledge cultures, operating with different design-criteria. As the weapons of kings, each would surely be among the best of its kind. Thus, on one level, Foucault has a point: There is a sense in which each sword must be judged by the episteme of its own culture. Certainly, it would seem unjust for either king

¹ Thus, we would disagree with the more extreme structuralists that a culture (or language) is intelligible in purely synchronic terms, as a static framework of ideas and symbols in relationship to one another. That the synchronic viewpoint adds a dimension to the understanding of a culture or language, is not denied. What is affirmed, however, is that the diachronic view also gives its insights, and should not be rejected from political motives. Those who long for the Revolution diminish its prospects greatly by ignoring the evolutionary continuities of history in their wish to emphasize its moments of radical displacement and change.

to have his sword-smith chopped next day because his weapon had proved inferior. Yet the point of the story is that comparisons between the swords, and the cultures behind them **are** possible. Indeed, that's what the demonstrations, the negotiation and the war itself were all about.

Between cultures that live by the same resources, competition is inevitable; and the need to prevail – to at least hold one's own – plays a part in making value-argument possible to the extent that certain values are all but obligatory. Among other things, it makes experts behave like experts – creating the game of status and one-upmanship found everywhere among persons who live by their mastery of any pursuit whatever.

The more symmetrical two knowledge cultures are in their resource requirements and offerings, the sharper competition and comparisons between them are likely to be. However, it is not true that competition and comparison must lead to a convergence of differing knowledge cultures. To be sure, there will be mutual emulation and learning. But what seems to happen usually, is that one of the competing cultures comes to dominate the field, while the others take refuge in specialization, each adapting itself to some particular niche where it enjoys competitive advantage.

No doubt, each culture should be appreciated in the light of its own values. But refusal of invidious comparison among them can last no longer than our academic detachment. If you are in the market for something that two different knowledge cultures compete in providing, or if you are thinking of making a career in one or the other, then some comparisons will have to be made. Inevitably, we make our choices by what these cultures mean to us, and not just by what they mean to themselves².

How then might the relationship amongst competing knowledge cultures be characterized, granting both their intrinsic, inward-looking aspects (what they mean to their own members), but also the face they present to outsiders? I think we want to say that in their interaction and dealings with their publics, they create what could be termed a *context of comparison* between them.

The different styles of *budo* (martial arts) afford an interesting example of such a context – each being, of course, a distinct knowledge culture in its own right. Yet, in every major city today, instructors of these styles are in

² Again, it is true that our perceptions and values are not entirely our own – that they are subject to manipulation by skilful propaganda and advertising, i.e. to specious forms of value-argument. But the possibility of such influence does nothing to help the relativist case. It merely shifts the zone of competition to a cognitive playing field. In their struggle for market-share, the contenders must compete for position in people's fields of attention, in their memories, in their chains of association, in their loyalties; and their fitness for this competition becomes just one more ground for comparison.

competition for prestige and students. There is a common public of potential beginners whose interest must be stimulated and whose concerns and curiosity satisfied. There are military, police and private security forces whose members are given some unarmed combat training by their organizations, or are required to take such training on their own time. There are media (movies, TV, magazines, etc.) which thrive by collecting audiences. Taken together, all these provide a cross-cultural context in which the character, strengths and weaknesses of the various martial arts traditions are constantly subjected to comparison.

The last paragraph might just as well have been written about dance, music, pottery-making, cuisine, or any other traditional art. In each case we find a great many styles, each with its local *episteme* – its standard of value and competence, which can be viewed as autonomous only so long as their masters are not in competition for customers and pupils.

Now, having established that knowledge cultures compete, and that comparisons between them are not only legitimate but inevitable, the question before us is this: Among the diverse knowledge cultures that might obtain in a given field, where should we look for the authentically *public* knowledge?

Continuing with the example of martial arts: A plethora of styles exist – from different cultures, developed for different purposes and situations, with different concepts of the human mind and body, wielding different weapons, and with different training values. Each of these styles has its own body of theory and its forms of practice; and though there is considerable overlap and agreement among these, there are also contradictions, so that we can not just think of martial arts theory as a structure of universal truths abstracted from and common to the various styles. But, on the other hand, since concepts of strength, speed, grounding, balance, centeredness, rhythm and focus are understood everywhere, it seems the notion of public martial arts knowledge can't be wholly empty. What is this knowledge, then? Where would it be found?

9.2 The Idea of Public Knowledge

The need for trans-cultural or *public* knowledge arises when over-lapping knowledge cultures come into competition for market-share. So long as the various knowledge cultures are not in competition for clients or apprentices, there is no need for anyone to judge between their claims, and no need to reformulate knowledge on an abstract, theoretical basis. Lore and guild mystery are just what is meant by “knowledge” in every field of endeavour. Medicine is what the healers do; metallurgy is what the smiths do; mechanics is what the engineers do. Indeed, the idea of “book knowledge” seems like a contradiction

in terms. “The Tao that can be told is not the true Tao; the names that can be named are not the right Names.” Everyone knows that really worthwhile knowledge is tactile and empathic: in the hands, belly and buttocks more than in eyes and brain. Book learning is glib and illusory by contrast. Musicianship is in the fingers. The bush pilot flies “by the seat of his pants” Only a fool could mistake the scholar’s glib facility with words for craftsmanly familiarity with the tools and the materials.

All this changes when over-lapping practice- and knowledge cultures come into competition for business, as happens when the best healers, sword-smiths and builders migrate to the metropolitan cities in search of powerful clients and the highest fees. In these world-marketplaces, different “schools” of healing, metal-work, and so forth, come into contact and jostle each other. Practitioners from one city-state must defend their reputations against those from another. Their adepts learn from and imitate each other, but must also strive to distinguish themselves and to differentiate their wares. Under these metropolitan conditions, knowledge becomes more contentious – for the worse but also the better – than it remains in provincial market-towns where each practice-culture holds a monopoly in its respective field. At the metropolitan centres, a word-game of claims and counter-claims gets started, and skill at this game becomes a condition for successful practice. At the same time, consumer skills are sharpened as customers learn to pick their way among the rival wares. Where there is little choice available, consumers have to take what is offered or go without; but in these metropolitan cities where anyone with the price in his pocket confronts an embarrassment of choice, a critical faculty is needed. What we call “public knowledge” now emerges to provide just such a faculty.

The pupils who come – or are sent – to study, and then the new class of shoppers and stewards that develops at court and in the rich households require and therefore develop a new kind of knowledge, more abstract, more eclectic and more verbal than the tactile, practical knowledge of the crafts and trades. Where the old knowledge evolved primarily in the dialogue of crafts persons – men and women – with their materials, the new “theoretical” knowledge is a knowledge of onlookers talking to one another and comparing notes. Indeed, the words themselves point to the origin of this distinct kind of knowing: Our word “practical” comes from the Greek word for doing: *praxis*. “Theory” comes from the Greek *theoros* meaning “spectator.” Theoretical knowledge begins as a lore of on-lookers in the crowded marketplace with its civil law, and develops as the “law” of Nature itself.

The new, abstract knowledge is useful first to the persons who run the city, and then to everyone prosperous enough to buy the goods and services on offer there. Theory, in other words, is the special lore of a governing class, concentrated at the sites of governing conversation: the palace, the court of

law, and the marketplace, where decisions to buy and sell are made. For the governing elites and their trusted servants, it is a means, and finally a whole support system, for picking one's way among the competing claims of rival knowledge cultures, and bestowing patronage appropriately. With the advent of the professional "man of taste", critic and connoisseur – think of Petronius Arbiter in *Quo Vadis?*³ – an abstract, "public" knowledge culture is off the ground, with a brilliant career before it.

Public knowledge is itself a knowledge culture, evolving its own language and methods and rules of play. But it is not on the same level as the practical knowledge cultures in its purview. With respect to these, it is a meta-culture: a culture *about* cultures. Also, it becomes a privileged knowledge culture, as the knowledge of privileged people. Increasingly, it sets the terms of inter-relationship amongst all the hands-on knowledge cultures, as their customer, regulator and judge. Increasingly it will be contemptuous of mere lore, and will see only the word-game as true knowledge,⁴ transcending its vulgar, practical origins.

We can imagine the "public," theoretical knowledge as a Christmas cake, in which component knowledge cultures are embedded like candied fruits and nuts. It gets started as a thin connection amongst these cultures, gaining in density as it evolves. At the outset, public knowledge places scarcely any constraint on the autonomy of the traditional cultures. It hangs sheerly around them as an abstract, appreciation and summary, and does not interfere at all in their distinctive projects. But, as it thickens and solidifies, it evolves projects of its own, and the knowledge cultures must accommodate and submit themselves to its authority.

We may think of this "cake" as having four ingredients:

- 1) a shopper's awareness of the offerings of the existing knowledge cultures – what each has to sell, and what each is good for;
- 2) a repertoire of concepts and ideas derived from these cultures (quoted out of context, as it were), and more or less misunderstood as terms of everyday language;
- 3) an awareness of the structure of argument among certain knowledge cultures as these collide over particular issues;
- 4) (eventually), a body of accepted theory, abstracted from the "rules-of-thumb" of particular knowledge cultures and the less controversial, more consensual features in their argument.

³ Sienkiewicz' novel about Nero's Rome.

⁴ cf. Aristotle in the opening section of the *Metaphysics*.

As the world of knowledge grows more complicated, competence in the vocabulary, conceptual offerings and arguments of this theoretical meta-culture as a whole become too much for any individual; and the “cake” of theoretical knowledge must be cut into autonomous specialties, each with a life of its own.

This polyphonic “cake” paradigm departs from the classical “edifice” paradigm which saw public knowledge as a coherent structure of theory and empirical fact, organized by subject matter. It departs too, from the idea that a branch of knowledge may be considered *public* simply because its results are consensual among persons trained in its accepted methodology. Today, these requirements would limit the domain of public knowledge to mathematics, and the “hardest” of the hard sciences. These days, if we wish to conceive of public knowledge in fields that are controversial or culture-relative, we must imagine it quite differently – as a common environment allowing any number of disparate knowledge cultures to flourish side by side, with no attempt at forced reconciliation amongst them. Rather, the environment must aim to provide a context for argument of substantial integrity amongst the disparate knowledge cultures, as each pursues its self-defined agenda. This, perhaps, is the utmost to which the post-modern university can aspire.

Traditionally, public knowledge tended to favour interpretations comforting to the interests sponsoring it; and it tended to enshrine such interpretations as “absolute truths.” The thrust of the post-modern critique has been that knowledge of this kind is not authentically public. To become so, it must reject the notion of “absolute truth” in favour of some polyphonic epistemology that leaves room for divergent understandings. At the same time, to stand as worthwhile knowledge, it must retain its faculties of critical judgment. As A. J. Ayer says, “. . . we do not want to be driven into admitting that “anything goes.”

The political role of polyphonic knowledge, as of the absolute kind, is to mitigate the power struggle amongst divergent interests by subordinating their conflicts to a base of shared understanding. My wife and I may disagree about the household finances, but it helps if we have a common idea of our bank balance, some joint understanding of the concerns in play, and an awareness of each other’s interests, priorities and arguments. Similarly in the world at large: Today, if we are to speak honestly of public knowledge on some controversial matter, it can only be the structure of argument around it that we have in mind.

9.3 Social Science

There can be no doubt in anyone’s mind that the under-ambition of the discipline of anthropology has reaped, and continues to reap, great and necessary empirical fruit. It is very probable that there was historically no alternative to this necessary development. But the point of my critique is that the science of man, in losing its synthetic vision, actually lost the three things that gave it such world-historical promise in the eyes of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And if we are again going to make the science of man meaningful . . . , we must find some kind of conceptual framework which will permit us to reintegrate these three things into a single scientific vision that includes 1) the central problem of the science of man: How do we explain human differences? 2) the large historical panorama of human development, which provides the background and support for this explanation; 3) the superordinate value scale for judging the wisdom and adequacy of man's social arrangements.

The Lost Science of Man

Ernest Becker (1971)

The most significant test of conversational logic and epistemology lies in the area of social science, where the realms of fact and value are inseparable. Here is where the conundrum of human *volition* against causal *necessity* is sharpest. Here, if anywhere, is where we need to admit a whole range of complementary, even downright contradictory understandings, without accepting that "anything goes." If any branch of knowledge has outgrown the classical tradition, it is the group of social sciences. If any branch remains plagued by outstanding issues of epistemology and inference, it is this one. Social science is the domain where a perspectivist, polyphonic epistemology has to "make its bones," so to speak: actualize itself, and prove its worth.

Just one of the issues that blocks consensus in these fields is that of explanation. How are human events, and the choices of individuals to be explained? Focussing just on this issue, we find at least the following strains of thought:

- 1) Common sense would have it that all social phenomena result from the free choices of human agents. Things happen because we make them happen, either individually or collectively; and we attempt to make things happen because we believe it in our best interests to do so. For daily life, such a position is compelling. It would be very difficult to get around in the world without the working assumption that we and others are fairly coherent, moral agents, making free choices as we see fit. Still, for a science of psychology or the writing of history, a deeper account seems needed.
- 2) Thus, it has long been known that people's desires and choices are shaped by their life histories, especially by their infancy and childhood. Nor can we hold our parents responsible, since they themselves were once children with parents. And so on. On this telling, people are to be thought of as information processing devices, more or less "programmed" by their cultures, upbringing and past experience. We do things because they have become habitual, or because we have been taught to want them, or to think them the right thing to do.
- 3) For some religious people, both biography and history are ultimately to be explained in teleological terms as the working out of some divine or

cosmic purpose. Things happen as they do because God wills them so. But science too recognizes a kind of predestination, when systems are said to tend toward an equilibrium state where some parameter is minimized. Such explanations correspond to Aristotle's notion of final cause: All things move toward the state at which they are most completely and essentially themselves. Self-actualization, conceived in various ways, is yet a third mode of explanation.

- 4) In particular, an explanation of individual and social behaviour may be sought in the biology of the human animal. Thus, for example, the origins of ethnic sentiment and warfare may be traced to primate territoriality, status seeking and bonding. For any individual, the evolutionary history of its species is a kind of destiny.
- 5) Social activists, by contrast, find such biological explanations unacceptable, as they seem to admit no room for improvement. They point to the wide variation and plasticity in human behaviour, and insist that when people do nasty things this is due to corrupted values and habits of their existing environments that have perverted their natural feelings and tendencies.
- 6) Finally, the structuralist school, building on a fruitful insight from linguistics, points out that people and societies, like languages, can be seen as coherent wholes, existing at some given point in time. For these writers, the explanation of any personal or social fact is to be sought in the structures of which they are a part, and into which they are required to *fit*.

These differing styles of explanation point to very different causal relationships, and suggest entirely different programs for research. Nor are they merely complementary: For example, 4) and 5) directly contradict each other as do 6) and 2), while 1) seems inconsistent with all the others. In the social sciences, we nearly always find a structure of argument among distinct *schools* of explanation, rarely a single theory that everyone accepts.

Now, my question is this: Partly because people come to the social sciences with different perspectives, partly because the social facts themselves are over-determined and complex, it seems unlikely that complete, univocal explanations for social phenomena could be given. Why should this bother us? Why shouldn't divergent, even contradictory explanations be admitted?

The reason we prefer single explanation may be connected with our habitual way of attributing agency and blame: Why did the vase break? Because I carelessly knocked it over. Why did the car hit that pedestrian? Because its driver was drunk. A whole body of law and custom has developed to cope with the problem of responsibility in such cases, where the (governing) question of who shall be punished or made to pay for damage cannot be

answered apart from the (epistemic) question of who caused it. Often, however, it makes little sense to demand a single, inculcating explanation of this kind because there is more than one way to assign responsibilities, no clear way to resolve the argument amongst alternative ways of doing so, and/or no strong motive to do so. Even with the motive, a tensegrity of close argument may be the best we can do.

But in what sense can argument be an explanation? What we have to say is that explanation is a matter of interpretation; and on such matters a structure of argument will be the best explanation we can give. If explaining an event means embedding it within some narrative and paradigm that makes it appear intelligible and likely, then by extension it can also mean embedding it within some argument amongst alternative paradigms and narratives. It is not just that differing explanations may be complementary. My point, rather, is that the structure of argument already **is** the public explanation. The argument amongst alternative explanatory paradigms for the French revolution seems to be the best *public* context we can find to render that event intelligible.

On one hand, such an argument may collapse to triviality. Or it may lose itself in endless detail, as when we attempt to predict the weather more than a few days in advance. But finally, as with the French revolution, the argument may settle down to a controversy with many areas of basic agreement, and many of permanent dispute. When this has happened, we know as much as we can know about “the cause” of the event in question – barring the discovery of new evidence. This is a great deal more than knowing nothing about the event’s causes, and a great deal more than a factional brawl.

Thus, the history books tell us that the French revolution occurred because of: 1) the Crown’s fiscal bankruptcy; 2) aristocratic and clerical privilege; 3) the rise of industry, commerce and the bourgeoisie as loci of power; 4) Enlightenment philosophy; 5) the sufferings of the peasants and urban masses; 6) the unpopularity of Marie Antoinette; 7) the king’s ill-judged flight from Versailles; and for other reasons as well. Similarly, women’s spheres of activity tend to be restricted by their closer involvement with the tasks of bearing and raising children, by a political-economic system based on exploitation and violence, by the insecurity, selfishness and brutality of men, and by what has usually been the path of least resistance for women themselves. In each case, some explanations are better than others, for reasons that emerge from reasoned argument. No single explanation is definitive. Both scholars and ordinary people weigh the suggested explanations as they please, and give more or less convincing reasons for the way they do so. But finally, it is the pattern of argument as a whole that comprises our public understanding of why the revolution happened, why women are disadvantaged for public life, or anything else we wish to explain.

In the social sciences, explanation will always remain somewhat a matter of ingenuity and taste. Several or many explanatory strategies will seem to have merit (at least to their own inventors and followers); and it will seldom be possible to embarrass any one of these so thoroughly and permanently that it is out of the running for good. As we've seen, this is not to say that some may not be stronger than others, nor that reasoned argument amongst them is impossible. Some explanations will be strengthened and others embarrassed as new information turns up. But it is to say that these fields remain domains of story-telling, whatever else they are. In every case, the task in these fields is either to tell a good story, or to encompass the current stories in some balanced way.

The conclusion I would draw is that *social science is controversial and polyphonic by nature*. We cannot expect classical, univocal answers to its great questions, since there is scarcely anything in its purview that could qualify as raw fact. From beginning to end, in its choice of concepts, its descriptions of particulars in its law-like generalizations, it is a tissue of value-laden interpretations. Such rigour as it possesses, often very considerable, is a matter of intellectual integrity: a diligence and scrupulosity in the collection and interpretation of evidence, a willingness to subject fond theories to critical embarrassment, a determination to treat the individuals and cultures studied in a spirit of respect and human solidarity.

Both social scientists and their clients are social animals who bring their own vanities, economic interests and political loyalties to the questions they ask. For this reason, the more positivist we try to make these disciplines, the more we try to force them into the classical mould, the more we turn them into political battlegrounds or else condemn them to triviality. It will be more fruitful to encourage any number of distinct knowledge cultures in the broad field of social science, and set these to play against each other on terms of reason and civility. Then the answers we can expect will be interpretative and plural: a public knowledge of perspectives and patterns of understanding, not of definitive facts and laws.

Finally then, we have an answer not only to Nietzsche, but also to Hume: induction, causation, categorization are modes of understanding involving leaps that reason alone cannot account for. Hume is right about this. Empirical sense data alone do not afford an intelligible world. To arrive at intelligibility, people must construe first according to the structure of their minds (or nervous systems) as Kant saw, then according to categories and values absorbed from their ambient cultures, and finally idiosyncratically and willfully, according to their individual life histories, and projects and vested interests. Nietzsche is right about that. But none of this makes the world unintelligible, nor reasoned argument impossible.

9.4 Knowledge Institutions

The cause of reason faces one massive obstacle that has little to do with the scandal of interpretations, and is therefore beyond our scope. Yet this obstacle requires at least a mention here because of its consequences for public knowledge.

In many respects, the Enlightenment project of using knowledge and critical reason to improve the human condition succeeded beyond its founders' dreams. Nonetheless, this project is threatened today by a massive and *justified* loss of public confidence in the legitimacy, integrity, and sheer competence of knowledge-using institutions. This is not really a philosophical problem, yet it bears on our discussion because it threatens not so much the idea as the practicability of authentic public knowledge.

Where savvy belongs to individuals, knowledge is and must be collected and deployed by corporate institutions, public or private. As this happens, it inevitably takes on a corporate life of its own, developing in response to political and institutional necessities, which often warp the consciousness and judgment of its custodians – the “professors” of knowledge, who hold and manage and apply it. In this way, the institutional character of knowledge gives cause for epistemological suspicion. Today, it is common knowledge that bureaucracies and senior professionals tend to serve their own needs first, putting those of their clients a long way second. In consequence, knowledge has been losing its intellectual and moral authority, though our dependence on it continues to grow.

Contemporary attitudes toward self-serving public institutions can be traced back to the “Protestant” movement against the corruption of Christ's church – and to Christ himself, scourging the money-changers from the temple. In their contemporary, secular form these attitudes can be traced at least to Rousseau who opposed the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of sin with a new doctrine of the natural goodness of Man. According to Rousseau, evil in the world is not the fault of human nature or Original Sin: By nature, Man is born free and good. But everywhere he is corrupted by society which teaches him to envy, to crave what he does not need, and to exploit others to obtain it. And so he lives and dies in chains. In the 60's, Rousseau's loathing for society and its institutions became epidemic. Viet Nam was a large factor: In 1963, any college sophomore who did a week's reading could predict that the United States would fight there for a decade, and accomplish nothing but a squander of blood and treasure and power. The key political question for the generation that came of age in those years was one of practical epistemology: How was it possible that sophomores could easily get right a judgment call that "the best and the brightest" were getting disastrously wrong? The answer was, and

remains, obvious to everyone: In the college classroom or at home, we can afford the luxury of private judgment; at work we are committed to affirm the policies and organizational cultures of the institutions that pay our salaries.

Newspaper headlines every day reinforce this lesson. Scarcely any large institution – political, commercial, social, religious, or intellectual – has kept a reputation for integrity among its clients. Public loathing and rage continue to build, and no one knows where it will end. One point, however, is clear enough: *The vulnerability of expert knowledge to corruption by mad or self-serving institutional logic is incomparably the most serious of our epistemological problems.* The "prison-house" of language, and even the scandal of interpretations do not come close. For, if the experts – the people who have spent their lives studying a field – are not to be trusted, then who can be? If expert opinion is for sale, (and what it means to be "a professional expert" on some matter is precisely that one has developed one's opinions about it into a marketable commodity), then all knowledge claims are suspect. Given the sheer volume of knowledge today, our dependence upon it, and its greatly varying quality and reliability this situation is lethal.

Classically, knowledge meant something like "justified, true belief." All three conditions were necessary: You could not be said to know a truth if you did not actually believe it. You could not be said to know, or have known it if it turned out to be false. You could not be said to know something if you could produce no valid argument in its favour. Under the conditions we've been describing, every one of these assumptions breaks down: Society as a whole clings to quite a few cognitive commitments that very few persons could be said to believe, or even understand. (Its commitment to economic science might be a case in point.) It certainly clings to such commitments on grounds that many people find unconvincing. Finally, its commitments are not truths in anything like the classical sense; they are only interpretations – at best, partial, limited understandings – as we have seen.

What we find is that the continuity between personal and public knowledge, classically taken for granted, is broken beyond repair by the institutional crisis just described and, beyond that, by the sheer complexity and diversity of post-modern life. It is this fracturing of the cognitive commitments of the individual from those of his society, that our word "alienation" primarily signifies: to be doing things for reasons not our own, from values and "beliefs" that we do not share. Indeed, we have found that the phrase "personal knowledge" is an oxymoron, strictly speaking: The individual has *savvy* of directly experienced people, things and events, relative to a great many cognitive commitments acquired second-hand from the groups to which he or she belongs. Such items of *knowledge*, properly so called, are constructed in the conversation of families, communities, nations and whole civilizations – and

become more or less obligatory for the individuals who comprise them. For the sake of competent, comfortable participation, these cultural commitments are taken over and internalized by individuals, but they are not truly personal in nature. Rather, by accepting its knowledge, the individual “buys in” not just to concepts and paradigms, but to the community itself. As a “social animal,” he has little choice but to keep up certain memberships as best he can – though he may well have reservations.

The knowledge-commitments of any institution (whether large and diverse, or small and relatively homogeneous) ultimately represent political choices of its pragmatic conversation. When a Board of Education has to decide whether to commit the authority and resources of a school system to Evolution Theory or Creation Science, it is *not* making an epistemic choice between a sacred cosmos and a de-mythologised one, but a political choice about what young people should be allowed, encouraged or actually compelled to learn. Invariably, it makes the choice based on political pressures from the various interest groups and coalitions.

But, for the community as a whole there is a logically prior question, also political in nature, whether it prefers to invest its authority, resources and coercive power on one side of an issue or leave the matter open; and unless the commitment is *constitutive*, as we may say, the community will probably do better to avoid taking a stand. Thus, religious freedom was invented precisely at the time when Faith had become (as it remains) more divisive than constitutive for European societies. The allegiance that mattered was to the state, and to an exalted conception of property rights. Religious affiliation, precisely because it no longer mattered greatly and was raising worse antagonisms than it soothed or healed, came to be left to individual conscience.

On the other hand, some cognitive issues are constitutive for a given community, in the sense that it cannot tolerate the presence of members who have not resolved them in some particular way. For example, one cannot be a practising engineer without substantial commitments to Newtonian mechanics as a viable description of everyday reality. One cannot be a Catholic priest without a comparable working commitment to the divinity of Christ. These are commitments that an engineer or a priest must hold officially in order to practice their professions – though in private they are free to doubt, like everyone else.

Accordingly, communities and their spokesmen cultivate, and are actually granted, considerable teaching authority. For most people, most of the time, knowledge is just the opinion that their community endorses or insists upon. Correspondingly, which uses of teaching authority are appropriate is more than a question of epistemology. Above all, it is a question of prudence and wisdom.

The connection between savvy and knowledge, and the notion of a

“personal epistemology” that inquires into the validity of cognitive strategies for a particular, situated individual is a topic for the next chapter. But I would like to frame that final segment of our discussion, and mark the end of this one, by leaving the question of self-serving institutions and the authority of public knowledge in the sharpest focus possible: Outside their own areas of competence, the citizens of a complex society are inexorably dependent on specialized knowledge in the hands of self-serving institutions which can be expected to serve their own agendas, whatever else they do. On one hand, we have no choice but to rely on local (sub-cultural) and public knowledge. On the other, the institutions that collect and dispense knowledge are proving unworthy of our trust. That is the real epistemological crisis.