

UNIVERSAL INTELLECTUAL TRUST

All of us get opinions from other people. And not just a few. We acquire opinions from others extensively and do so from early childhood through virtually every day of the rest of our lives. Sometimes we rely on others for relatively inconsequential information. Is it raining outside? Did the Yankees win today? But we also depend on others for important or even life preserving information. Where is the nearest hospital? Do people drive on the left or the right here? We acquire opinions from family and close acquaintances but also from strangers. We get directions from and heed the warnings of individuals we've never met, and likewise read books and articles and listen to television and radio reports authored by individuals we don't know personally. Moreover, we undertake inquiries in groups in which the group relies on the conclusions of the individuals making up the group. In some of these collective efforts everyone knows one another, for example, a set of neighbors taking a census of birds in the neighborhood. But others, such as the effort to understand gravity, are not so nearly self-contained. Indeed, many of the most impressive human intellectual accomplishments are the collective products of individuals far removed from another in location (and sometimes even over time) who rely on each other's conclusions without feeling the need to re-confirm them.

Our intellectual lives are played out within an atmosphere of presumptive intellectual trust, and intellectual progress depends upon this atmosphere. And yet, such trust can appear puzzling from the point of view of an individual inquirer. What reasons do I have, or could I have, to rely on the opinions of individuals far removed from me in time or place and about whom I know little?

I will be arguing that an answer to this first-person question is to be found in two theses. The

first is that it can be reasonable for me to have trust in the overall reliability of my faculties and opinions even though I lack non-question begging assurances of their reliability. The second is that the intellectual self-trust pressures me to have *prima facie* trust in the opinions of others and in my own future and past opinions as well.

Together these theses have profound epistemological significance. They imply that intellectual self-trust lies at the rational core of human intellectual achievement, making it possible for the transmission of opinions across people and time to be reasonable. Intellectual self-trust radiates outward across people and time, creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, and it is this atmosphere that allows us to make sense of some of our most fundamental intellectual practices, practices that otherwise might seem puzzling or unreasonable. It explains why it can be reasonable to borrow opinions from complete strangers, why it can be reasonable to rely on our own past conclusions without constantly reconfirming them, and why it can be reasonable to engage in intellectual projects that extend well into the future.

I will be focusing here on social epistemology, in particular, on relation between intellectual self-trust and intellectual trust in other people, but the same considerations that govern social epistemology also apply to temporal epistemology, that is, the transmission of rational opinions over time. I'll return briefly to these structural similarities later.

But first, consider the unavoidable role self-trust plays in our intellectual projects. The best way to appreciate this role is to reflect on the possibility that our most fundamental faculties and methods might not be reliable. Try as we may we cannot expunge this worry. We would like to defend the overall reliability of our most fundamental faculties and methods, but the only way to do so is by using these same faculties and methods, which

means that we will never succeed in altogether ruling out the possibility that our opinions, unbeknownst to us and despite our best efforts, are widely and seriously mistaken.

This predicament is an extension of the familiar Cartesian circle, and it is a circle from which we can no more escape than could Descartes. That which makes epistemology possible — our ability to turn our methods of inquiry and the opinions they generate into objects of inquiry and to do so while taking as little for granted as possible — also makes skeptical worries inevitable. Within the context of epistemological inquiry, the worry that our beliefs might be widely mistaken is as natural as it is ineradicable.

This is one of the central lessons of the Cartesian circle. Another is it is not a prerequisite of rationality that we be able to provide non-question begging guarantees of our reliability. Inquiry always presupposes an element of trust in our intellectual faculties and in the opinions they generate, the need for which cannot be eliminated by further inquiry, and such trust is reasonable unless there is positive evidence of unreliability.

Intellectual self-trust is also inextricably intertwined with issues of the intellectual credibility of other people, both in concrete and theoretical ways. Whenever my opinion about a topic conflicts with that of someone else, I am faced with the concrete question of whether to trust myself or the other person. In addition, there is a theoretical interconnection, because the materials for an adequate account of intellectual trust in the opinions of other people are to be found in intellectual self-trust. For, if I reasonably trust my own faculties and opinions, I am rationally pressured to grant some measure of intellectual credibility to others.

But this is getting ahead of the argument. Let me back up a bit. When you tell me that something is the case, there are two kinds of questions for me to address. First, there are questions about your sincerity. Do you really believe what you are telling me or are you trying to mislead me, and how can I tell the difference? Second, there are questions that presuppose I can reliably determine what you believe and then go on to ask how, if at all, your opinion should affect my opinion.

Given the extent to which we rely on others for information, both kinds of question are important, but for purposes here I will be concerned only with questions of the second sort, which strip the problem of testimony of worries about sincerity and thereby focus attention on issues of the credibility of other people's opinions.

A dramatic way of fixing upon these issues is to suppose that I have found an inventory of what someone else believes. Call this person "Anonymous." Although the inventory is extensive, it is not exhaustive, and among the omitted beliefs are those from which I could extract information about who Anonymous is. As a result, I know little about his or her background, history, training, abilities, and circumstances. (Think of a confidential reference letter in which all information that might reveal the identity of the referee has been blackened out.) Under these conditions, how, if at all, should I adjust my opinions in the light of Anonymous's opinions?

This scenario raises in the starkest possible form the question of universal intellectual trust. Is it reasonable for me to grant a degree of intellectual credibility even to complete strangers? If the answer is "yes," as I will be arguing, then in addition to rational persuasion and specialized authority, there is a third way for the opinions of others to reasonably affect what I believe.

Rational persuasion occurs when you get me to believe a claim through a series of well thought-out questions or instructions. Afterwards, I understand what you understand and hence believe what you believe, but the reasonability of my belief is not dependent upon your having any special authority and *a fortiori* is not dependent on universal intellectual trust. Thanks to your efforts, I can now defend the claim on my own.

On other occasions, I may not be in a position to know on my own whether a claim is true, but I am in a position to take your word about it, because I have information to the effect that your evidence, abilities, training, or perhaps simply your circumstances, put you in an especially good position to evaluate the claim. It is thus reasonable for me to grant you specialized authority.

But according to epistemic universalists, even if you do not have the opportunity to rationally persuade me of the truth of what you believe, and

even I have little or no information about your evidence, abilities, circumstances or history of reliability and hence have no basis for granting you specialized authority, it is nonetheless reasonable for me to regard your opinions as having a measure of *prima facie* intellectual credibility.

Non-universalists deny this. They say that if I am not rationally persuaded by you, it is reasonable for me to be influenced by your opinion only if I have reasons to believe that you have some kind of specialized authority, which distinguishes you from other individuals who lack this kind of authority. For example, if by my lights your past record on issues of the sort in question is a good one, I have reasons, all else being equal, to count your current opinion as credible. Or even without direct knowledge of your past record, I might have information to the effect that you have had special training or had access to especially relevant information or simply have deliberated at especially great length about the issue. Or I may simply know that the issue in question is one whose truth can be easily determined by observation and that you were in a position to do so.

Return to the case of Anonymous. By hypothesis I have little or no information about Anonymous's background, training, abilities, or circumstances. Accordingly, Anonymous does not have any specialized authority for me, or more precisely does not have such authority for me unless the list of propositions on the inventory is extensive enough to provide evidence that Anonymous has a reliable track record or special expertise or is in an especially advantageous position. But for simplicity's sake, let's assume that the entries on the list that we are focusing on are too sparse or randomly distributed to provide such evidence. Nor do they contain enough information to rationally persuade me of their truth. Epistemic non-universalists are thus forced to conclude that I have no reason at all, not even a weak one, to be influenced by these beliefs of Anonymous. Epistemic universalists disagree, saying that it is reasonable for me to give some level of credence even to the beliefs of Anonymous, about whom I know little or nothing.

Like many oppositions, the difference between epistemic universalism and non-universalism is most accurately viewed as a matter of degree.

The degree of universality in an account of intellectual trust is a function of the quantity and specificity of information the account implies I need about someone in order for his or her opinions to be *prima facie* credible for me. The less information I need and the less specific this information needs to be, the more universalist the account is. The more information I need and the more specific this information must be (about the person's background, circumstances, education, and track record, or about the particular faculties, methods, and procedures the person used in coming to the opinion in question), the less universalist the account is. As the requirements for special information become more demanding and, hence, as it becomes increasingly difficult for someone else's opinion to be *prima facie* credible for me, the account begins to shade into epistemic egoism, according to which the only appropriate way for others to affect my opinions is through rational persuasion.

I will be arguing for a strong form of epistemic universalism. The case for this position, most simply put, is that it is rational for most of us most of the time to have *prima facie* intellectual trust in our own faculties even though we cannot provide a non-question begging defense of their reliability, and this in turn rationally pressures most of us most of the time to have *prima facie* intellectual trust in others as well.

Consider my own case. In my childhood, I acquired beliefs from parents, siblings, friends, and teachers without much thought. These constituted the backdrop against which I formed yet other beliefs, and often enough these latter beliefs were also the products of the beliefs of others. I heard testimony from those I met, read books and articles, listened to television and radio reports, and then formed opinions on the basis of these sources of information. Moreover, my most fundamental concepts and assumptions, the material out of which my opinions are built, were not self-generated but rather were passed down to me from previous generations as part of my intellectual inheritance. I am not an isolated intellectual atom. My opinions have been shaped continuously and thoroughly by those of others. Accordingly, if I have intellectual trust in myself and it is reasonable for me to have such trust, I am rationally pressured also to have *prima facie*

intellectual trust in others, for I would not be largely reliable unless they were.

Of course, not everyone affects the opinions of everyone else. I live in one place and you in another, and we may not have had any contact with one another. If so, we have probably not influenced each other's opinions in any direct way. On the other hand, unless one of us has had an extraordinary upbringing, your opinions have been formed in an intellectual and physical environment broadly similar to the one in which my opinions were formed. Moreover, your cognitive equipment is broadly similar to mine. So, once again, if I intellectually trust myself, I am pressured on the threat of inconsistency also to intellectually trust you.

This is not to deny the obvious truth that there are significant intellectual differences among people. The increasing ease of global communications has made our differences more apparent than ever, while cultural anthropology and cognitive sociology has made the study of diversity a staple of academic literature. There is now impressive documentation of differences in the belief systems of North Americans and East Asians, Arabs and Europeans, Germans and Italians, Christians and Buddhists, rural peoples and urban peoples, blue collar workers and professional workers, college graduates and high school dropouts, church goers and non-church goers, and of course, men and women.

Striking as these differences sometimes are, they should not be allowed to obscure the fact there are broad and pervasive cognitive commonalities among humans. Indeed, the differences among humans look insignificant when compared to the differences between us and other intelligent creatures, for example, ants, whales, and bats. Because we tend to take our similarities for granted, it is easy to overlook how similar our intellectual faculties and backgrounds are. It is our differences that fascinate us. We make far finer distinctions about one another than we do about anything else, and among the most intricate distinctions we make are those concerning our respective capacities, personalities, and backgrounds. The availability of so many distinctions, and the zeal with which we employ them, may sometimes make it appear as if we are enormously different from one another, but any

careful look will reveal that this is an exaggeration. Indeed, genetically it is a wild exaggeration. Human are uncannily alike genetically, with startlingly little diversity.¹ What is true of our genetic make-up is also true of our intellectual faculties and environments. Here too there are differences, but the differences are dwarfed by the similarities. It is not surprising, therefore, that the belief systems of all human beings about whom we know anything also have broad commonalities. This is true even of those who are distant from one another in time and place. For example, they all believe that there are other human beings, that there are living things other than human beings, that some things are larger than others, that some things are heavier than others, that some events occurred before other events, that some things are dangerous and others are not, that some things are edible and others are not, and so on.

Ignoring the enormous backdrop of shared beliefs and narrowly fixing upon the differences in beliefs across cultures can create an impression that people in cultures far removed from one another in time or place have beliefs tremendously different from one another. But this impression is unsupported by the empirical evidence, and indeed Donald Davidson has famously argued that the lack of empirical evidence is not accidental. According to Davidson, it is impossible to mount an empirical argument in favor of extreme cognitive diversity. To make his point, Davidson focuses on situations of radical interpretation, where it is an open question whether the creatures being interpreted have beliefs at all. He observes that it is only by assuming broad agreement on basics with those whom we are interpreting that we can get the interpretative process started. Unless we assume that the creatures have perceptual faculties that provide them with extensive information about their immediate environment and that this information has broad similarities with what we take their immediate environment to be, we will not be in a position to establish the kind of correlations between their environment and their bodily movements that would give us reasons to infer that they have beliefs at all, much less infer what those beliefs are.²

Davidson attempts to move from this

epistemological point to the metaphysical conclusion that it is altogether impossible for there to be belief systems massively different from one another. This is an inference that many philosophers have questioned, but the epistemological point is enormously important on its own. It is an effective antidote to the idea that it is both easy and common for one to have convincing evidence that the beliefs of people in other cultures and times have few commonalities with one's own beliefs.

Davidson's epistemological argument is powerful, but its conclusion is also common-sensical. Given the broad similarities in the intellectual equipment and environment of peoples across times and cultures, it should not be surprising that there are correspondingly broad similarities in the concepts and beliefs of peoples across times and cultures. Nor should it be surprising that these similarities pressure us, on threat of inconsistency, to trust one another.

So, insofar as it is rational for me to believe that someone else believes P, I have at least a weak reason to believe P myself. I do not need to know anything special about the person. I do not need to have information that he or she has special talents or training or that he or she has had a good track record with respect to the issues in question. All else being equal, it is incoherent for me not to have a degree of intellectual trust in the opinions of another person, given that I trust myself.

This having been said, there is nothing inherently incoherent in my thinking that I was born with radically different abilities from others or that I was raised in a radically different physical or intellectual environment from others or that unlike most other people this environment has not shaped what I believe. Accordingly, there is nothing inherently incoherent in my refusing to grant intellectual authority to others. The conclusion I am arguing for is contingent. It is that intellectual self-trust creates a pressure to grant authority to others that is extremely difficult to avoid. It is unreasonable for most of us not to concede that our intellectual faculties have broad commonalities with those of others, that a large portion of our opinions have been influenced by the same kinds of factors that have influenced others, and that we have not cast off these

influences. But then, insofar as it is reasonable to have intellectual trust in ourselves, it is also reasonable, all else being equal, for us to trust the opinions of others.

This trust in others should only be presumptive, however, not absolute. The *prima facie* universal credibility that attaches to other people's opinions can be and often is defeated. It is defeated if I have information about their having a history of errors with respect to issues of the sort in question, or if I have information about their lacking critical evidence, or information about their not having sufficient abilities to understand the issues, or insufficient training to do so, or even if I simply have evidence that they have not been sufficiently reflective.

In order to place in sharp relief the overall structure of the argument, I have set aside certain issues and have been treating other issues in a black-and-white fashion that are more accurately treated as gradations. For example, if someone else's opinion is to give me a reason to alter my opinion, it must be reasonable for me to believe that the person has this opinion. Yet, it is often far from clear what another person believes about an issue. Moreover, I can have stronger or weaker evidence concerning what it is that the person believes, and this can affect how strong a reason I have to change my opinion. Another complication is how treat questions of intellectual credibility when there are disagreements among others. If I have no opinion about P but Smith and Jones do have opinions about it, I have a *prima facie* reason to defer to them even if I know little or nothing about them. But when Smith and Jones disagree with one another, their opinions tend to cancel each other out. Thus, if I have no information about the relative reliability of Smith versus Jones, I should continue to withhold judgment on P. On the other hand, if I were to have evidence that Smith is typically more reliable than Jones about issues of kind P, I should move my opinion in the direction of Smith's opinion, but the strength of my reason to do so is again relative to the strength of this evidence.

Yet a further complication is that universal intellectual trust is compatible with different degrees of trust being appropriate for different kinds of beliefs. Indeed, the structure of the above argument suggests something of the sort. It

suggests, in particular, that the pressure to trust one another may be most intense with respect to those kinds of beliefs that are most closely grounded in the broad similarities of human intellectual equipment and environment that create the pressure to trust one another in the first place. If so, there may well be a case to be made for an interpersonal foundationalism of, say, simple observational, memory, and conceptual beliefs.

This is an intriguing possibility, but rather than pursue it or any of these other particulars, I want to remain focused on the fundamental epistemological problem, which is to explain how it can be reasonable for an individual such as myself to rely so extensively on the opinions of others, even those about whom I know little or nothing. A solution to this problem, I have been arguing, is that insofar as it is reasonable to trust my own faculties and opinions, I am pressured on threat of inconsistency to grant a measure of intellectual credibility the opinions of others as well.

This solution stands in contrast to the standard solutions to the problem staked out by Locke, Hume, and Reid respectively. Of these three, Locke had the most extreme position. He was a non-universalist, and many passages even suggest that he had leanings towards epistemic egoism. In Book I and Book IV of an *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke repeatedly insists that in the process of regulating opinion, appeals to the intellectual authority of others are to be avoided. Indeed, he makes a point of saying that of all the “wrong measures of probability” (that is, sources of inaccuracies in our opinions), allegiance to authority is the single worst.

Thomas Reid and David Hume, by contrast, are both universalists, although of very different sorts. Reid was an *a priori* universalist, who thought that testimony is necessarily credible, whereas Hume was an empirical universalist who thought it possible to use one’s own individual observations of the reliability of other people to construct an inductive argument in favor of the reliability of testimony in general.

It is difficult to generalize about contemporary epistemologists, but at least many of them embrace some kind of modified Reidian

approach. The embrace is more forced rather than enthusiastic, however, the implicit assumption being that there seems to be no choice but to resurrect a Reidian account, given that the Lockean approach is unacceptably dismissive about our relying on the opinions of people about whom we know little, and given that the Humean approach is unacceptably optimistic about the project of constructing out of one’s own, inevitably slim base of personal observations about the testimony of other people an inductive defense of the reliability of testimony in general. The modern day Reidian thus concludes that the only feasible alternative is to side with Reid and to assert precisely what Hume was at such pains to deny, namely, that there is some property of testimony that makes testimony necessarily *prima facie* credible and testimony-based beliefs necessarily *prima facie* reasonable.

According to Reid, God implanted in humans an ability to determine the truth, a propensity to speak the truth, and a corresponding propensity to believe what others tell us. Most contemporary Reidians are reluctant to resort to a theistic defense of testimony,³ and thus they feel pressured to posit some non-theological property of testimony that explains why testimony-based beliefs are necessarily *prima facie* reasonable. A. J. Coady, for example, contends that the very notion of a public language carries in it a commitment to some degree of unmediated acceptance of testimony.⁴

I have been arguing that there is a simpler, a more intuitive, and a more powerful solution to the problem, one that rejects Locke’s pervasive skepticism about the opinions of others but that does not depend upon either a thin Humean induction to support the general reliability of testimony or a desperate Reidian stipulation that testimony is necessarily *prima facie* credible. The solution is that it is reasonable to have *prima facie* trust in one’s own opinions and faculties and that this intellectual self-trust pressures one on threat of inconsistency also to have *prima facie* trust in the opinions of others.

Additional albeit indirect support for this solution can be found in the fact that precisely the same structure of argument is applicable when the opinions are not those of another person, but rather those of one’s own past self or future self. In

other words, the same kinds of considerations that pressure me to trust the opinions of others also pressure me to trust my own past and future opinions. In each instance, a combination of rational self-trust and consistency constraints create a presumption of credibility.

After all, my current opinions have not only been extensively shaped by the opinions of others but also by my own past opinions, and likewise my current opinions, I believe, will extensively shape my future opinions. Thus, insofar as I reasonably trust in the overall reliability of my current opinions, I am pressured, at risk of inconsistency, to trust not only the opinions of others but also my own future opinions and my own past opinions. Furthermore, just as there are broad commonalities between my current self on the one hand and other people, so there are broad (and normally even more robust) commonalities between my current self on the one hand and my future self and my past self on the other hand. The kinds of methods, faculties, concepts, and environment that produced (or will produce) the beliefs of my past self and my future self are broadly similar to the kinds of methods, faculties, concepts, and environment that combine to produce and sustain my current

beliefs. Thus, once again, insofar as it is reasonable for me to trust my current opinions, I am pressured also to have *prima facie* trust in my own future opinions and my own past opinions.

I have argued for these positions in more detail elsewhere.⁵ For purposes here I am merely stating them, but I am also pointing out that together with the account that I have defended here they constitute a unified way of treating issues of intellectual trust wherever they arise. The account is founded on the notion that rational self-trust radiates outward in all directions, making it reasonable for individuals to have *prima facie* trust in the opinions of others and in their own future and past opinions.

Rational self-trust creates an atmosphere of rational trust in other people and in our own past and future selves within which our intellectual lives take place. Within this atmosphere, it becomes reasonable for us, all else being equal, to borrow opinions from complete strangers, to rely on past conclusions without reconfirming them, and to engage in intellectual projects which extend well into the future. It becomes possible, in other words, for the transmission of opinions across people and time to me to be rational.⁶

References

- ¹ A recent study of mitochondrial DNA suggests, for example, that all modern humans can be traced back to a breeding stock of no more than 10,000 individuals emerging from Africa within the last 100,000 years. See *Nature*, "A Start for Population Genomics," December 7, 2000, p. 65; also, *Natural History*, "What's New in Prehistory," May 2000, pp. 90-1.
- ² Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Knowledge and Belief," in E. LePore (ed.), *The Philosophy of Donald Davidson: Perspectives on Truth and Interpretation*. London: Basil Blackwell, 1986, 307-319.
- ³ An exception is Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- ⁴ C.A.J. Coady, *Testimony*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- ⁵ Richard Foley, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001, Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.
- ⁶ Thanks to David Christensen, Hilary Kornblith, Harvey Siegel, Miriam Solomon, and Todd Stewart for their helpful comments.

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