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Reply to Watson on the Social Virtue of Questioning

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Lani Watson’s “The Social Virtue of Questioning: A Genealogical Account” offers a thoughtful and, on the whole, very plausible picture of questioning’s place in social epistemology, where it is often overlooked. On Watson’s view, questioning is best theorised about as an *epistemic practice*; it is socially established, activity-based, and aimed at the epistemic end of eliciting information. This picture of questioning as an (epistemically aimed) practice is supported in part by a kind of a Craigean (1991) genealogical strategy, one that is used, additionally, to support what is arguably the key thesis in Watson’s paper, which is that questioning is an indispensable form of social and epistemic cohesion, one which helps substantially to form, sustain and grow our epistemic communities. It is in this respect that the practice of questioning is meant to be understood as a *social* epistemic virtue.

While I am on board with Watson’s wider picture here – I think there is a lot right about it – I am going to use this brief space to raise a few small quibbles, which I hope might prompt useful further discussion. These concern (i) the status of questioning as an epistemic practice; (ii) the methodology of the Craigian genealogical strategy, as applied to questioning; and (iii) the normative thesis Watson embraces about the social-epistemic value of questioning in an epistemic community.

First, regarding the status of questioning as an epistemic practice. It is a practice according to Watson because it meets three criteria; it is socially established, activity-based, and directed towards common goals; it is an *epistemic* practice, because the common goal is an epistemic one, that of eliciting information. As Watson rightly points out, *sometimes* questioning is used to serve non-epistemic purposes. We might question someone in order to undermine their authority; or to distract, to impress, to show off, to put someone on the spot, to ‘shoot the bull’, uninterested in eliciting information. The fact that questioning is often used *for* these ends, however, should lead us to ask why the aim of eliciting information is privileged among these ends such that *questioning* is best understood as an epistemic practice – as opposed to – a wider multifariously aimed practice that on occasions is epistemically oriented.

Perhaps an answer here might come from Watson’s Craigean genealogical story: if a society existed without questioning, we’d need to invent it in order to serve the valuable function of eliciting information. But this kind of answer leads to my second critical point, which concerns Watson’s use of the Craigean strategy. Showing off, impressing, undermining authority, shooting the bull – these are also valuable – and questioning is a mechanism by which we can do all of this quite directly. Which raises a kind of ‘devil’s advocate’ question for Watson’s Craigean strategy: might not a society without a mechanism that could do all of *these* things so effectively be led to embrace questioning as a flexible way to facilitate all of these goals? Of course, one might point out that you can achieve these other goals by mechanisms other than questioning. True, but by the same token, you can elicit information by means other than questioning – viz., including via command or threat. This is not to say that Watson’s Craigean strategy is implausible; rather, that a more refined version of it might help us to better connect (as Watson wants to) the practice of questioning with the epistemic function of eliciting information.

A third place where I’d like to press Watson’s argument concerns the *social value* of questioning as a practice. Here I will quote a key passage I’d like to critically discuss:

[…] the value of questioning from a social, or perhaps societal, perspective is not hard to see. Questioning allows us to both access and generate epistemic goods such as true belief, justification, information, knowledge and understanding – goods that we value within our epistemic communities. Equally, if not more importantly, questioning facilitates the exchange of these goods among community members – the *sharing* of information, knowledge and so on. As such, questioning serves to ease the passage of epistemic goods between members of an epistemic community. Much as the holding open of doors eases passage in and out of buildings. Indeed, it is hard to see how the smooth and efficient exchange of epistemic goods would be possible in the absence of questioning.

In the above passage, Watson is defending the social value of questioning by drawing our attention to various ways in which questioning is instrumentally epistemically valuable in an epistemic community. As she rightly points out, questioning allows us to access and generate epistemic goods, it facilitates the sharing of information, knowledge, and so on.

Given that the reasoning here is instrumental reasoning, it is fair enough to ask: what is the *nett* instrumental epistemic value of questioning in a community? To Watson’s credit, it is probably positive. However, it should at least be registered that the practice of questioning can generate all of these goods only by at the same time putting us at epistemic *risk*; the practice of questioning puts us at risksof misinformation, deception, and betrayal; these risks are inevitably incurred by questioning aimed at eliciting information.

An epistemic doomsayer might then suggest the following kind of counter-reasoning, in response to Watson’s optimistic passage above: “Questioning allows us to both access and generate epistemic *bads* – viz., misinformation, false beliefs, etc. – that we disvalue within our epistemic communities. Equally, questioning facilitates the exchange of misinformation among community members – by facilitating the *sharing* of misinformation. As such, questioning serves to ease the passage of misinformation between members of a community. Much as holding doors eases passage in and out of a building. Indeed it is hard to see how the smooth and efficient exchange of misinformation would be possible in the absence of questioning.’

The above is the reasoning of the doomsayer. Watson’s is the reasoning of the optimist. My own thinking here is less committal, and more curious. I think Watson has a point, but so does the epistemic doomsayer. My final question to Watson is: why throw in with the optimist? And relatedly, *can* we defend the optimist here without inadvertently reducing the value of questioning in a social community to the value of trust?

**References**

Craig, Edward. 1991. *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis*. Clarendon Press.