78. Self Awareness
p.2

COMMUNITY, CONFORMITY AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

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In the previous paper we tried to identify some of the bases on which each side in the controversies about the sociology of knowledge could convince themselves that serious issues were at stake and that their own position was necessary for the defence of certain obvious facts which,nonetheless,their opponents might choose to disregard or,worse,deny. In this paper we want to follow that line of investigation a little further and attend to what has recently come to be seen as a core element in the argument,and that this the extent to which 'the community' enters into arguments about knowledge. It is the intensification of attention on the question about whether the community is necessary to knowledge which has resuscitated arguments about a 'sociology of knowledge' for,of course,if 'the community' is an indispensible presence in epistemological considerations then it does indeed appear that we must take a 'sociological' view of these matters. Those who participate in the controversy do so on the basis of an apparent disagreement over whether or not the community should enter in - thus,the strong programme in the sociology of science is welcomed because it undermines a traditionally 'individualistic' approach to epistemology. We shall not,however,take the argument on the terms that it is offered to us,but will,instead,take it for granted that 'the community' does enter into these matters and that the issue is not whether it should do so,but how it does so. This does not,however,mean that we are simply presuming the correctness of

one side of the argument (cannot do so since,it will be recalled,we are entirely dubious of the way the alternatives are formulated.) We are not beginning the question of whether 'the community' should enter in,but will argue that the fact that it does should do ought to be recognisable and acceptable to both sides of the argument. The difficulty arises because of the way in which the relevance of the community is presented makes it seem that acknowledging its importance drives us into absurdities. Arguments which futher a 'sociological' approach to epistemology do indeed appear to move toward absurdity,but this is not because of their 'sociological' character,but because of the way in which they try to build upon the indisputable fact that human beings are social creatures and that their culture is a collective creation. The fact that much of our argument will be directed against 'social constructionists' (or S's as we came to call them) does not mean,then,that it is argument in favour of 'rationalists',our R's. The S's have rightly seen that there is much wrong with rationalism,but their mistake is in the way they go from that realisation,and it is with their mistake that we are,here,concerned. Once again,we will appeal,at crucial stages in the argument,to the work of Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein is,after all,one of the 'progenitors' of the emphasis upon the community but,in this matter,as in so many others,his arguments have been taken to legitimate the kind of philosophical positions against which he had most firmly and deliberately set his face. Thus,we shall point out that what is important about Wittgenstein is not the fact that he introduces 'the community' as a relevant

consideration,but the manner in which he does so,through a concentration on 'practices,'

Colin Radford provided us with an effective crystallisation of the elements of opposition in these matters through the instance of bowling practice in cricket,and the reasons why people follow the policy of avoiding bowling long hops. This example has the dual advantage of being a satisfactory summation of the central points of division but also of conveying the impression that there is something seriously wrong with these alternatives. We want,at least to begin with,to persist with Radford's example because it embodies,as well as could be, the issue on which we now want to concentrate.

In cricket there is at least agreement that,on the whole,it is best to avoid bowling long hops. But there is not much agreement in philosophy/sociology about why this is so. It is clear enough to someone like Radford. People avoid bowling long hops because it is rational of them to do so. It is because,in the light of various natural facts about the movement of balls and the human body it is ineffective to bowl long hops. This is,or seems to be,a conclusion which people (can) draw for themselves. However,others are not convinced that things are as Radford says. They think that people avoid bowling long hops because they have been taught to do this,and are kept from doing anything other than they have been taught because they are constrained by social pressure,intimidated into conforming with the general opinion (that bowling long hops is a bad thing) by their sensitivity to the contumely and scorn of their associates. This,to someone like

Radford,seems like an irrational basis for doing something: after all,the fact that people tell you things,that they all agree on what the right thing to do and that they will disapprove if you differ from them may be consequential for social life,but it doesn't seem a very sound basis for deciding what to believe. You ought to decide that on the basis of considerations relevant to whatever it is you aim to believe something about - thus,if you do believe,along with your fellows,that bowling long hops is (in general) undesireable,you do so because of considerations pertaining to effective batting and bowling,not because everybody else believes it. Indeed,it seems that the alternative to the R's picture is one of people as credulous and craven,ready to believe whatever they are told,to cling to authority and kept in line by fear of a little mockery.

Let us note,though,that there is no question of one side of this argument excluding,and the other including,'the community' in its arguments. Though Radford's position might seem to be of just the sort that can be scorned as 'individualistic' this is not true. The community's presence is felt in that,after all,we are talking about what policies people follow in the game of cricket and,of course,Radford's arguments presuppose various things about the aims and procedures of the game of cricket. Thus,it is taken for granted that the game of cricket provides the bowler with the objective of avoiding being scored off,and it is this which (of course) contributes to the irrationality of bowling long hops. Long hops are easy to score off,and bowlers don't want to be scored off (which is not a psychological generalisation about

bowlers,but a specification of a social role),so it would be irrational to bowl long hops. Radford is not,any more than any other rationalist need be,averse to introducing 'the community' into his considerations. What gives him trouble is the question of how far,and in what ways,the presence of 'the community's is to be developed. Certainly,if developing that leads to a picture of human conduct as a species of mindless conformity,driven by conventional agreement,then the fact that we live and act in communities is going to be taken no further by someone like Radford. And it does,indeed,seem that it is in just this direction that many S's do want to take it. Which is why we want to argue that it is the way in which we are invited to acknowledge the presence of the community that causes the trouble.

The choice seems to be that we are either dependent on or autonomous from the community,and it is in this way that philosophers have struggled with the problem of reason,but it is - once again - to Wittgenstein's credit that he shows us how misleading this kind of opposition is. to emphasise that human beings are social creatures who live and act within communities is not to treat them as dependent creatures: there are some dependent creatures (in any ordinary meaning of that word),such as children and some old people,the severely handicapped etc but those who live within a community are not thereby dependent on it. Nor are they independent from it. They are,in the normal run of things,independent of other people,of supervision etc. What Wittgenstein tries to point out to us is that independence is something which is to be found within a community.

Let us go back a little way. One of the ways in which both sides of the argument put the question is: how do people get their beliefs? Naturally,they think this a question that deserves answering,and that there are only two ways of answering it. Either,people must derive their beliefs for themselves,or they must derive them from the community. However,as we have indicated,there is something deeply problematic about the notion of 'beliefs' and therefore of asking for an explanation of how,in general,people get their beliefs. The oddity of this comes up in connection with our example. The question is,'how do cricketer's get their belief that one should avoid bowling bad balls.' It seems that they must either take over this belief from others,or work it up for themselves. No doubt one could then go on to ask other questions about other beliefs that cricketers have (such as,say,that batsmen should get in line with the ball) and go right through all the beliefs cricketers have about cricket. It is a philosopher's picture of someone learning to play cricket as learning a set of beliefs. Someone who learns to play cricket learns not a set of beliefs,but how to play. Someone who is at the nets being taught cricket is not being taught to believe anything,but to do something,namely play cricket (and,subsidiary to that,to hold a bat,to grip a ball,to find line and length,to move his feet.) What we should normally and naturally say a trainee cricketer is learning is not beliefs but 'technique.' The business of instilling a technique in someone can be done in a variety of ways,some of which involve drilling,simply getting them to go over things again and again. Something else that may be

NB. Self-Awareness: bowlers see what happens as a consequence of what they do.

involved in showing them the consequences of deviating from the technique - thus,bowlers being encouraged to keep the ball up to the batsmen will sometimes fail to do so and the ball will be punished mercilessly,contrasts between the well placed ball and the 'loose delivery' will be made as part of the training to show the consequences of deviating from received technique. Sometimes,explanation will be given as a part of the training,things about alignment and posture will be spelled out to show why a particular technique is accepted and effective. The novice will be provided with plenty reasons for accepting and adopting received technique. The idea of a novice cricketer working up for himself the technique of play is,of course,an absurdity. It has taken the playere of cricket some centuries to develop the apparatus of technique which is currently in use and it would be ludicrous for each player to start out by trying to contrive technique for himself from the groundfloor up. On the other hand,it is equally ludicrous to suppose that someone who is being taught cricketing technique is simply and slavishly accepting everything that he is told because he is told it. Somethings may be 'the bottom line' (so to speak) just as children are taught to learn their multiplication tables by rote,just trained to get them right,without being given any reasons (other than,say,that they have to learn this if they want to be able to calculate,do other sums etc) and some matters of technique in training cricketers may be treated this way,but as part of the training in technique reasons will be given. These reasons will derive their force from the fact that they originate from people

with authority,but this has to do with the authority of authoritativeness,that is: those who are doing the instruction are those who have mastered the technique. They can do the things they are giving instruction in and simply seeing that the technique works in application is reason enough for aspiring to master it oneself. So,what people are being taught is technique. And they are,in that respect,being taught to do what their instructor does.

As part of the instruction the instructor will indeed apply 'social pressure': instructors certainly encourage pupils by approval,irascibility,mockery but the mistake is to counterpose this to the giving of reasons,since these are all part and parcel of the business of instruction. Thus,instructors often proceed by showing people what a technique is,how it is applied and why it is an effective technique. This is,however,often preparatory to and different from mastering the technique: thus someone who in learning to bowl can't find line and length isn't having trouble because he has the wrong belief but,e.g. because he can't control and direct the ball,can't discipline his body in the right ways,can't judge his own movement and the length of his stride and things like pitching it short,too far up,too wide etc are things he is being taught to control - in this respect patience,encouragement,impatience,contempt are all useful training resources. Indeed,part of the way of getting someone to be more aware of what they are doing wrong,to try harder etc is to try to make them feel stupid,sometimes what is needed is to give them confidence etc. If we treat 'social pressure' as being what is

involved in 'getting someone to believe that bowling long hops is a bad thing to do' then it may seem odd,but if we see that we use 'social pressure' to train someone to do something,to motivate them to master e.g. pitching a cricket ball in the right place then we will see that this is a most natural part of training. Indeed,part of the training may involve treating people as stupid if they don't see that bowling long hops is to be avoided: it is,in the word of cricket,something so obviously to be avoided that only a fool would systematically bowl long hops. Indeed,its a funny picture of training to think that what we do is,at any point,to teach them that bowling long hops is to be avoided,since we teach them good technique,the business of finding line and length and just by doing so we preclude bowling long hops. We don't proscibe bowling long hops,the issue never comes up as such,but as part and parcel of the acquisition of bowling techniques in general and it is simply clear that one does not bowl long hops - these just visibly fall into the class of 'bad balls'.

The first point,then,is that there is a false opposition between seeing,on the strength of various 'natural facts',that bowling long hops would be ineffective,and being sensitive to the regard of one's fellows,such that one is cuircumspect of the consequences of going against the general agreement. It makes it sound as if one either sees that bowling long hops one will be hit all over the place or that,bowling long hops is something that others see as stupid and therefore if one bowls them onself they will see you as stupid too. However,seeing that if one bowls

long hops one will be hit all over the place and seeing that one's colleagues will think one a moron if one does bowl them are two sides of the same coin - it is obvious - to someone with experience of cicket - that,in general,bowling long hops is not the way to do things and this is therefore equally obvious to everyone else so,if one did do something so obviously stupid then one would,indeed,receive the deserved contempt of other players.

The best way,at this point,that we can say just what is going wrong is to say that what can (rightly) be counted as separate kinds of considerations (such as e.g facts about the physics of throwing objects like cricket balls and facts about the extent of agreement in a community) are being presented as if they must be segregated in the actual business of considering things when,in truth,they must be intertwined. Thus,in seeing that bowling long hops is to be avoided we are apparently put in a position where we must say that this is because of one kind of consideration or the other,either because of natural or because of social facts. This is not,of course,how it need be at all because there are,in seeing that bowling long hops is to be avoided,quite different kinds of considerations which jointly lead to this conclusion - thus,there are considerations about how people wielding bats can move and considerations about tactics and about the rules and about the dispositions of the umpires,all of which enter into the consideration of the advisability of bowling long hops and,then,of course,there are the facts of particular cases because on some occasions -rare though they may be - bowling a long hop might just be the thing to do, not least because of the general

inadvisability of their use.

Thus,the fact that something is generally agreed may be a consideration which enters into some decisions but that enters in with other considerations,and not always in the same way. Thus,the fact that one gives one's road signals in the same way as others,that there is an agreed practice, enters in as something enabling drivers to count on each other,something contributory to effective driving. The fact that one bowls line and length (and not long hops) is something that enters into cricket as definitive of 'good practice',but of course as definitive of good practice among the cognoscenti. Their agreement on this is of the character of 'its the first thing you learn' and that it is a lesson the value of which is endlessly demonstrated in practice,is proved over and over by events. It is something so well entrenched in the lore of the game,the understanding,that it is hardly to be questioned,its acceptance taken for granted,the sort of thing that could be gone against,but in exceptional cases and their one would want a reason as to why it was apposite to deviate.

So,one is taught what is(widely,standardly,universally? agreed to be good technique and its being generally accepted good technique is part of its character and affects the way it is taught but one is taught it because it is good technique not because it is widely agreed. We find ourselves,though,being forced into doing what we want to resist doing,which is making these things into sharp opposition: but this will be the result if we don't see that in some cases the fact of agreement and quality

that that is because of social + technical facts of cricket.

are intertwined: good technique is good technique,in part,because it is agreed technique,but also because of the quality of the technique. The consensus on what are good and bad ways to bat and bowl is an emergent consensus: it is not something just agreed amongst a variety of people,it is something which develops out of the shared experience and extensive thought given to the game of cricket,it is the product of a very great deal of practice at and meditation on the game,it is a 'worked out' agreement (and it is,further,one which is still being worked on and revised) and its compulsive power is not that a majority believe it,but that it is something which can be supported by a great deal of explanation and example;it is anything but an arbitrary phenomenon. It has the support of being overwhelmingly supported,but not just by numbers, but by the experience,judgement and argument which those numbers represent and,to no small extent,of squaring with what one can see for oneself,what one's own experience tells one. It would be a rash bowler who decided to consistently bowl long hops,the disapproval of his fellows being invited by the likely outcome,and confirmed by the all too visible result. Is it the fact that long hops are easy to hit or that long hops are regarded with contempt that counts? Long hops are easy to hit and making yourself easy to hit is (usually) to be regarded with contempt.

We have been picking at the understanding of the role that agreement plays in all of this,and we shall return to that topic shortly,but the issue of the role that agreement plays was initiated by considerations of what is being learned. What we are

persuaded to think is being learned is 'conformity' - this is what the R's fear,and the S's rather gleefully insist. Someone who learns to believe that long hops are bad balls learns to believe the same as others. We have,however,just tried to show something of the internal complexity of the business of learning to believe the same as others,and the way(s) in which the fact that it is 'the same as others believe' is involved. Now we want to turn attention to what it is that is learned,which is,it appears,'to believe the same as others' (though we would prefer to talk of learning to do the same as others.)

Wittgenstein has pointed out the role of 'the same' in contriving philosophical traps,reminding us of the necessity to specify just how one thing is the same as another. Someone who is being taught to drive or to calculate or to work as a physicist is being taught to do 'the same as others' in the sense of being taught to engage in a practice which has many standard features: someone who is taught to drive is thus taught to do what others can,namely drive,and is taught to do - in many ways - the same as they - viz,to drive on the appropriate side of the road,give the conventional signals and so on. And someone who is being taught to drive is being taught to emulate what someone else does,or just to follow the drill that they give,being instructed in each case just what to do,being shown exactly what to do. However,whilst someone may be taught to drive by emulating someone else,they are not being taught to emulate that person,they are being taught to drive.

The need for a 'social control' or 'social pressure' account

of competent conduct arises from an illusion which philosophers and linguists - at least - fall for. Someone is taught by someone else,they are shown how to do things by a trainer,and they practice under the eye of the trainer. Thus,the trainer sees that they can now do the things involved. Then the training stops. Previously the trainer had been there to check that the trainee had understood the lessons and did things properly,but what now takes the place of the trainer. What ensures that the learner goes on in the right way? What ensures that the learner,having grasped the application of the principle in this case and this case,has grasped the principle for the generality of cases? What is there to stop the trainee going right off the rails as soon as he leaves the purview of the trainer? One answer to this is,of course,social control:the fear of sanctions from others.

This is,of course,the kind of query which led Wittgenstein to develop his elaborate reflections on rule following,once again without a view to giving a better answer,but by undermining the question. The whole gist of Wittgenstein's argument was: what keeps someone 'on the rails' after they have been trained is the training itself. However,the insistence that the training is what keeps people 'on the rails' will not satisfy if one is gripped by the picture of rules as rails. If one takes talk of being 'on the rails' so seriously as to think that a set of rules prescribe all future courses of action then one has been badly misled. So Wittgenstein seeks to undercut the idea that rules prescribe conduct in that way. We do not want/need to go into them now,but the rule following considerations are - if we may put it thus -

designed to emphasise the extent of decision involved in deciding what - in a given case - to do,the need for decision as to what the rule requires and what to do. So,someone who has learned to follow a rule is not,thereby,obviated of the need to work out for themselves what to do now,here.

There appears to be a problem because of an apparent logical gap. A learner is taught to do something in this case,then in that one,and seems,thereby,to face a generalisation problem: how is the learner able to move from this case and that one to some quite unprecendented case i.e. ones that he will subsequently meet. But the learner,though being taught on this case and that case is not being taught to deal with these two cases. The learner is,of course,being taught to handle such cases, and there is generality in the instruction from the word go. Someone who learns to drive in this particular car and in this particular neighbourhood is not (of,if being properly instructed is not) being taught just to drive this car on these roads. The learner is being taught to drive,and toward that end is taught on certain vehicles and certain roads but is being taught to drive any car (pretty much) under all kinds of conditions. The driver is,in important part,being taught techniques,ways of handling this and other cars,ways of negotiating this street and other streets,ways of responding in this traffic and in traffic generally. The

trainee is not being taught to follow rules,being taught to follow rules is part of being prepared for independent practice,for being able to do something on one's own,without supervision or guidance

but which should exhibit some concurrence with what other (suitably) trained people do. Thus,someone who is being taught to calculate is being taught to independently arrive at mathematical conclusions,to work things out for himself,within the framework of mathematical practice. It is,of course,part of the idea of mathematical or scientific practice (amongst others) that,if you do things in the appropriate ways,then you will get the same outcome each time,the same outcome that others will get. It is,thus,a feature of your doing this that you assume that you should get what other people do,but it is not the case that you need to check or have checked that you do . People who do calculations keep checks on each other,but not because people who were taught their two times table and mastered it in school might suddenly go mathematically berserk and start 'multiplying by two' in some deviant ways but because e.g in dealing with large or complex calculations is easy to make mistakes or because they fiddle the figures. That someone's results agree with someone else's does enter into mathematics,because - after all - if the calculations are done right then one's own calculations should come out the same as everyone else's - thus,checking one's own results to see that they agree with someone else's is one important way of checking one's results. If both parties agree,then they have probably done it right. If they don't agree,then that's a sign that someone has gone wrong.

It is within a practice that one can meaningfully talk of independence. Someone who has not learned the rudiments of calculation certainly cannot undertake to calculate

independently,but someone who is able to calculate is then capable of independently calculating all kinds of things and - perhaps - of rethinking some of the ways in which calculation is done. We must not think,though,that training and independent practice relate in the same way from activity to activity - someone who has not learned to drive may nonetheless be able to drive off someone's car but we do not allow people to do this until they have been taught the conventional ways,the objective being to teach them not just independent control of a vehicle,but safe driving. Someone who is being taught to drive is,again,being taught to be able to decide what to do in traffic situations,and to take the same kinds of steps that anyone might in those situations. Again,the aim is not to have people do what others agree should be done,but to have people decide what to do and arrive independently at a decision or conclusion with which others would agree - that they do or do not agree with it is a weighty matter,such that one might,on discovering that other people did not agree, reconsider (inviting them,perhaps,to do the same) -, not because the point is to have them agree,but because the fact that they don't may be indicative of something.

We said that the issue was not about whether the community entered into these issues but how it did so,and we have relied upon the insistutionalised practice of 'playing cricket' as the background to all the issues we have raised here,just as the previous discussants have. We have tried to show that both sides of the argument draw mistaken conclusions about the force of pointing to the presence of the community because they share the

same misguided picture of the socialised member,as someone who is motivated by conformity rather than 'substantive considerations'. This is not,however so: assuredly the individual's social sensitivity is employed in training,but not in a way which is (in the proper case) at the expense of substantive considerations but,au contraire in conjunction with substantive considerations and in support of developing the learner's capacity to handle just those substantive considerations. A great deal of 'unthinking' activity is involved in training,but training is not entirely unthinking,and the relationship between drilling and giving reasons is something to be articulated in the training process itself -- thus,e.g. before asking you to do something the trainer might explain to you what he wants you to do it for so that (say) you'll see the point of doing it. There is something else the trainer may ask you to do without giving any reasons,perhaps because being able to do that thing is a sine qua non of being able to do anything else. There are also promissory aspects to training,in the sense that things which are just drilled in now will come to be seen,later,as useful things with purpose and effect,but will only be recognised as such when one has had one's sensibility trained up. This,too,is an integral and neglected aspect of training,the development of a sensibility,such that one becomes attuned to certain kinds of noticeables,considerations -- as in learning to drive one becomes attuned to the positioning of the vehicle with respect to corners,other cars etc. The validity and consequentiality of 'natural facts' is internal to a sensibility -- through learning to play the cricketer becomes

attuned to the movement of balls,the shape of the posture,the fine detail of stance and movement and able to judge the pertinence of these to defence,attack,run scoring,wicket taking and so on. It is the trained sensibility which becomes aware of the way in which the movement of the feet affects the capacity to use the bat etc. One should,in this process,learn to become discriminating as to how and in what ways the responses and reactions of others should affect one's own behaviour -- thus,one needs to learn not to be put off one's stride by harassing,learning when other people's judgement matters,should supersede one's own, being able to tell the difference something which is a well founded and standard practice and that which is a baseless but widely held prejudice. One learns,as we have been saying,to develop independent practice and judgement where it is,let us say,one's responses which conform to the norm,rather than oneself conforming to the opinions of one's colleagues. The trained cricketer has learned to play and think about the game,such that what he has learned equips him to decide what to think about this particular move,whether to bowl this kind of ball of that,it does not dictate what he is to do. In playing this game now,the cricketer is neither dependent on nor independent of the training received.

Someone who has been trained to play cricket no doubt now plays as he does because of how he was trained to,but this does not mean that he how plays in the ways in which he was trained to. Being trained by certain people or in certain kinds of techniques can leave their marks on someone's subsequent practice,even though the practicioner then dispenses with the

techniques in which he was specifically trained. Someone who is now bowling may bowl in just the way that he was trained to,may deliver a certain kind of delivery using just the technique he was taught,but that does not mean that he is bowling it that way because he was trained to -- he is bowling it that way because the technique has proved itself effective.