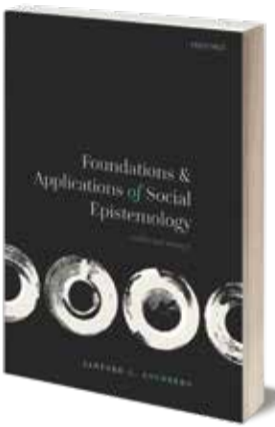


EXCLUSIVE



Sanford C. Goldberg is professor of humanities at Northwestern University, and author of 'Foundations and Applications of Social Epistemology: Collected Essays', published by Oxford University Press in 2021.



One of the most famous feuds in science and technology has been between Nikola Tesla and Thomas Edison, which still makes for heated arguments between their fans.

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Let's begin here: What is social epistemology?

The quickest definition I can give you is that social epistemology is the study of the social dimensions of knowledge: The generation of knowledge, the storage of knowledge, the dissemination of knowledge, and the evaluation of knowledge. And it contrasts with what we call individualistic epistemology, which focuses solely and exclusively on the individual subject. This one focuses on social processes, social relations, and so on and so forth.

There is a distinction in some other areas of sociology. In the sociology of religion, for example, we have religious sociology and sociology of religion, the insider-outsider distinction, and we have it in some other areas. So, is there a difference between the sociology of epistemology and social epistemology?

That's a wonderful question. I would say, yes. Sociology of epistemology is, if you like, the study of the study of knowledge. So, they're actually they will be studying how we actually study knowledge. In social epistemology, we're still studying knowledge, but we're studying knowledge insofar as there are social processes that are involved in its production or its dissemination.

So, one of them is the study of an academic subject. The other one is the study of knowledge from a certain perspective.

So, we can have some social study of social episte-

mology, too.

That's right. Absolutely yes. If sociologists ever become interested in it, they can certainly study it.

What is the importance of social epistemology?

These days, certainly in the United States — I can't speak for Iran or many other parts of the world — we recognize how deeply dependent we are on other people for information, for keeping us apprised, and for correcting us. So, if you try to look at these things from the vantage point of a theory that puts its focus exclusively on the individual, it's not that you can't understand these things at all, but, I would argue, you couldn't understand the full range of effects.

You can understand, for example, things like echo chambers or intellectual bubbles. You can get some sense of this. You can get a sense of what their effects are on individuals but not why and how they come to form and not their role in the overall landscape of knowledge production, if I can put it that way. So, insofar as you have an interest in these kinds of things,



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Northwestern University scholar Sanford C. Goldberg: Science has the smudgy fingerprint of humanity all over it 1 PART

social epistemology should be significant for you.

It's my understanding that you have a program for social epistemology as well.

You're very kind to call it that. That's what I've called it. It may be a big word, though.

I have tried to describe a research program that is systematic so that it actually is a single way of approaching a number of topics. And what I have suggested is that we focus on what I've called the "epistemic significance of other minds" and try to enumerate the ways in which other minds have epistemic significance for us, how can our interactions with other people affect the goodness of our own beliefs and the goodness of our own thinking, and how that will affect — what we call — epistemic evaluation of our beliefs in our other states. So, that's how I would put it.

So, you argue that there are social dimensions in the production and dissemination of knowledge. And by extension, there are power struggles in those regards. There

are personal biases. There is everything social about knowledge. However, people used to believe in the authority of science. When you bring such an argument to the table, that there are social dimensions to it, the logical implication might be that some people doubt the authority of the science produced in academia, for which you are only partly responsible. I mean, that is not the whole reason, but it can contribute to that.

I think, as a matter of fact, you are right that when the social dimensions of science get highlighted, some people get more skeptical. So, I think that's true. I think it's actually a faulty criticism though, because my impression is — and I'm happy to go into this if you'd like — that it's precisely the social dimensions of science that keep it as honest and reliable as it is. So, although you're right that people tend to become a bit more skeptical when they hear that science is a social phenomenon with various kinds of social dimensions and social relations, in a way, I think that's exactly why science is as trustworthy as it is.