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Truth, relevance, and justice: towards a veritistic turn for KO

Abstract
Analysis of recent work at the intersection of epistemology and ethics points to a potentially innovative mode of critical knowledge organization (KO) that (1) is informed by applied social epistemology, (2) is inspired by values of epistemic justice, (3) is respectful of human rights, and (4) privileges truth over relevance.

1. Introduction
In efforts to construct theoretical foundations for information studies, scholars have drawn variously on conceptions of social epistemology, social justice, and epistemic justice (among other ideas). Is it possible to untangle the relationships among these conceptions, in order to arrive at a compelling justification for a distinctively critical LIS (library and information science, generally) and KO (knowledge organization, specifically)? In this paper, I address this question through a conceptual analysis of truth, relevance, justice, and related notions, and point towards the possibility of a veritistic turn for KO.

2. Ontology
One way to start thinking about KO is to consider it as a field of inquiry, and to attempt to define it by identifying a primary goal shared by its practitioners. From an LIS perspective, for example, we might decide that the goal of KO is to establish a set of principles by which tools and techniques for the access-oriented description of resources – tools and techniques such as controlled vocabularies, metadata schemata, and ontologies – may be designed, constructed, and evaluated. From a standpoint with a wider view, contrastingly, we might choose to relax the pragmatic requirement that KO should be directed towards helping us build information services, and at the same time to recognize that KO may usefully be defined in comparison with the philosophical field of ontology.

Ontology is commonly characterized as the philosophy of being – of what there is, or what kinds of things there are. Along these lines, the practical work of ontology may be construed as the determination of the ways in which individual things are related to one another, and thus are organized into kinds or classes. Using the same template, but replacing things with the narrower category data, produces a formulation that looks as if it could be put to work as a definition of KO. If we understand our resource descriptions and authority records, our catalogs and data models, our indexes and thesauri, our classification schemes and terminological databases, as themselves being made up of items of data – i.e., expressions of propositional knowledge – then it is
surely not too much of a stretch to consider the practical work of KO as the
determination of the ways in which items of data are related to one another, and thus
are organized into kinds or classes. Similarly, here lies an opportunity to explore the
potential equivalence of KO and philosophy of data (see, for example, Furner 2017).

3. Epistemology

It might be argued the subject matter of philosophy of data is primarily comprised
of elements of three more-traditional branches of philosophy, themselves bounded
more-or-less arbitrarily and with considerable overlap, that we might conveniently label
philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, and philosophy of belief. I use the term
epistemology, traditionally employed to refer to philosophy of knowledge, to denote
this last, slightly broader category, so that I can make a distinction between two generic
families of theories of belief.

One approach to explaining the difference between these families involves first
making an ontological commitment to at least two categories of abstract objects,
namely attitudes and propositions, and then conceiving of beliefs simply as attitudes
towards propositions. Once this is done, truth-oriented theories may be defined as
theories of belief that distinguish between true and false beliefs, that is, between beliefs
that true propositions are true, and beliefs that false propositions are true, respectively;
while relevance-oriented theories may be defined as theories of belief that distinguish
between relevant and non-relevant beliefs, that is, between beliefs that relevant
propositions are relevant, and beliefs that non-relevant propositions are relevant.

We may use this distinction to express a historical disconnect between epistemology
as a subfield of analytic philosophy, and other fields such as library and information
science. The theorizing about belief that occurs in epistemology is typically truth-
oriented; that done by LIS scholars has typically been relevance-oriented. Specifically,
the significance of perceived relevance as a criterion for determining the retrieval-
worthiness of resources comprised of aggregations of expressions of propositions is
well-documented (see, for example, Borlund 2003).

4. Social Epistemology

Several other fundamental distinctions are helpful for characterizing the various
branches of the field of epistemology. We may distinguish between pure epistemology
and applied epistemology, even if those labels are seldom used in practice – i.e.,
between theories that are “merely” descriptive of the nature of doxastic and epistemic
concepts and practices, and those that are normative in the sense that they seek to
specify the practices that are most conducive to believing true or relevant propositions.

Regardless of whether one’s objectives are descriptive or normative, one’s approach
or methodology may be more-or-less rationalistic, and more-or-less naturalistic,
depending on one’s readiness to admit different kinds of evidence in support of one’s
conclusions. Similarly, one’s interests may be more-or-less *individualist*, and more-or-less *social*, to the extent that one chooses to focus on interpersonal interaction as a factor in the formation of beliefs.

*Applied social epistemology*, then, is the study of normative questions about the social practices that are most likely to generate true or relevant beliefs (see, for example, Goldman 1999). So, for example, we might ask, On what kinds of grounds should we assign positive evaluations to testimony? Under what kinds of conditions should we believe that what we read is true, or that what we’re told is relevant?

5. Justice

Like truth and relevance, and like other concepts such as beauty and freedom, justice is a *value* – a more-or-less desirable feature of the outcomes of people’s decisions and actions. The nature of justice has been the subject matter of a huge body of philosophical literature spanning ethics, social and political philosophy, and jurisprudence, with both descriptive and normative dimensions (see, for example, Sandel 2009). Simplifying greatly, one theme that has attracted much attention is the idea of justice as *fairness*, with its corollary that the kinds of practices that generate states of justice most effectively are those in which people are treated fairly.

Of course, simply substituting “fairness” for “justice” does nothing to explain the concept or to suggest what kinds of criteria can be used to evaluate how fair or just any given treatment might be. Yet we may recognize that, typically, justice is seen to be done when people are treated in accordance with their just deserts, on their merits or needs, without prejudice or bias or discrimination, without violation of their human rights, without limitation of their freedoms, and without the exercise of any form of oppression stemming from asymmetric power relations.

Concepts of justice are commonly incorporated into *rights*-based ethical frameworks through the identification of natural, human, civil, group, or individual rights to equitable access to goods or opportunities, and to fair treatment by others, free of impediment and obstruction. Such rights include those that are attributed to speakers and hearers, knowers and inquirers, teachers and learners – in other words, to all of us, as communicative, social beings: (1) rights to *think*, to conceptualize, to categorize and classify, to believe and have opinions; (2) rights to *express*, to give voice to one’s thoughts in speech, writing, and other forms; (3) rights to *access*, seek, inquire, find, hear, and know the thought and expression of others; (4) rights to *be heard*, to publish and broadcast, to reach an audience without being censored, silenced, hidden, or ignored; (5) rights to *be left alone*, to maintain one’s privacy, to be forgotten; (6) rights to *be believed*, to be given credence, to be treated as credible; *inter alia*.
6. Social Justice

Different theories of justice account for the relationships between notions of desert, merit, bias, and so on, in different ways. Theories of distributive justice focus on the outcomes of actions taken to distribute quantities of resources among the members of given populations. Theories of social justice, which may or may not simultaneously be theories of distributive justice, highlight the importance of individuals’ identifying with certain groups – races, genders, and classes, for example – and of ensuring that such memberships are taken into appropriate account in any calculus of justice (see, for example, Roberts and Noble 2016).

Different theories of social justice work with different ideas about how “appropriateness” in accounting can be determined. Many of us in KO education avow a commitment to social justice in distributive terms, which means that in general our goal is to change the world in ways that include (1) reducing divides, disparities, and inequalities between rich and poor, and between powerful and powerlessness, (2) generating fairer distributions of social, cultural, economic, and political opportunities, and (3) building and maintaining thriving communities in which basic human rights and freedoms are respected. Translating that specifically into a vision of the future of information services, we say that we are working towards a society (1) where members of all social groups enjoy equitable access to the knowledge they need to get their jobs done and live their lives to the full, (2) where everyone, not just an elite minority, is empowered to preserve their own artifacts and stories and ideas, in the ways they wish, and to the extent they wish, and (3) where the actions of governments and corporations respect the rights of individuals and communities to intellectual freedom, to privacy, and to cultural property.

Yet, to focus on distributive social justice alone would be to ignore one of the most prevalent kinds of injustice in our society, which is that caused by the systemic oppression of, or discrimination against, specific social groups. Iris Marion Young (1990) distinguishes between what she call the “five faces of oppression”, pointing out that injustice is manifested as exploitation, whenever labor is divided in such a way that women work specifically in order to maintain the power, wealth, and status of men; as marginalization whenever those who are old, or young, or poor, or disabled, or otherwise dependent on others, are thereby deprived of basic rights and freedoms; as powerlessness whenever working-class people find that they are unable to participate in making the decisions that have the greatest effect on their lives; as cultural imperialism when the very means of interpretation, expression, and communication in our society are so completely controlled by white Christian heterosexual men that the experiences and values of nondominant groups are rendered invisible; and as violence when we choose to tolerate the fact of black people living their lives under the constant threat of harassment, intimidation, and physical violence simply on account of their
group identity.

Working towards social justice as a goal therefore involves the basic reform of oppressive, discriminatory social practices and institutions, as well as the redistribution of resources. Among those practices and institutions are those by whose means we produce and consume knowledge—the practices and institutions, in other words, of library and information services, including knowledge organization systems (KOSs) such as bibliographic classification schemes, subject heading lists, and thesauri.

7. Epistemic Justice

Among theories of justice, theories of epistemic justice are special in the way that they focus on the fairness of our treatments of people in their capacity as believers and as knowers (see, for example, Fricker 2007). These theories, too, may or may not be theories of distributive justice, depending on whether or not they suggest how quantities of what we might call epistemic resources, such as data or knowledge, or opportunities to access such resources, may be distributed fairly. Similarly, they may or may not be theories of social justice, depending on whether or not they emphasize people’s affinities with social groups as factors to be weighed when determining the fairness of particular treatments.

Along these lines, Miranda Fricker (2013, p. 1.318) distinguishes between two kinds of epistemic injustice. Distributive injustice occurs whenever epistemic resources, “goods such as education or information,” are distributed unfairly. Discriminatory injustice (which, had she seen reason to follow Young, Fricker might instead have called oppressive injustice) occurs whenever wrong is done to an individual either as a testifier or as a sensemaker—that is, either as a potential source of evidence, or as a potential acquirer of true belief: testimonial injustice happens “when a speaker receives a deficit of credibility owing to the operation of prejudice in the hearer’s judgment” (and Fricker gives the example of a police officer not believing the testimony of a young black male; p. 1.319), whereas hermeneutical injustice happens “when a subject who is hermeneutically marginalized (that is, they belong to a group which does not have access to equal participation in the generation of social meanings) is thereby put at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of a significant area of their social experience” (and Fricker gives the example of a female victim of domestic violence unable to process the reality of their situation; p. 1.319).

Whereas the goal of social justice has, over the last decade or so, become quite a commonly articulated objective for the providers of library and information services—at least at the more activist or progressive end of the spectrum of views about the proper role of LIS institutions such as KO schemes—the notion of epistemic justice has not been taken up by LIS scholars or practitioners to anything like the same degree. This is curious, given the magnitude of the overlap that may be discerned in the respective
concerns of KO and epistemology, especially applied social epistemology.

8. A Critical KO

Analysis of recent work at the intersection of epistemology and ethics, such as that highlighted in the previous section, points to a potentially innovative mode of critical KO, in four related respects.

(1) A KO that is informed by applied social epistemology

In the first place, we may clarify how the goals of KO may be viewed as the result of applying the normative theory of a particular flavor of social epistemology. Answers to questions of the kinds addressed by applied social epistemology – such as those directed to identifying the conditions under which testimony should be evaluated as true or relevant – provide sets of desiderata for the design both of our search engines and of the KO systems that underlie them.

(2) A KO that is inspired by values of epistemic justice

Secondly, we have an opportunity to characterize our values with more precision. Notwithstanding the virtue inherent in its pursuit, to present social justice as the primary end to which library and information service is directed is to undermine the unique character of such service. That unique character is captured in the idea that the librarian’s mission is to provide access to the world’s recorded knowledge: in other words, to foster epistemic justice by enabling the dissemination and acquisition of true beliefs.

(3) A KO that is respectful of human rights

Thirdly, we have an opportunity to articulate a right to be believed – a right to testimonial justice – to set alongside the rights to free thought and free expression that are already encapsulated in documents such as the UN’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) and in IFLA’s Code of Ethics for Librarians and Information Workers (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions 2012). Recognition of a need to respect the rights to testimonial justice held by members of a marginalized, oppressed, or previously underrepresented community could be the catalyst for long-overdue revision of KO systems whose developers have not attributed appropriate levels of credibility to testifiers from that community.

(4) A KO that privileges truth over relevance

Fourthly, we have an opportunity to proclaim a veritistic turn, in the course of which the centrality of epistemological concerns to LIS and KO is recognized, and truth supplants relevance as a core value. It seems both possible and desirable to distinguish between relevance-oriented and truth-oriented characterizations of the mission of the information worker, along the same lines on which it is useful to distinguish between two families of theories of belief. Relevance-oriented KO is that which seeks to evaluate its practices, institutions, and products on the basis of the extent to which the
desires of users are satisfied; truth-oriented KO is evaluated on the basis of the extent to which the beliefs acquired by users are true.

9. Conclusion
Given the historical attachment of LIS to relevance-oriented service, the influence of postmodernist denials of the possibility of objective knowledge, and the maintenance in IFLA’s Code (among many others) of a statement of information workers’ commitment to “neutrality,” this last conclusion may be the most controversial of the three. The skeptic might even wonder if the controversy is simply a contemporary manifestation of the age-old debate in librarianship over the competing principles of “Give them what they say they want” and “Give them what we think they need”. I suggest that the most critical task facing KO theorists today is to recognize the moral emptiness of both of those positions and provide a justification for a KO that is consistent with contemporary, pluralist conceptions of truth.

References