

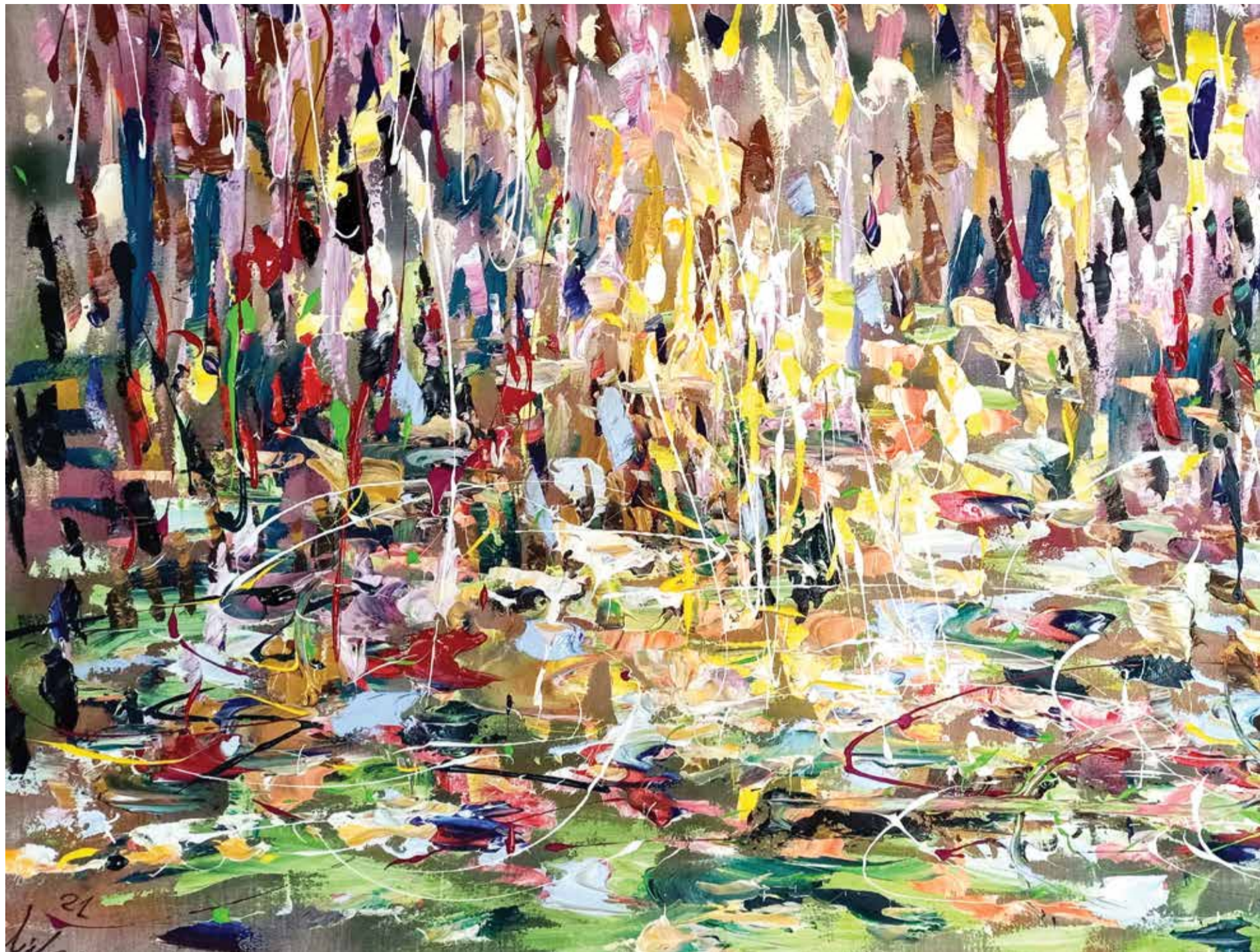
EXCLUSIVE



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.



Pond and water lilies (acrylic on linen) by Antonino Puliafico (2021) [artsper.com](https://www.artsper.com)



Let's imagine that you take your car, ride through the city, and go somewhere with your partner or some friends. The reason for your car ride is that you want to go from point A to point B, and that's a social practice; right? However, Google Maps is going to generate knowledge based on that practice. From that vantage point, this is a socio-epistemic practice.

You could say that. But let me ask you this. This is a very familiar example that comes to me from the literature on the philosophy of biology. We say that the heart has a function, which is to pump blood. But surely, if you take a heart out of the human body and just put it by a door, it can be used as a doorstop. The fact that the heart can be used as a doorstop doesn't tell you anything about the nature of the heart or its function. It's a mere byproduct. Similarly, even when the heart is functioning properly, it makes those beating sounds. So, you can say the heart actually produces noises. But it's not because it produces noises that it's persisted in the species. It persisted in the species because it pumps blood.

I think you can say very similar things about the function of social practice. There may be all sorts of things that happen in the practice that aren't central to its function if I can put it that way.

That was a nice way of putting it. This whole project of explaining social epistemology is a political project in the broadest sense of the matter. Is that right? Right.

So, have you been aware of the political implications of the work you are doing or were you doing it like how some do art for art's sake or science for science's sake?

That's a really, really great question. I will say that the reason that I first got involved in social epistemology did not have anything to do with politics. I was beginning to think that the things that most interested me in epistemology showed me the limitations of my previous model. And I began to think of how could I expand or revise or even get rid of and replace my model with something that I found even more adequate. That was the original motivation. But you're absolutely right.



I've thought more and more about these issues largely because of, I'll be honest, the younger generation of social epistemologists, which contains many people who are superb thinkers and many of them are deeply interested in politics and the politics of our day. So, I can't help but wonder and start thinking about the political implications of the kinds of views that I'm presenting as well. So, these days, I do think quite a bit about the political implications of these views.

That's great because many examples are available across your works. So, let's talk a bit about the second part of your books which deals with applications of social epistemology. Let's start with the 7th chapter. What are the "epistemic costs of politeness" that you discuss there?

I had the great good fortune of being able to work with a colleague in China for

many, many years. He and I were just talking about the cultural differences between China and the US. Obviously, one of the big ones is that there is really a heavy emphasis placed on politeness in China in ways that, at least when I was growing up in New Jersey and New York, there was much less of it. It dawned on me that there were epistemic costs to having a polity of politeness.

By epistemic costs I mean that we become less knowledgeable in a certain regard in polite societies than we are in non-polite societies. What I wanted to do with my Chinese colleague was I wanted to see whether Guiming Yang and I could articulate the theoretical basis for that idea. So, this paper tries to provide a theoretical basis for the sense in which you can be less knowledgeable in a polite society than you would be in a less polite society.

I sense that the whole chapter is, I would say, a mild criticism of political

Northwestern University scholar Sanford C. Goldberg:

Our moral codes need 2 PART to acknowledge the messiness of life