Feminist Philosophy Quarterly

Volume 2
Issue 2 *Fall 2016*

Article 9

2016

Knowing Responsibly, Thinking Ecologically: Response to Panelists

Lorraine Code PhD DLitt FRSC
York University, codelb@yorku.ca

Recommended Citation
Code, Lorraine PhD DLitt FRSC. 2016. "Knowing Responsibly, Thinking Ecologically: Response to Panelists."Feminist Philosophy Quarterly2, (2). Article 9. doi:10.5206/fpq/2016.2.9.

Knowing Responsibly, Thinking Ecologically

Lorraine Code

By way of background though not by way of dissembling, I have to note that it was difficult to find a publisher for *Epistemic Responsibility* in the late 1980s. Now, in retrospect, I think some of the difficulties had more to do with state-of-the-art epistemology in Anglo-American philosophy than I was then able to recognize. Post-positivist epistemologists, working still in the legacy of logical positivism, seem to have found the book's aspirations to claim a place in that highly respected yet oddly *unpopulated* field quite simply implausible. Unpopulated, I mean to say, by "real" specific knowing subjects and/or multiples thereof, not by practitioners of/in analytic epistemology: they were the puppeteers, the invisible gatekeepers. Nor was there widespread tolerance for the idea that knowing could be a communal quest, a social (and latterly a political) project. The sustained abstract individualism that characterized "the knower" served to contain epistemic inquiry within a certain fixed—if tacit—set of assumptions about knowledge and subjectivity. According to the going orthodoxy then, "socializing" it would render its purposes implausibly diffuse. Hence, the very idea that knowing could be both a social and an individual project brought with it a heightened fear of descent into a pernicious relativism. Symptomatic in this regard is the respect Karl Popper's quest for developing an "epistemology without a knowing subject" had garnered (Popper 1968). Although it makes no sense to offer a mono-causal explanation of its silencing, *Epistemic Responsibility* did not fare well in its early days, for reasons that are not easy to discern. They may have to do with the state of the discipline then; they may also have to do with the sex of the putatively responsible knower?[1] Nonetheless, the book did earn gratifying respect from Ernest Sosa, then Professor of Philosophy at Brown University, where it was awarded the Brown University Press First Book Prize, together with an invitation to teach for one semester at Brown. In addition to the pleasure of teaching social epistemology and being part of that department, I was able to affiliate with the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women: it was a fine opportunity. Now, the book and the issues it engages are claiming renewed attention and interest, to the point where I have even come to like it, and to believe in it myself.

The issue now is to determine how anyone can/could respond to such thoughtful and insightful readings of her work as Susan Dieleman, Christine Koggel,

[1]See for example my "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?" *Metaphilosophy* 12, nos. 3 & 4 (July/October 1981): 267–276.

Cathy Maloney, and Alexis Shotwell offer of mine, especially when these readers/writers are so well known to and respected by this responder? Is it epistemically irresponsible to embark on such an attempt? Can objectivity figure in such an engagement? Can this exercise avoid self-referentiality? If the answer to any of these questions is "no," then does it enhance or detract from the book's putative standing? These questions hover in the background of what I will say here. One objective truth though, infuses everything: it is that I am *so honoured* by the very fact of this opportunity to respond; so moved by Anna Mudde's orchestration of these readings and by her part in devoting an entire session to *Epistemic Responsibility* at CSWIP 2015, that—among other things—it affirms the wisdom of my refusal to expunge *affect* from the epistemological repertoire I enlist throughout my thinking and writing. Furthermore, being thus honoured restores my belief in the worthiness of a project that was long under- or unacknowledged, and often severely criticized, not least by its author.

But why should a writer/thinker demur? By way of a second preamble, and germane to what I say here, I borrow from a footnote in Susan Dieleman's elegant contribution to this conversation. Drawing attention to the putative origins, and the territoriality, of social epistemology, she names Alvin Goldman as one of its self-proclaimed founders who, in a *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry, does not demur. He observes that thinkers interested in, and credited as principal actors in, this positive project of developing a *social* epistemology include "*himself*, Steve Fuller, C. A. J. Coady, Edward Craig, Philip Kitcher, Margaret Gilbert, *himself* again, *himself* and some co-authors, and then *himself*" (Dieleman 2016, 2–3, emphasis mine). The citation elicits a chuckle: clearly an ironic chuckle. How could so carefully colonized an area of inquiry find space for serious, constructive readings of works so far removed from its presupposed qualifying regulations, tacit though these may be, and decked out in unisex garb by the inclusion of one woman?

So many things come to mind in response to these so fine essays: oddly, for example, before reading Christine Koggel's splendid analysis, I had forgotten that Kant figured so prominently both in my 'everyday' philosophical thinking then, and in writing *Epistemic Responsibility*. But Christine is right to notice it: I believe, from reading her contribution to this set of papers, that I do have him ever-watchful in the background, so to speak, of how I think. Of course, depending on the situatedness of the reader, this fact/admission may push worries about relativism sharply to the fore; but it may also catch the (often silent) connections to epistemic virtue that figure more prominently, both in this book and in my subsequent writings, than I had fully realized. All of it reminds me of how naïve, how wide-eyed despite my already advanced age, I then was. Where Christine and I part company, perhaps, is that now I rarely think of these and other virtues as individually possessed or enacted; or rather I conceive of them as primarily social-interpersonal,

DOI: 10.5206/fpq/2016.2.9

secondarily 'individual.' It is not, I think, a small point. Whether these are just factual differences about how we each proceed, or evidence of mere whimsy on my part; or whether they separate our positions radically, I wonder. Clearly they are philosophically significant. Moreover, I have a certain allergic response to the very idea of "the individual" as a self-contained entity, because I cannot see—in the world even more than in philosophy—how it can function as a categorizing term, recalling as I frequently do Anne Seller's statement that "as an isolated individual I often do not know what my experiences are" (Seller 1988). *A fortiori*, so to speak, neither could I know what my *responsibilities* are, epistemic or other, were I a totally solitary being.

As I have noted, Sue's footnote prompts me to begin with an ironic chuckle: himself, himself, himself again!! Indeed. There is, it seems, no more to be said: the ramparts are well guarded. And why are (were?) we women so reluctant (many of us) to engage in such self-advertising? A rhetorical question, but not only that: I think of my own modesty, then: my near-shame about epistemic responsibility—both the idea, and the book. It met with such scant praise (and occasional vituperation) as it struggled to find a place *as a book*. I concluded that there were ample reasons: it just was not good enough. Its continued quest for uptake seemed merely to confirm that disdain, even when it won the prize I have mentioned. Now, I am gladdened by and pleased with its recent enthusiastic reception in some philosophical situations but more sanguine than I then was about matters of territoriality. There was no easy category, no obvious conceptual space where the book could fit. Hence the growth of social epistemology and *a fortiori* of feminist[2] and post-colonial epistemologies have played no small part in its revival/survival, as have renewed and constantly renewing conversations across the hitherto stark analytic/continental divide. By chance rather than by design, I had studied and respected both. Yet in the early post-publication period of *Epistemic Responsibility*, a seriously troubling constraint was an overwhelming, widespread disdain of "continental" work in analytic circles, of which a serious consequence was its demonstrated power to discredit hermeneutic analyses as philosophically illegitimate contributors to knowledge and understanding. But an equally inhibiting personal-historical constraint came out of the unorthodox character of my graduate studies where, owing to my own situatedness, I was not engaged in the adversarial and other public philosophical practices that seemed to prepare others to enter a highly competitive quest for recognition.

Perhaps as a consequence of these circumstances, perhaps from a certain unphilosophical personal stubbornness, I was not and am not persuaded—in

[2] It is worth noting that I did not write *Epistemic Responsibility* as a feminist book: I had no idea there could *be* such a pursuit as *feminist* epistemology.

response to Christine Koggel's challenging response—that relativism is an inevitable consequence of the position I take in *Epistemic Responsibility* and, with variations, continue to occupy. I am grateful to Christine for struggling as she does with the implications of these improbable positions, and I think now we are not so far apart in our thinking as we once were on these matters. It amounts to a rather feeble rejoinder to say, as I often do, that I mean "relative *to* certain circumstances, certain sets of beliefs, certain people." Such a move, for many thinkers, simply dodges the issue. Does it? My stubbornness does not derive from an intransigent commitment to relativism but from a resistance to the power of absolutism. Yet it is possible that my working conception of each amounts merely to a caricature of itself: I often test my philosophical intuitions by trying to imagine how it would be to *live* the implications of a certain way of thinking, which may make for sloppy philosophy but can, nonetheless, be enlightening. Thus tricky in this exchange is our varied response to virtue ethics, and to virtue epistemology. Christine is right to note that virtue disappeared (mostly) from my writing and thinking after *Epistemic Responsibility*. I have no good explanation for its vanishing: most plausible is the thought that as soon thereafter as *What Can She Know?* my thinking shifted from the implicit individualism with which I tended to think of virtues toward an increasingly social approach to most if not all epistemological issues—virtues among them. The distinction is, admittedly, stark and perhaps too swift; but it seems right. Still, it is clear that virtues more or less drop out of the picture in my later work, but I think—now tentatively—that in spirit they do persist, if not in the letter. In large part, I venture, we think differently about relativism, heretical as this thought may be: in my view, the caricatures of relativism and its putative consequences in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy make of it a demon from which good, responsible knowers must forever flee. For reasons such as these, I tend to distance my thinking from it.

Yet such distancing may well be a sham, and in this regard as in many others, these essays make me think again about some of my starker views. Here I am responding, first of all, to Alexis Shotwell's reference to "the possibility for practices of epistemic responsibility to create virtuous epistemic effects beyond what is known (about) or intended by particular agents" (Shotwell 2016, 1–2), which I read as a noble aim. It prompts me to think anew about such responsibility's *potential*, beyond or away from the backward-looking effects that have been my focus. I like the idea of its being a "generative theory" as it plays out from responsibility to ecological thinking, and I am moving, in consequence of these thoughts, toward a less defensive defense of the oft-maligned conceptual apparatus I enlisted in 1987. In this regard Alexis and Christine together motivate a productive revisiting of some sedimented ideas that may well have impeded thinking forwardly, so to speak, away from how it is or should have been to how it *could* be. Consequently, I applaud

Alexis's focus on the social imaginary, which does not figure in *Epistemic Responsibility* for the too-simple reason that I did not know about it, then. As her quotation from *Ecological Thinking* attests, this conceptual resource generates possibilities for filling a conceptual lacuna that has hampered productive being and doing, down on the ground, so to speak, in relation to HIV and AIDS. While the idea of "changing the social imaginary" (Shotwell 2016, 3) as it comes across here is too swift to capture the complexities of such an extended social-political project—it's not like changing a shirt!—nonetheless this is the generative idea that, in my view, has to be a goal, piece by piece and together, of collective, ongoing responsible knowings across multiple and multiply diverse situations. A larger, theoretical point, then, is that my hope for *epistemic responsibility*—both the book and the conceptual apparatus—has been that it could contribute a certain epistemic *energy* to thinking about knowing, such as distanced/after-the-fact (yet indeed highly principled) interventions commonly fail to achieve.

And what do these thoughts have to do with "himself"? At a 2008 social epistemology conference in Edinburgh, orchestrated and chaired by Alvin Goldman *himself*, my paper, "An Ecology of Epistemic Authority" (2011), had a strangely ambiguous, uncomfortable reception. It is not one of my best, but I still find it interesting. Yet many conference participants seemed not to know what to do with it: it was in a sense enigmatic, and it sits oddly in *Episteme.* It is unclear whether the unease derives from certain in-group standards of the ethics of writing; the appropriateness of subject matters; the irrelevance of novels, fiction, to thinking about knowledge. I am forcefully reminded of a negative review that voted (successfully) against publishing *Epistemic Responsibility:* "'Literizing' is not theorizing," the critic pronounced.[3] Perhaps such thoughts bear upon the apparent unease in Edinburgh. The paper's argument draws extensively on an episode in Leo Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*, and I ask myself whether this unease attests to a tacit, sedimented "rule" that elaborated examples drawn from literature can draw too much, can signal too soft an epistemic approach in taking their sources from a novel. (Is it pertinent that, historically, women have been the principal novel readers; men have read more "serious" things?) I have wondered whether the gender balance on the speakers' roster and in the *Episteme* volume prepared the way for this odd reception. Such speculations are only that; yet Sue's reference to a special feature of my work being "the role of the community in influencing what it means to act in epistemically responsible ways" prompts me to wonder whether in *bona fide* social epistemology circles there are still implicit limitations to how far it is respectable to stray into "the community," beyond the sanitized Anglo-American

[3] I use this expression as the title of my forthcoming contribution to Heidi Grasswick & Nancy McHugh, eds., *The Power of Example*, currently in preparation.

repertoire. Thinking about Susan's speculations about how "the role of the social is different depending on whether it shows up in a reliabilist or a responsibilist framework," I wonder whether there is an unspoken background assumption to the effect that the "social" is more appropriately evaluated from a reliabilist stance. Can a person be reliable without a community? I think the answer could be yes. But can one be responsible without a community? I think not.

In some intriguingly derived sense, there are strong connections here to Cathy Maloney's observations about "imaginative empathy," where she cites my conjecture that it "is less about knowing than about *believing*" (Code 2006, 231), parsing it as an understanding across difference that "opens the possibility of advocacy." Germane to this larger argument is her affirmation that such advocacy requires "an open or willing listening of the kind that Jay Lampert, writing about Gadamer's hermeneutics, refers to when he says that to engage dialogically an interpreter must 'freely invite aliens into one's home'" (Maloney 2016, 6). Her observation and this citation, in large part, capture my frustration in writing *Epistemic Responsibility* with the absence, in analytic epistemology, of hermeneutic resources for *understanding* a wide range of presumably populated epistemic activities. To an extent, "literizing" in some of its forms proffers one such resource, and may disqualify itself as alien in so doing. As Cathy rightly insists, a "person who wants to understand across difference cannot do so without opening herself to new possibilities. This involves risk to the knower's own ways of perceiving and sense of self, but without this open belief of the other, knowledge remains only a monologic repetition of the knower's own understanding" (Maloney 2016, 6). In my view, both then (in 1987) and now, understanding may sometimes *require* 'literizing' if its consequent theorizing is to be good of its kind; if the theorizer is to move responsibly away from, or engage responsibly with, the 'givenness' of a stubbornly entrenched social imaginary. This thought is continuous with Cathy's reading of the risk of opening oneself to new possibilities which, in my view, is one of the most vital (indeed risky), and most often ignored or omitted, aspects of trying to know/understand across differences—especially when "a monologic repetition of the knower's own understanding" consists largely in one-liners, instantaneously produced and rarely contested.

I think it is in this regard that Alexis Shotwell refers to shifts in epistemic practice creating space where "new forms of scientific practice . . . and thus new ontologies" might arise (2016, 3). Such, too, is my hope. And for my way of thinking, too, it is vital to bring such renewed/revised epistemic approaches to bear on complex social-political-medical situations and circumstances in their complexity. So I applaud Alexis's bringing these ponderings to bear specifically on the matter of HIV/AIDS activism, weaving philosophy and "real world" practices together in open spaces—spaces that *it* opens—removed from yet deeply informed by thinking in the

DOI: 10.5206/fpq/2016.2.9

esoteric spaces to which so much philosophical inquiry continues to confine itself. More globally, if that is the right word, I applaud—as I do every day—the very fact, the existence, of feminist philosophy and of CSWIP, without which, I venture, *epistemically responsible* responses to and engagements in "life, the universe, and everything" would be seriously truncated.

References

Code, Lorraine. 2006. *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location*. New York: Oxford University Press.

———. 2011. "An Ecology of Epistemic Authority." In "Social Cognitive Ecology and Its Role in Social Epistemology." Special issue, *Episteme*: *A Journal of Social Epistemology* 8 (1): 25–37.

Dieleman, Susan. 2016. "Responsibilism and the Analytic-Sociological Debate in Social Epistemology." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (2): Article 6. http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fpq/vol2/iss2/6.

Koggel, Christine M. 2016. "The Epistemological and the Moral/Political in *Epistemic Responsibility*: Beginnings and Reworkings in Lorraine Code's Work." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (2): Article 5. http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fpq/vol2/iss2/5.

Maloney, Cathy. 2016. "From *Epistemic Responsibility* to *Ecological Thinking*: The Importance of Advocacy for Epistemic Community." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (2): Article 7. http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fpq/vol2/iss2/7.

Popper, Karl R. 1968. "Epistemology without a Knowing Subject." In *Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science III*, edited by B. Van Rootselaar and J. F. Staal, 333–373. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing.

Seller, Anne. 1988. "Realism versus Relativism: Toward a Politically Adequate Epistemology." In *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy,* edited by Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Shotwell, Alexis. 2016. "Fierce Love: What We Can Learn about Epistemic Responsibility from Histories of AIDS Advocacy." *Feminist Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (2): Article 8. http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/fpq/vol2/iss2/8.

LORRAINE CODE is Distinguished Research Professor Emerita in Philosophy at York University in Toronto Canada, and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She is the author of *Epistemic Responsibility* (1987), *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (1991), and *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on (Gendered) Locations* (1995). In *Ecological Thinking: The Politics of Epistemic Location* (Oxford University Press, 2006) she develops an "ecological naturalism," which draws on

ecological science where Quineans look to cognitive science, as a place—literal and metaphorical—where knowledge is "naturally" made. She is currently working on issues of gendered subjectivity as they bear on testimony, ignorance, and vulnerability, with particular reference to climate-change scepticism. This research is funded by an Insight grant from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. The project's title is "Manufactured Uncertainty and Epistemic Responsibility: Implications for Climate-Change Skepticism."