I begin with a certain temerity on an autobiographical note, sketching some of the reasons that prompted me to write a book called *Epistemic Responsibility* in the 1980s, after completing a PhD with a dissertation titled ‘Knowledge and Subjectivity’. The dissertation topic did not lead directly into thoughts about epistemic responsibility since the concept was not then so central a part of the philosophical lexicon as it briefly came to be, and as it is again reclaiming explanatory space. Yet a rigorous if short-lived exchange assessing its ‘scope and limits’, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, prompted me to take it up in ways its then-articulators subsequently ceased to pursue, perhaps because of its apparent fluidity, its lack of conceptual rigour, and/or its uneasy fit within then-current epistemological orthodoxy. For my work, it was the missing piece in a range of issues I was thinking about without the conceptual resources to articulate them.

Briefly to rehearse some moments in a relatively short-lived debate in Anglo-American philosophy then, consider the following: In 1974, asking ‘How Do You Know?’ Ernest Sosa suggests that, on occasion, a resort to neglectful data collection resulting in lack of knowledge ‘could be traced back to epistemic irresponsibility’ (1974: 117), to substandard performance attributable to the investigator. More centrally inspirational for how I continued is Laurence Bonjour’s (1978) observation:

> Cognitive doings are epistemically justified, on this conception, only if and to the extent that they are aimed at this goal – which means roughly that one accepts all and only beliefs which one has good reason to think are true. To accept a belief in the absence of such a reason, however appealing or even mandatory such acceptance may be from other standpoints, is to neglect the pursuit of truth; such an acceptance is, one might say, *epistemically irresponsible*. My contention is that the idea of being epistemically responsible is the core concept of epistemic justification.

*(1978: 5)*

Yet, according to Hilary Kornblith, Bonjour seems to presuppose that there is a free choice of belief: thus, fulfilling one’s epistemic responsibilities is a matter of following certain rules of ideal reasoning – an assumption he rejects (Kornblith 1983: 34 fn.1). But he argues persuasively in favour of judging epistemic conduct responsible or irresponsible: he is a principal contributor to this line of thinking. In this 1983 essay, Kornblith suggests that often when someone wonders
whether a belief is justified, she/he is asking ‘whether the belief is the product of epistemically responsible action’ (1983: 34). Such questions, he notes, are about the ethics of belief. He stops short, however, of claiming that beliefs are freely chosen tout court, concentrating rather on questions about how ‘truth seekers ought to comport themselves’ (1983:34). Similarly, John Heil focuses on a tension between regarding believers as active doxastic agents who are responsible for what they believe, and believers as being ‘at the mercy of their belief-forming equipment’ (1983: 357): apparently, they are passive. Referring to the epistemically responsible agent, he argues: ‘It is not that one has a choice in the beliefs that one forms, but that one has a say in the procedures one undertakes that lead to their formation’ (1983: 363). Hence he is critical of an epistemological focus on proper reasoning to the exclusion of considering how evidence is gathered, maintaining that being epistemically responsible is about engaging in appropriate knowledge-seeking procedures. He addresses neither the criteria of ‘appropriateness’ nor the nature of responsibility as praxis. He concludes that a need to avoid voluntarism in knowledge/belief formation leaves space for speaking of epistemic responsibility and agency only if the focus shifts to the ways in which ‘agents . . . select belief-generating procedures’ (1983: 363).

As this small sampling indicates, discussions of epistemic responsibility did claim a place, then, in mainstream American epistemology. They may have failed to play a more central part in consequence of their uneasy positioning in relation to the post-positivist rigour that continued to govern epistemology, or in consequence of their departure from deductive-nomological analysis. More plausible an explanation is/ was their stark individualism, which sustains settled practices of failing to take subjectivity into account: indeed, of avoiding the compromises doing so would entail.\(^2\) It is difficult – even incongruous – to talk about responsibilities in relation to knowing chairs and tables, even though in some situations it could matter. But once knowledge-seeking is recognized as a cooperative-collaborative, textured human practice, it is vital to keep in mind Anne Seller’s emblematic affirmation: ‘As an isolated individual, I often do not know what my experiences are’ (1988: 180). These, in condensed form, are among the ideas that, in my view, affirmed the centrality of such issues.

In writing *Epistemic Responsibility*, I was attempting to fill a gap I could neither name nor describe – a gap where evaluative and interpretive judgments could find no place, seemingly because they could not ‘boil down’ to simple true-or-false empirical propositional claims, nor did they admit of evaluation – say, of nuance or relevance. Most crucially, inquiry that starts from (perhaps tacit) questions about epistemic responsibility requires engaging with subjectivity/subjectivities: it is about working to understand, assessing, and (often hermeneutically) engaging with issues about the place of subjectivity in knowledge-making, constructing, and evaluating practices. It is about the ethics and politics of knowledge, and indeed about epistemic subjectivity in its multiple instantiations. Hence given that talk of responsibility in its literal modalities commonly, if implicitly, refers to human agency, it clearly requires ‘Taking Subjectivity Into Account’ (Code 1996): starting from understandings of epistemic subjectivity/subjectivities more diverse and more complex than working from the standard unidentified occupant of the S place, in ‘S knows that p’ assertions, allows. My aim was to claim space for the concept and the practices it could inform in knowledge acquisition, development, evaluation, and circulation by bringing the epistemic subject out of hiding:\(^3\) acknowledging the incongruity embedded in working from a systemic failure to recognize that talk about responsibility without reference to a responsible epistemic subject – to the knower(s), the potentially responsible or irresponsible epistemic agents involved – is indeed futile.

Space did have to be claimed, for in the then (and often still now) ‘instituted’ Anglo-American epistemic imaginary, talk about responsible epistemic conduct and its implications for knowing well was conceptually at odds with established epistemic practice.\(^4\) This incongruity is apparent
in the examples I cite from epistemologists who were working on such issues, then. In an entrenched concentration on determining how \( S \) can know that \( p \), there was no ready conceptual framework for assessing the variability, tonality, and situation-specificity of a range of putative knowers or of certain kinds of claim that nonetheless, I maintain, merit the label ‘knowledge’. Nor was it easy to detach references to subjectivity from a then-pressing worry about inquiry reducing to a defence of subjectivism or to a chapter in the sociology of knowledge. In short, appeals to necessary and sufficient conditions were inadequate to naming the task that investigations into such situated, contextualized responsibilities required.

Thus, in claiming significance for ‘epistemic responsibility’, the book brings a sideways/oblique conceptual framing into the going discourse, albeit tentatively and uneasily: uptake was, and persisted in being, rare. There was no space within the going conceptual repertoire to introduce, and anticipate a hearing for, matters of responsibility within the formal apparatus of analytic/Anglo-American theories of knowledge, then. In part owing to an implicit yet firm separation of epistemology from ethics, politics, and ontology, such proposals were read as heralding a descent into incoherence. Again, in part owing to the principled absence of any real ‘knower(s)’, it seemed that to achieve objectivity, knowledge-claims had to be made from nowhere and into a void, with no hearers, validators, deliberators, or naysayers participating in the scenario: no-one appropriately nameable as responsible or otherwise. In short, the received Anglo-American epistemic imaginary lacked the conceptual resources to bring matters of responsibility into focus or to follow so unorthodox a line of reasoning. The very idea of epistemic responsibility unsettles the self-certainty of an orthodoxy for which, to avoid a pernicious subjectivism, knowers are replicable space-holders whose circumstances are irrelevant to processes of verification or falsification.

Nonetheless, working within a conceptual frame for which responsible or irresponsible epistemic practices – of knowing, and \( a \) fortiori of responsible knowing as conduct are pervasive goals – can move toward closing a conceptual-interpretive lacuna that holds a range of issues hors de question in epistemology and its cognate practices, even as the politics of knowledge claims increased epistemic legitimacy. Pivotal are matters of subjectivity that are integral to thinking about responsibility, but could claim no place in Anglo-American epistemology, then. Yet these matters are integral to issues, practices, and puzzles that exceed the assertive scope and legitimacy of ‘\( S \) knows that \( p \)’ declarations. They direct attention to the activity – the human praxis of knowing, inquiring, deliberating – in an ongoing quest that resists premature closure.

Questions about responsible epistemic conduct have met with impatience or disdain from mainstream Anglo-American epistemologists, no doubt because it is difficult to establish definitive criteria for or against judging how well an act/process/practice of knowing fulfills or evades these requirements. Moreover, sufficiently elaborated examples of epistemic (mis)conduct face charges of committing the \( ad \) hominem fallacy. Yet such acts are not so different from practices of judging moral conduct good or bad, which are integral to virtue ethics: apart from strict adherence to a utilitarian calculus or facsimile thereof, ethical/moral conduct is amenable to interpretive-evaluative judgments, which admit of degree. The parallel is plausible. But, given the tenacious legacy of logical positivism and its derivatives, Anglo-American epistemologists were less than prepared to think analogously about knowing. Silently, it was conceived as an all-or-nothing phenomenon which, in striving for objectivity, presupposes and preserves the anonymity and/or the absence of the knowing subject(s).

Hence, although the knower is generally absent from articulated knowledge claims, other than as a place-holder in relatively trivial, empirically-derived assertions, epistemology prior to social epistemology persisted as a more rigorously individualist activity/practice than moral-political practices could be. When paradigmatic knowledge claims draw on everyday events and
equipment in (presumptively) materially replete scenarios with a single but replicable player, the act of knowing that a cup is on the table needs no additional substance to establish its exemplary status. Yet this status is an artefact of the localized specificity and limited reach of the putative universality of standard epistemic exemplars and of the invisibility of knowers beyond their role as mere place-holders. To invoke a tired yet still pertinent example, even so venerated an empiricist as Bertrand Russell withdrew the paradigm status he presupposed for ‘All swans are white’ in the aftermath of colonizers’ ‘discovering’ black swans in Australia. The example points to the limitations of generalizing from local experiences and to the challenges colonialism, at home and abroad, poses to taken-for-granted epistemic habits and practices. Are such practices thereby rendered irresponsible? The question is unsettling for Anglo-centered evaluations of responsibility in ‘mainstream’ epistemology: clearly, their paradigm status, not just as specific utterances but as constitutive of settled epistemic practices and precepts, needs to be reevaluated.

The difficulty in bringing matters of responsible epistemic conduct into the then-going (late 1980s) conceptual frame is thus consequent upon the conception of subjectivity that has silently sustained the ‘instituted’ Anglo-American epistemic imaginary. Then, and still now, ‘S’ was an infinitely replicable place-holder: the invisible knower ‘ . . . that p’. When the influence of British empiricism and logical positivism was strongest, S was rarely named. Yet he was presumptively adult (but not old), male, white, educated, and sufficiently affluent to have cups, tables, and other ‘standard’ material accoutrements of ‘everyday life’ in the social-economic circumstances that formed the presumed backdrop of his being, knowing, and doing. Exemplary knowledge claims were commonly uttered ‘outwards’, into an empty or universally presupposed space: thus neither deliberatively nor interactively. The discursive spaces (written or spoken) into which they are spoken, heard, written, or read were rarely taken into account. Such assumptions infused the social-epistemic imaginary of Anglo-American philosophy then – and still, if less persistently, now. Silently yet firmly, they establish the scope and limits of human knowledge worthy of the name and of epistemological investigation.

Reasons for or against the uptake of such projects are difficult to substantiate, but to catch a sense of the opposition they generated, consider two early reviews of Epistemic Responsibility, by Elizabeth Fricker (1989) and Susan Haack (1991). The former is cautiously yet helpfully critical; the latter vociferously excoriating. For Fricker (and I agree), a serious flaw is the book’s (the author’s) failure to spell out exactly what a ‘responsibilist’ epistemology is. She notes its indebtedness to Aristotelian virtue theory, is uneasy about its appeal to a Kantian idea of the active role of the subject in synthesizing experience, and suggests that the epistemic responsibilities an agent is to fulfill are insufficiently articulated in the text. These points are well taken. They suggest that a principal flaw is in my attempt to position the book in relation to analytic epistemology then, some of whose major contributors I cite. With respect to Haack’s review, evidently the hermeneutic style of much of the book’s presentation – its quasi-narrative articulation – offends her: plainly, she is deeply offended. She elaborates her reaction in extensive examples of places where I am less than exact, where the writing is allusive rather than expository-argumentative, where I fail to observe settled distinctions. Many such criticisms may be warranted, yet the review’s mockingly dismissive tone is at best grossly insulting, at worst, nastily mocking. Its purpose is unclear: seemingly, it is meant to discipline an undisciplined – and ignorant – would-be philosopher. In so doing, it speaks from a closed, hard-edged epistemic position where the epistemic ‘engagement’ these criticisms suggest is characteristic, in Kristie Dotson’s words, of a ‘culture of justification’. The contrast as I understand it is with a deliberative, dialogical culture. Whereas the justificatory approach has no space for representing philosophers as engaged in ongoing dialogic inquiry, in a culture of praxis the aim is to work collegially, collaboratively – if not harmoniously – toward evaluating, understanding, interpreting guiding beliefs, both superficial
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and sedimented. Epistemic friction may well be integral to the process, but it need not be negatively or aggressively conceived.

As Epistemic Responsibility moves into a more explicitly hermeneutic dimension, there is – I think – a clearer sense of what is at stake, as also in its appeals to quasi-Wittgensteinian cautions about asking not for meaning, but for use: its situating knowledge. That said, I do not spell out necessary and sufficient conditions for achieving responsibility in epistemic practice, mainly because there are none. Nor do I offer a guide or rule-book. This absence, for some (including Haack), may leave the book in something of a criterion-less limbo. But such an approach is not so different from how a putative doer will endeavour to engage in virtuous moral-political conduct. Although there may be no established rules, epistemic agents learn, communally and interactively, to work toward, and embody, responsible epistemic practices: to navigate situations where trust, deliberation, and debate are their principal resources, and accountability requires careful deliberative practices. Would-be knowers need not be dogmatic or rigidly rule-bound in so doing: often, and appropriately, there are no rules, and arguments may work from example and/or analogy. Nonetheless, thinking how knowers might achieve such a goal is an ongoing project in social epistemology, as is evaluating epistemic responsibility in its basic connections with trust. The conclusion may be that analytic epistemology, given the fixity of its formal conceptual apparatus, cannot make space for epistemic responsibility and is impoverished in consequence. Such a conclusion is not mine.

When Fricker’s and Haack’s reviews appeared, the conceptual resources may indeed have been lacking for assessing the meaning and value of responsible epistemic conduct. Hence it would be challenging – akin to a category mistake – to spell out rules or necessary and sufficient conditions for its achievement. Fricker’s puzzlement is apt. There was no conceptual space where knowers could find ‘the minds prepared’ to take its potential seriously (recalling Louis Pasteur: Dans les champs de l’observation le hasard ne favorise que les esprits preparés: chance, or fortune, favours only the prepared mind). Now, social epistemology is creating spaces where such projects can claim a voice: spaces hospitable to understanding knowledge-seeking as a social practice in communicative-interpretive frameworks where discussion, deliberation, debate claim a pivotal place. Conditions of situation and uptake claim a new centrality, and hermeneutic-interpretive-deliberative practices a renewed pertinence, even though the subjectivity of the subject remains unaddressed. Yet Elizabeth Fricker, with many Anglo-American epistemologists then, found a quasi-oxymoronic uneasiness in the very idea that so putatively inexact a practice could claim the label ‘epistemology’ while offering no objective (contrasted with situation-specific) criteria that, for bona fide epistemologists, are definitive of epistemic practice. But ‘responsibilists’ need not eschew such criteria: respect for empirical evidence, commitment to truth-seeking and objectivity, adherence to public standards of inquiry remain. Still, responsible epistemic conduct requires even more challenging practices: communicative, deliberative, evaluative, temporally extended practices such as are rarely engaged by knowers as isolated, solitary place-holders making punctiform knowledge claims.

Social epistemology involves more than adding a concept, or another variation, to a conceptual orthodoxy. It marks a radical shift in practices of understanding and evaluating knowledge as integral to, constitutive of ways of being in the world. Like all human practices, knowing is situated within and enabled or thwarted by material, political, geographical, situational, cultural, and other factors, many of which are integral to assessing and/or implementing knowledgeable beliefs and actions, and many of which evoke matters of responsibility. Feminist, antiracist, multicultural, and other ‘difference sensitive’ theories and practices are acutely aware of them. By this feature alone, in its multiple modalities, they depart from the bland neutrality of Anglo-American orthodoxy. Nor do all such factors figure in every instance of social epistemology per
se, so to speak, but their insistent (if tacit) affirmation unsettles the scope and limits of pre-social epistemic projects while adding urgency to developing responsible knowledge-making practices.

Situating this discussion within an *epistemic imaginary,*\(^{11}\) is more than and different from adding one more piece to an established conceptual apparatus. As I have indicated, in advocating such a relocation I am drawing indirectly and variously on the work of Michèle Le Dœuff and Cornelius Castoriadis. While neither of these thinkers makes explicit reference to epistemic responsibility, their (admittedly diverse) conceptions of an *imaginary* prepare the way to developing a framework for loosening the constraints inherent in locating inquiry within rhetorical spaces where the power of such a conceptual reconstruction is unacknowledged. Hence I am endorsing Le Dœuff’s contention that ‘there is no intellectual activity that is not grounded in an imaginary’ (2003: xvi), while insisting that working within an *imaginary* is emphatically not equivalent to appealing to ‘imagination’ as fantasy – individual or collective – as an explanatory contributor to knowledge making and circulating. Such thought experiments have no place here. Yet neither is the point to discount the contributions of ‘imagination’ to knowing well: as José Medina (2013) shows, the language of a social ‘imagination’, also, claims space in these deliberations, if differently.

In understanding inquiry/knowing as grounded in an imaginary, I follow Castoriadis, who refers to a widespread, often imperceptible yet multifaceted world-view or framework, a complex of ideas, expectations, presuppositions, implicit assumptions which are by no means beyond articulation or debate, although they rarely enter everyday discourse. An imaginary thus conceived is (distantly) analogous to a Kuhnian paradigm or a Foucauldian *epistêmê* in shaping, framing, conferring legitimacy and/or its opposite, on quotidian knowing in its particularity and generality. With Kuhn, a paradigm refers to standard-setting exemplars of scientific legitimacy within a powerful if often tacit worldview, which confer or withhold judgments of scientific achievement. With Castoriadis, Le Dœuff, and Foucault (albeit variously for each), the effects of an imaginary can be more quotidian than domain specific. For example, as the rhetoric of ‘public man, private woman’ signals, the implicit imaginary from which it derives is integral to a western–northern white middle-class social imaginary that women (of a certain class, age, race) should comport themselves ‘decorously’ in ways which, *inter alia,* were stifling, inhibiting, damaging. Certain areas of activity, study, or employment were known to be ‘unsuitable’ for a woman. Likewise, received values – epistemic, social, moral, political, ontological – deep if silently embedded in, yet constitutive of the dailiness (allgemeine *Alltäglichkeit*) of ‘everyday life’, carry a normative force whose (often tacit) power demands recognition in thought and action. Violations occasion disapproval or worse, yet their manifestations are less than explicit, despite the power they exert. The social imaginary characteristic of white middle-class North America, as of much of the affluent western–northern world in the twentieth and twenty-first century, has silently condoned and perpetuated such coercive practices, shaping the assumptions that hold ‘neutral’ examples in place, whose ‘neutrality’ often masks an endorsement of variably unjust yet entrenched ways of thinking, being, and knowing. Nor were/are these assumptions always negative, restrictive. In their evolving modalities, they open space for hitherto unacceptable policies and practices: women’s and non-white people’s admission to higher education in many countries is a telling example. Analogous claims pertain, diversely, to assumptions that hold approval or disapproval in place across the social–political–everyday world in most societies and situations: albeit gradually and tacitly, they are sufficiently powerful to effect hitherto unimaginable shifts in social practices.

Writing *Epistemic Responsibility* in the early 1980s, I knew neither Le Dœuff’s nor Castoriadis’s work: their rich – diverse – thinking about the *imaginary.* In consequence, my analysis was too slender in its articulation of the conceptions of subjectivity and epistemic agency that informed it, and of the powerful, if often hidden, forces that conferred or withheld attributions of
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responsibility. Processes of understanding thinking, knowing, living within an imaginary relocate this way of thinking, now (if less clearly then) off-side from an epistemological orthodoxy with its presuppositions that formal analyses couched in a language of anonymity (S knows that p) or generic assertions about knowers and the known will best achieve objectivity and explanatory clarity, uncluttered by the specificities of subjects and situations; by particularities. With such presuppositions this analysis parts company. One reason for this shift derives from the exclusionary power, then (if less starkly now) of a divide between Anglo-American and ‘Continental’ philosophical thinking about knowledge. It manifests vividly in a widespread (erstwhile) Anglo-American philosophical reluctance to acknowledge and draw upon the interpretive-hermeneutical resources integral to the practice of such philosophers as Martin Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Luce Irigaray, Franz Fanon, and their ‘post-modern’ contemporaries and descendants. Most of these philosophers neither represent themselves nor are represented as epistemologists (owing perhaps to a resistance to Anglo-American orthodoxy or to convictions about the interrelatedness of diverse ‘branches’ of philosophy). Their engagements with ‘being in the world’ investigate ways of experiencing and knowing that world in its singularities, sociality, multiplicity, and unevenly distributed power structures. They work, albeit variously, with practices of explicitly embodied knowing that are responsive and responsible, or the reverse, in their interactive relations with their ‘subject matters’. From such holistic approaches the imaginary achieves its power as a resource, where epistemological questions may not be labelled as such, but are woven into larger interpretive/hermeneutical analyses. Knowing, being, doing appear as integrated practices: ‘situated knowledges’ in Donna Haraway’s words attest to analogous assumptions and practices, even though the terminology would not be hers.

Thinking-knowing within an epistemic imaginary in its contrasts with an imaginary of mastery and control, eschewing any goal of achieving a ‘view from nowhere’, are integral to Castoriadis’s conception of an instituted social imaginary, which ‘carries within it the normative social meanings, customs, expectations, assumptions, values, prohibitions, and permissions – the habitus and ethos – into which human beings are nurtured from childhood and which they internalize, affirm, challenge, or contest as they make sense of their place, responsibilities, options within a world, both social and physical, whose ‘nature’ and meaning are also instituted within these imaginary significations’. This conceptual framing owes a debt to phenomenology, especially in its hermeneutic modalities, while drawing on and engaging with approaches in Anglo-American epistemology that are, perhaps in spite of themselves, hospitable to such readings. The consequent position need be neither static nor dogmatic. To it, Castoriadis counter-poses the instituting imaginary: the critical-creative activity of a society whose autonomy is apparent in its capacity to put itself in question, recognizing that as a society, it is incongruous with itself, with scant reason for self-satisfaction. Feminist, post-colonial, anti-racist, and other ‘new’ epistemologies are often informed by what amounts to an implicit recognition of such incongruities.

Relating these thoughts to epistemic responsibility, I suggest that working toward its realization – cognizant of its questions as both urgent and difficult – requires no mere adjustment of certain basic assumptions of mainstream epistemology: it re-situates its projects and practices. Thus to José Medina’s question – ‘When is partaking in a body of social ignorance a form of irresponsibility? . . . And is the failure in responsibility an ethical failure of the individual or a political failure of society?’ (2013: 133) – my response is that, despite its seeming to fall outside the purview of standard epistemology tout court, the failure is both ethical and political. Thus, appeals to epistemic responsibility, which has been something of a sleeper since my 1987 book appeared, are now enriching the conceptual repertoire of Anglo-American social epistemology, opening new rhetorical-discursive spaces. In consequence, epistemic inquiry moves toward wide-ranging reconceptions of the place and purpose of responsibility in knowledge-making and
knowledge-conveying practices. One of its effects is evident in the spaces it opens for taking subjectivity seriously into account in projects of evaluating knowledge claims, both punctiform and extenuated. Indeed, for this project to succeed, a fundamental restructuring of going assumptions about epistemic subjectivities is urgently required. Such appeals acquire an enhanced urgency in relation to knowing – and understanding – the epistemic implications of racism, sexism, classism, homophobia, and multiple other ‘otherings’ from an entrenched and powerful social norm.

As its early critics note, epistemic responsibility does not come complete with a set of accompanying rules for the direction of the mind. Like many virtues, it names a precept, a principle whose effects are diffuse, unpredictable, and open to ongoing, collaborative-contestatory deliberation. Often they do not speak for themselves but require collective processes of evaluation/negotiation. I do not spell out necessary and sufficient conditions for achieving epistemic responsibility, and for good reasons: there are none. But guidelines can be sketched: impressionistic though they may be. In this respect they are akin to other articulations of virtue theory as for example, in Alasdair MacIntyre’s After Virtue, where he affirms the significance of narrative and tradition for understanding human lives. He emphasizes that virtue is not a one-off phenomenon: that it manifests as part of ‘a concept of self whose unity resides in the unity of a narrative which links birth to life and death as narrative beginning to middle to end’ (1981: 191). He is not claiming narrative as the only route to understanding, nor that narrative will tell of a single, isolated protagonist, but its contribution to engaging with complex moral (and epistemological) questions can be vital.17

For reasons such as these, it is increasingly clear why such socially grounded and enacted capacities as responsible knowing found no easy uptake in Anglo-American philosophy, prior to the development of social epistemology. Now, more than thirty years after After Virtue, and in consequence of the proliferation of social media as sources of information, in the early twenty-first century, the issues are still more complex. So, for example, in response to a question about what he expected students to know about climate-ecological issues, a colleague observed: ‘Virtually nothing: their main source of information is Fox News’.18 Does these students’ putative ignorance in these matters invite condemnation, understanding, and tolerance? Such questions are increasingly urgent as people’s reliance on social media as sources of knowledge/information increases in western/northern societies, where epistemological counter-arguments often struggle to claim a hearing. Here matters of epistemic responsibility claim a renewed urgency. A new epistemology of listening, interpreting, deliberating will need to claim a larger place than it has hitherto occupied, in philosophy and in the world, and the inadequacy of epistemic individualism will be increasingly evident.

Still pertinent, then, is Medina’s observation: ‘The mistake of intellectualism is to think that by changing the epistemic, the ethical and political will follow, whereas . . . people’s concepts and cognitions may not control all their emotions, moral characters, and political attitudes’ (2013: 90). The going social imaginary makes space for such a thought. Medina, citing Miranda Fricker on epistemic injustice, rightly insists that ‘such a contextual approach has to be pluralized and rendered relational in more complex way . . . [its] assumptions . . . about the pervasiveness of hermeneutical lacunas and their influence on entire collectivities have to be interrogated’ (90). But whose collective understanding is at issue? Whose collective hermeneutical resource? Of particular interest, especially in relation to climate change, is how certain ‘epistemic identities’ and social-structural positionings enable and restrict projects of bringing epistemic responsibility into conversation with questions about hermeneutic and testimonial (in)justice.

In his chapter ‘Epistemic Responsibility and Culpable Ignorance’, Medina asks: ‘When is partaking in a body of social ignorance a form of irresponsibility? . . . And is the failure in responsibility an ethical failure of the individual or a political failure of society?’ (2013: 133). The
questions are timely now that appeals to epistemic responsibility are currently unsettling – and enriching – the conceptual repertoire of Anglo-American social epistemology: opening new rhetorical-discursive spaces. Medina’s book exemplifies this reengagement. Such appeals acquire enhanced urgency in relation to climate change skepticism, with the doubts that feed it and are nurtured to preserve it. Participating in such skeptically generated social ignorance is indeed, and always, a form of irresponsibility: at once an ethical and a political failure, with ethics and politics reinforcing one another. It is, primarily, an egregious failure of epistemic responsibility, with cultivated-manufactured ignorance and doubt sustaining the ethics and politics that require contestation. The question of whose irresponsibility is at issue, and how it could/should be discerned and addressed, is fraught in a time of conflicting information which few ‘ordinary people’ are equipped to disentangle from the vested interests and unstable expertise that often infuse it. Answering the question in the affirmative presupposes that ignorance is recognizable and that its ‘partakers’ acknowledge it as such. How could they justify doing so?

I have noted Castoriadis’s references to the social unrest that follows when a society where a certain imaginary has prevailed comes to realize that it is incongruous with itself: that a struggle to preserve an impoverished imaginary would be ethically and politically unworthy. Especially pertinent in this regard are ongoing, often vicious debates in/about the epistemology and ethics of climate change inquiry. Large epistemic injustices are widely enacted against bringing to public-social attention matters that challenge fixed self-presentations to overinflate an epistemic exaggeration that positions certain findings ‘dans le faux’ (to distort the Foucauldian idea ‘dans le vrai’). This inquiry, then, is involved in working to discern how certain ‘epistemic identities’ and social-structural positionings simultaneously enable and restrict projects of bringing epistemic responsibility into the conversation with matters of hermeneutic and testimonial (in)justice. Difficult to articulate in this regard are injustices performed against hard-won public reasons that generate a certain credibility in favour of scientific research stereotypically presumed to be ‘neutral’ (in a now superseded imaginary!). They unsettle assumptions that accord quasi-inviolate standing to ‘science has proved’ assertions, without asking ‘whose science’ (with a nod to Sandra Harding). Hence an imaginary of complacency and comfort seeks reassurance from its own persistence, so long as practitioners look away from empirical events that, increasingly, strike at the core of their lives – and their theories. Taking some of these ideas as my starting point, I am currently examining events of denial and refusal in response to climate change, which the social imaginary of the affluent western world still strives to accommodate. At issue, still, are questions of individual and collective epistemic responsibility.

Related chapters: 3, 7, 11, 20, 21

Notes
1 See also Sosa (1980).
2 See in this connection Code (1993).
3 The reference is to Medina (2013: 133), with thanks to Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr.
4 Yet owing to Ernest Sosa’s (and others’) careful reading of the manuscript, Epistemic Responsibility found its way into print. It was awarded a Brown University First Book Prize, with a teaching and research fellowship at Brown.
5 The ways that putatively universal and general concepts and convictions are challenged by material, social, and historical realities is explored by Alcoff (2005), especially chapters 1–4.
6 In part, these criticisms indicate the degree to which the notion of epistemic responsibility was under-theorized at the time and the extent to which Epistemic Responsibility was forward reaching. Indeed, Aristotelian virtue epistemology arose in response to the need for accounts of epistemic responsibility.
7 See Dotson (2012), with thanks to Gaile Pohlhaus, Jr. See also Moulton (1983).
8 The reference is to Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges’, in her 1991 work.
9 See Battaly (2014).
10 I refer to Edward Craig’s (1999) innovative approach, moving away from single epistemic agents speaking into a void, to working with the language of speakers and hearers. It is a revolutionary move, whose implications are central to the development of social epistemology.
11 Charles Taylor (2003) also writes about imaginaries in a sense contiguous with, but not identical, to the sense that informs the works I draw upon here.
12 A notable exception is Alcoff (1996), where she draws on the work of Gadamer and Foucault and, relevant to my thinking here, on hermeneutics.
17 Relevant here is Code (2011). This appeared in a special issue on Social Cognitive Ecology and its Role in Social Epistemology, edited by Mikkel Gerken, Jesper Kalelstrup, Klemens Kappel, and Duncan Pritchard.
18 I cite this example in Code (2014).

References


