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“Do We Still Share Reality?”
Epistemic Fragmentation and the Precondition for Civil War

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Introduction

Democratic societies do not require that their citizens all agree with one another. Indeed, disagreement is one of the features that defines the democratic society. Citizens of a democratic society may disagree with one another with regard to a variety of topics, including elections, taxes, immigration, foreign policy, education, religion, and governmental policy. Despite the disagreements that occur, however, there is generally no violence between the citizens of that society. Individuals may disagree with one another, but they are still able to live within the same community without any negative consequences of those disagreements. The question, then, is why are there no violent conflicts between the citizens of a democratic society?

One possible answer to this question is that there are shared epistemic norms amongst the citizens of that society. While the citizens of a democratic society may have disagreements with one another regarding various topics and beliefs, they are still required to have some level of trust in others as a means of managing their disagreements. Should the shared standards that society's citizens have of knowledge become fragmented and not shared amongst them, however, those disagreements begin to transform from disagreements with individuals with differing beliefs to individuals with a different reality altogether.¹

¹ Alvin I. Goldman, “Social Epistemology,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University).

In examining this phenomenon through the lens of contemporary epistemology, it is possible to understand how the shared reality that is required of citizens of a democratic society is based upon shared procedures for evaluating knowledge. The citizens of a democratic society may have different beliefs and knowledge of various topics, but they are required to have some level of trust in the knowledge of others within their society. Should that trust begin to erode, and if the citizens no longer have trust in others in their society in relation to knowledge, it is likely that their disagreements with one another will become more difficult to manage peacefully.²

The concept of epistemic fragmentation is one approach to understanding how the trust of citizens of a society in the knowledge of others within that society may erode. Epistemic fragmentation is not the same as a polarized society. A polarized society is one in which the citizens of a society have disagreements with one another, but still trust in the knowledge of others within the society. A fragmented society, however, is one in which the citizens of that society no longer trust one another in their knowledge of the world or in their knowledge of specific topics.³

It is important to understand the difference between a pluralistic society and one that is fragmented in relation to epistemology. Societies that are pluralistic may contain many individuals of different beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge of the world. However, pluralism does not necessarily mean that the individuals of that society do not trust one another in their knowledge of the world. Fragmentation occurs when citizens no longer trust one another's knowledge, leading to their disagreements becoming difficult to manage.

² Robert Audi, "The Sources of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 71–94.

³ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

In recognizing how the digital information age has created the environments in which citizens of modern democratic societies interact with information, it is possible to understand how those societies have begun to fragment. The use of digital media and digital news articles, for example, has allowed individuals to trust different sources of knowledge than others within their society. Furthermore, the declining trust of individuals in the knowledge of the institutions in society has created an environment in which their trust in one another's knowledge has fragmented.⁴

If there is no shared reality between the citizens of a society, there is no framework through which their conflicts can be managed peacefully. If individuals trust the outcomes of the political processes of their society, they are able to accept the outcomes that are unfavorable to their own. Furthermore, their disagreements with the beliefs of others are more easily managed if they believe that others are experiencing the same reality as themselves. If there is no longer a shared reality, though, then those peaceful methods of managing disagreements are less effective. The disagreements between individuals in a society become more likely to escalate into civil conflict.⁵

In considering each of these topics regarding the concept of a shared reality for the citizens in a society, it is possible to understand how the arguments relate to one another to form a comprehensive argument regarding the topic of this paper. The structure of the argument is based upon five main stages. In each of these stages, it will be possible to review the arguments regarding shared reality, shared epistemic norms, epistemic fragmentation, the threats to social cohesion resulting from epistemic fragmentation, alternatives to the fragmented epistemic society, and epistemic fragmentation within the age of AI-mediated information environments.

⁴ Goldman, "Social Epistemology"; Prof. Dr. Sc. Aneta Karageorgieva, Contemporary Epistemology lecture, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Spring 2026.

⁵ Karageorgieva, Contemporary Epistemology lecture.

Each of these topics will relate to the others in such a way that, together, they support the main argument of the paper: that peaceful democratic societies require only that individuals share certain procedures for evaluating knowledge, rather than sharing in any conclusions that they form through their knowledge of the world.

Central Thesis

Conflict arises from the loss of shared standards for evaluating others' testimony and evidence. While democratic societies can tolerate a great deal of disagreement, they are not well-suited to surviving the collapse of the standards that enable peaceful disagreement. Thus, the shared reality of a society need not refer to the beliefs of its members, but to the shared standards by which they can determine what is knowledge of the world and its workings.

What Shared Reality Requires: Testimony, Trust, and Credibility

Before explaining what epistemic fragmentation is, it is first necessary to understand what shared reality requires in the first place. One of the main insights of social epistemology is that human beings are not solitary knowers of the world. Much of what human beings know of the world comes from other individuals; individuals learn from teachers, scientists, journalists, historians, physicians, judges, and others. Thus, while it may seem that the knowledge of the world that emerges from and is shared by individuals is weak, it is actually this method of sharing of knowledge that allows for the development of a shared reality among the individuals of a society.⁶

Philosopher and epistemologist Robert Audi argues that knowledge has certain sources; perception, memory, consciousness, reason, and testimony are all sources of knowledge. While perception and reason are often considered in the review of epistemology, testimony is perhaps

⁶ Alvin I. Goldman, "Social Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University).

the most important of these sources of knowledge for the majority of individuals. Most individuals have little knowledge of the scientific principles that underlie medicine, of the events of history that occur without observation by the lay individual, and of the facts of the world that are utilized by those individuals every single day. Instead, the majority of those individuals rely upon the knowledge passed along to them from others.⁷

Thus, in a society that depends upon testimony to gain knowledge, individuals must establish in what ways knowledge can be trusted from others; this is an area that social epistemology developed. In contrast to traditional epistemology, which examines the individual and their knowledge, social epistemology considers how knowledge is gained, passed along, and is maintained within society. For instance, philosopher and social epistemologist Robert Goldman argues that testimony, expertise, institutions, and the knowledge of societies in general is important in determining how knowledge spreads throughout society.⁸

Trust, then, is one of the foundational concepts of social epistemology. During class discussions, for instance, individuals began to recognize the difference between moral trust and epistemic trust. Moral trust is a concept of trust in individuals; does an individual possess the same morals as the individual that is to be trusted? Epistemic trust, by contrast, is trust in the knowledge of an individual; are they knowledgeable in the area of the discussion? Though these two concepts may appear to be separate, in practice it is difficult for many individuals to separate the two; individuals almost always consider the character of others in addition to their knowledge of a topic.⁹

⁷ Robert Audi, "The Sources of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 71–94.

⁸ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

⁹ Prof. Dr. Sc. Aneta Karageorgieva, Contemporary Epistemology lecture, Sofia University St. Kliment Ohridski, Spring 2026.

In discussing these two types of trust, it becomes apparent that one of the main factors in the development of trust between individuals is the reputation of those individuals. In general, individuals tend to trust individuals that are well-known as having knowledge of certain topics and skills; they trust physicians, for instance, because they are well-known as having the competence to provide medicine to patients. Additionally, individuals trust scientific institutions due to their reputation for producing successful science projects, for instance. Thus, reputation is built upon the knowledge of both the epistemic and moral trust of an individual of a society.

In addition to individuals whose reputation for knowledge is maintained, entire institutions are relied upon to build and maintain shared reality with individuals. Beyond the scientists of a society, other institutions that contribute to the knowledge of individuals include the courts, scientific organizations, news organizations, and even the democratic institutions of a society. Even more importantly, however, is the understanding by the social epistemologists that the knowledge of the world is created through the efforts of each society's individuals as a whole. No individual scientist knows all of the knowledge of science, and no individual citizen knows all of the knowledge of each society's experts and institutions.¹⁰

Thus, the knowledge of each society is created through the effort of the society's individuals as a whole. This knowledge is gained through processes like peer review of scientific articles, the publication of scientific journals, or the sharing of information between individuals. Furthermore, it is through this knowledge of the entire society as a group that individuals can trust in the decisions of their governments, their judges, and their other experts. Though it may appear to be a weakness of humanity to rely upon these groups, it is through their trust that each society can function as a society with a shared understanding of the world.¹¹

¹⁰ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

¹¹ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

Within this social structure of the society as a whole, however, it is possible for individuals to begin to disagree. Moreover, one of the main topics of discussion among epistemologists in the past several decades has been the discussion of what should occur in the case of peer disagreement between those individuals in the society. For instance, if scientists disagree, or if experts of any field within the society begin to disagree with one another, how should those individuals respond?

An understanding of this topic led to the discovery of the fact that while disagreements between individuals is normal and even expected, disagreements between society's experts is potentially disruptive to the shared reality that the individuals of those societies experience. Scientists often disagree on new scientific discoveries. Individuals of a society often disagree on political and social topics. Nevertheless, if individual scientists continue to discover new knowledge, publish articles on the discoveries, and share their knowledge with other scientists, as well as if the individuals of society continue to share their knowledge of the world with one another and trust one another's knowledge and opinions, then it is possible for individuals of those societies to live within a peace while disagreeing with one another on specific topics. An example of this behavior is the practice of Charles Darwin of publishing his discoveries of natural selection, but also actively searching for counter-evidence to his established theory. Shared reality, then, does not require that individuals all agree with one another and share the same understanding of the world. Instead, shared reality requires that all individuals use the same standards for evaluating knowledge, credibility, and testimony. Even if individual citizens of a society each have different views on various topics, the foundation of that society ensures that individuals can agree with one another on the means of resolving those disagreements in a peace manner.

Overall, then, the concept of shared reality and the relationship between trust, testimony, and credibility within society is of the utmost significance. If these concepts were to collapse, society would no longer be able to function as a society; no longer would it be able to agree with one another. Understanding this relationship between society, trust, credibility, and knowledge is, therefore, essential to gaining an understanding of the concept of epistemic fragmentation itself.

What Epistemic Fragmentation Is: Pluralism, Relativism, and the Breakdown of Shared Standards

If trust, testimony, and credibility create the foundation upon which a society shares a reality, then the breakdown of that foundation is the concept of epistemic fragmentation. The concept of epistemic fragmentation is often confused with polarization, diversity, or disagreement. However, these are not the same concepts. A society can be highly diverse yet share a reality with one another. Additionally, a society may disagree strongly about various political issues yet not be fragmented within their episteme. The key difference between these two concepts is the manner in which the people of a society disagree with one another.

Pluralism is a feature of a democracy. Individuals of a society have various beliefs, values, religions, and experiences that contribute to the diversity within a society. Individuals of a society may arrive at different conclusions to the same events due to these different experiences and beliefs. However, pluralism does not threaten the society's cohesion if individuals of that society agree to the framework within which those conclusions can be made.¹²

In class discussions concerning feminist epistemology and standpoint theory, it is possible to observe how the ideas of pluralism and fragmentation may relate to one another.

¹² Alvin I. Goldman, "Social Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University).

Feminist epistemologists tend to challenge the idea that the individuals that are believed to gain knowledge within a society are individuals that are detached from society and its social experiences. Instead, those thinkers posit that the individuals that perform knowledge are individuals that exist in various social positions within that society, and that their knowledge is influenced by those social positions.¹³

In these instances, it may initially appear that the ideas of feminist epistemologists support a form of relativism within knowledge claims. By suggesting that the knowledge of individuals is influenced by their social positions, it may be thought that the knowledge of those individuals is therefore valid in one position yet invalid in another. However, most feminist epistemologists do not hold these beliefs. Instead, their intention is to improve the standards of knowledge for those individuals.¹⁴ In these discussions of feminist epistemology, it is possible to recognize that the concept of epistemic fragmentation is not the same as the concept of situated knowledge. Furthermore, the beliefs of feminist epistemologists may provide one of the strongest arguments against the concept of epistemic fragmentation. By recognizing that individuals of different social positions have different forms of knowledge, it is evident that societies must include some means of enabling those with different standpoints to interact with one another.¹⁵

Different concepts are vital for understanding the distinction between fragmentation and situated knowledge. When individuals of a society have various standpoints, it is possible for them to agree with one another. However, it is impossible for them to agree with one another if the knowledge of their differing standpoints is dismissed altogether. Epistemic fragmentation occurs if individuals do not agree with one another within their shared episteme, yet instead

¹³ Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

¹⁴ Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*.

disagree with the framework of that episteme itself. For instance, individuals may no longer agree on the individuals that should be trusted with knowledge, on the institutions within a society that are to be trusted, in the types of evidence that are required to establish knowledge within a discipline, and whether objective knowledge of any phenomenon exists altogether.

In discussing the concept of testimony within a society, epistemic fragmentation may occur if the individuals of a society no longer trust testimony from other individuals of the society. In general, the knowledge of individuals of a society is often gained through the testimony of others within that society. Yet, epistemic fragmentation occurs if individuals of a society no longer trust testimony from other individuals of that society's information environment.¹⁶ Goldman discussed the idea of revisionist social epistemology in her text, in which some schools of thought consider knowledge to be entirely constructed within a society, that the concept of rationality is relative to the societies within which individuals live, and in which the societies themselves are the agents of knowledge rather than individuals within those societies. While these ideas provide valuable perspectives on the role of society in the creation of knowledge, abandoning the concept of objectivity altogether poses some difficulties for those revisionist epistemologies.¹⁷

In this case, an epistemology exists somewhere in between objectivism and relativism. One does not have to believe in the idea that all individuals of a society experience the same reality, yet one also does not have to believe in the idea that knowledge claims from individuals within a society of differing standpoints is all equally valid. Instead, the goal is to recognize and maintain the shared procedures for the evaluation of knowledge claims from individuals of that society.

¹⁶ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

¹⁷ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

These shared procedures are essential for the functioning of a diverse society. In the modern world, though, such shared procedures are becoming more difficult to maintain. Many individuals are exposed to media curated by algorithms that reinforce their existing beliefs and standpoints. These individuals are exposed to different types of evidence, different types of experts, and different types of narratives being shared about the same events. Yet, these informational communities are developing a cohesion among their members, while also becoming more disconnected from the information communities of others.

One of the defining characteristics of epistemic fragmentation is that these informational communities are no longer able to share a common understanding of how to resolve disagreements between individuals of those communities. Individuals no longer trust one another, do not believe in the abilities of common institutions, believe that the opponents of their beliefs are acting irrationally or maliciously, and no longer feel that the disagreements between individuals of the society can be resolved in a peaceful manner.

Epistemic fragmentation, therefore, indicates a breakdown of the shared justificatory procedures within a society. Instead of disagreeing with one another on the beliefs that individuals should hold, the disagreement emerges between the procedures through which those beliefs can be evaluated. The deterioration of such shared procedures, therefore, has the potential to contribute to the breakdown of the peaceful disagreements that are necessary within a democratic society.

Why Epistemic Fragmentation Threatens Social Cohesion: Trust Collapse, Coordination Failure, and the Path to Conflict

Now that the phenomenon of epistemic fragmentation has been discussed, the next question to address is the significance of such a phenomenon. Along with the fact that

disagreements are common within any society, there have always been conflicts between individuals regarding topics such as religion, politics, economy, society, and morals. However, not all disagreements among individuals result in conflicts between those individuals. The reason for which many of these disagreements are managed peacefully is due to the fact that many societies have established a means of managing those disagreements peacefully. Epistemic fragmentation, however, poses a threat to society's ability to maintain such peaceful management of those conflicts.¹⁸

One of the first ways in which epistemic fragmentation threatens the cohesion of a given society is through the collapse of the trust between the citizens of that society. Societies, modern or otherwise, are built in a way that each citizen relies upon the testimony of others to validate the outcomes of events within that society. An individual does not personally observe election results, scientific findings, judicial rulings, or the outcomes of other events within their society. Instead, each individual relies upon others to relay such information to those individuals. Thus, each individual must have some level of trust in others to receive such information. As a result of the fragmentation of epistemic knowledge, however, individuals begin to no longer trust others with the transmission of such information. Each individual feels as if the testimony of others may be deceptive, that their institutions may be corrupt, and that their experts within the society may be biased against their own views or outcomes.¹⁹

As a result, individuals in these societies begin to receive information from individuals with whom they share similar beliefs. These individuals provide information that reinforces the individuals' existing opinions of those society's institutions and experts, but which also increase

¹⁸ Alvin I. Goldman, "Social Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University).

¹⁹ Robert Audi, "The Sources of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 83–87.

the individuals' distrust of those with differing beliefs from their own. Thus, each society's individuals become increasingly isolated from those of other groups within their society. As a result, individuals no longer disagree with one another regarding the facts of the society's issues. Instead, they disagree with one another as to which individuals should be trusted to reveal those facts.²⁰

Another way in which epistemic fragmentation threatens the cohesion of society is through the delegitimization of the institutions of that society. Many of these institutions are relied upon as those which evaluate information, testimony, outcomes of experiments, election results, legal rulings, and other events within that society. For instance, individuals rely upon universities to establish standards within scientific research, the courts to evaluate the testimony presented within cases, scientific communities to provide scientific research and conclusions to scientific topics, and journalistic organizations to gather and distribute information regarding society from various locations. These institutions provide a means of establishing a shared understanding of events and outcomes within the society.²¹

When individuals no longer trust these organizations and their outcomes, however, these shared understandings are lost. Individuals no longer trust the outcomes of elections, the rulings of the courts, scientific findings, and other institutions. Due to this loss of trust in these institutions, those institutions are no longer seen as having the ability to peacefully resolve conflicts within the society. Each individual begins to turn to alternative means of obtaining information other than those of the society's shared institutions.

A third way in which epistemic fragmentation poses a threat to the cohesion of society is through the failure of coordination within that society. Society functions as a result of each

²⁰ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

²¹ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

individual coordinating with the others within that society. Each individual obeys the laws established by others within that society, accepts the outcomes of elections held by others, accepts the rulings of the courts established by others within that society, and accepts other coordinations created by the members of society. Each individual relies upon the existence of a shared reality within that society.

The fragmentation of epistemic knowledge, however, leads to each individual losing confidence in society's ability to coordinate with one another peacefully. Each individual feels uncertain as to whether others within the society act in their own best interests. Each individual feels uncertain as to whether the outcomes of society's elections are legitimate. Each individual feels uncertain as to whether the individuals of the society can coordinate with one another with any understanding of the shared outcomes of that society.²²

These feelings of uncertainty are often the results of each individual losing confidence in the ability of society's individuals to coordinate and manage conflicts peacefully. As a result, it is within this circumstance that individuals become radicalized. Individuals that feel as if the outcomes of elections were rigged, individuals that feel as if the courts are corrupt, individuals that feel as if scientists are intentionally reporting findings that work against their interests, or individuals that feel as if the media is intentionally deceptive of facts within the society will begin to turn towards extra-institutional means of resolving conflicts. While these means may have been considered as options for resolving conflicts within the society, they are no longer considered as options that will be met with peaceful outcomes. Instead, they are considered as alternatives to violence.

Social epistemology can also help to explain the ways in which epistemic fragmentation poses a threat to the cohesion of society. For example, during class discussions on the topic of

²² Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

epistemic fragmentation, the professor stated that one of the roles of disagreement among peers within a society is the improvement of knowledge of the topics being discussed. Each individual's knowledge of a topic can be tested against others within the society, and those who discover errors in individuals' knowledge can help those individuals to gain a more accurate understanding of the topic. In contrast, epistemic fragmentation poses a threat to society as a result of each individual rejecting the common standards of knowledge presented within their society. As a result, society is no longer able to gain the knowledge of others through the process of disagreement. An individual no longer feels as if sharing knowledge of a topic with others in their society is beneficial due to the potential for errors in those individuals' knowledge of the topic.

An additional threat to society of epistemic fragmentation occurs as a result of confirmation bias. As a result of this bias, an individual feels best with sharing information with individuals that support their beliefs. Individuals also seek to increase their level of confidence in their beliefs through continuing to share information with others that support their viewpoints. In contrast, the individuals' knowledge and beliefs of shared society are made more confident in their correctness while the individuals become less capable of understanding how others may view the same topics and beliefs within that society.²³

As a result, those of opposing viewpoints within a society are no longer seen as legitimate participants in the society's conflicts. A democratic society is established upon the assumption that those of opposing viewpoints to the individuals within a society are both legitimate and capable of resolving the conflicts that may exist between those individuals and themselves. The loss of this assumption is threatening to the cohesion of society.

²³ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

Now that the threat of epistemic fragmentation to society has been discussed, it is possible to understand how epistemic fragmentation can lead to the development of civil conflict between the individuals of a society. Civil wars do not typically arise as a result of the individuals of a society deciding to fight against one another. Instead, the motivations for war between individuals of society are typically established as a result of the loss of legitimacy of those individuals' conflicts.

An individual society is based upon the assumption that those of conflicting beliefs are still legitimate members of the society. As a result, individuals are still willing to accept their losses to those of conflicting beliefs. However, as a result of epistemic fragmentation, individuals begin to feel as if each loss to a conflict is another indication of the betrayal of their society or of their fellow citizens of that society. While epistemic fragmentation does not automatically suggest the development of civil war between the individuals in a society, epistemic fragmentation does suggest the threat of civil war and its consequences. While there are numerous other factors that contribute to the formation of civil war between individuals within a society, epistemic fragmentation is one factor that weakens the cohesion of that society.

In contrast, however, the consequences of epistemic fragmentation pose an additional threat to the cohesion of society. Due to epistemic fragmentation, each individual feels as if their outcomes are no longer legitimate, that their outcomes are illegitimate compared to those of others within their society, and as if their shared society is no longer able to resolve their conflicts in a peaceful manner. The reason for which such consequences threaten the cohesion of society is due to the fact that there is no longer a shared understanding between individuals of society as to the resolution of their conflicts. As a result of epistemic fragmentation, individuals no longer feel as if any peaceful resolution to their conflicts is possible.

For these reasons, then, it becomes apparent to those of any society that the fragmentation of epistemic knowledge poses a threat to the cohesion of that society. The collapse of the shared epistemic knowledge of a society is, therefore, not just an intellectual problem for its citizens. It is also a political problem and a social problem. Society's individual citizens rely upon shared epistemic knowledge to establish a shared reality within the society, trust in others within the society to create shared outcomes, and to provide individual citizens with a standard through which they may peacefully resolve their conflicts with one another. When that shared knowledge fragments, however, the cohesion of the society begins to weaken.

Feminist Epistemology and Shared Reality: Situated Knowledge Without Relativism

One objection to the idea that there is a shared reality that all citizens should recognize is that this argument is based on the idea that all individuals have the same experiences and knowledge of those experiences. Feminist epistemologists have discussed the idea that all individuals do not experience the world in the same way, and that certain individuals have knowledge that others do not recognize or respect.²⁴ Feminist epistemologists have described several weaknesses of traditional epistemologies. Traditional epistemologies have assumed that all individuals are created equally and with the same potential to gain knowledge of the world around them. Furthermore, the traditional theories suggest that knowledge is gained independently of others and in isolation of social interactions. Feminist epistemologists, however, argue that the knowledge that individuals gain from their experiences with others is knowledge of the world that may not be recognized or respected by others.²⁵

²⁴ Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

²⁵ Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

During this course, there were several themes discussed within the area of feminist epistemology. One of these themes was situated knowledge. Situated knowledge is the idea that the knowledge that individuals gain from their experiences is based upon their social locations and experiences. Therefore, different individuals will have different experiences with the world that others may not recognize.

The second of these themes related to epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice is the idea that individuals may be wronged in the role of the individuals as knowers. For instance, individuals may be disadvantaged in knowledge due to the biases of those individuals towards their social identities. Additionally, entire groups of individuals may not have the knowledge or experiences to understand the experiences of others.²⁶ Some examples of these ideas include the knowledge of caregivers of young children, disabled individuals' experiences with accessibility, or the experiences of women in scientific fields. These examples do not suggest that relativism is the proper epistemology for society. Instead, the knowledge that individuals of diverse experiences and perspectives gain can be especially valuable in the creation of shared knowledge. Furthermore, this knowledge can counteract the fragmented nature of epistemic trust among individuals of diverse backgrounds.²⁷

One concept that is especially relevant to these discussions is interactive knowledge acquisition. Knowledge is gained through the interactions that individuals have with others, and knowledge that is gained through diverse interactions will contain diverse experiences and knowledge of the world. One way in which this idea can be applied to the world today is in the

²⁶ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*.

discussion of artificial intelligence. The artificial intelligence that has been created to date has mostly emerged from groups of individuals that are similar in their experiences and knowledge. Furthermore, these artificial intelligences have created potential blind spots in their developed knowledge of the world.

Feminist epistemologies suggest an alternative to both relativism and objectivism. For instance, recognizing that different individuals have different experiences, knowledge, and knowledge gains from different experiences will allow for the knowledge of different perspectives to be recognized, respected, and incorporated into shared knowledge claims.²⁸ Feminist epistemologies, therefore, suggest an alternative method of knowledge that does not require the experiences and perspectives of all individuals to be the same. However, it does require that all individuals be able to respect the experiences and perspectives of others in the creation of a peaceful political community.²⁹

Feminist epistemology, therefore, helps to reinforce the main arguments of this paper. The issue that exists within society is not the diversity of perspectives. Rather, the issue is the lack of trust that individuals have in the knowledge and experiences of others. Feminist epistemology helps to highlight the solution to this trust issue, as well as the reasons for its development.

AI-Mediated Information Environments: A Case Study in Epistemic Fragmentation

The concepts discussed throughout this paper become easier to understand when applied to a specific example. One of the most significant developments in knowledge within the 21st century has been the emergence and growth of AI. AI is utilized in the dissemination of

²⁸ Longino, Science as Social Knowledge; Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?

²⁹ Harding, Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?; Longino, Science as Social Knowledge.

information to individuals in areas like search engines, social media platforms, recommendation systems, and generative AI language models. Thus, these systems have become some of the most important in the epistemic lives of citizens today.³⁰

One of the most significant impacts of this development in AI is upon the structure of testimony. Traditional testimony has emerged from a variety of institutions that citizens are expected to trust to possess some level of knowledge of the information that is disseminated to them. These institutions may include newspapers, universities, courts systems, and libraries. While individuals may have significant disagreements with these institutions, they are generally all in agreement as to the role that these institutions should play in the delivery of knowledge to citizens. Today, however, individuals are provided with information from personal AI systems that are designed to maximize the engagement of those individuals, and not the development of shared epistemic understandings among individuals.³¹

As a result of the personalization of information by AI systems, two individuals who search for the same information will be provided with different information. Furthermore, AI systems learn of the interests of individuals, and continue to provide information to those individuals that align with those interests. Thus, individuals are provided with information that reflects their interests and beliefs rather than those that are shared by the entire population.

This development by AI systems is related to the concept of epistemic fragmentation. Epistemic fragmentation is the concept that citizens of a society no longer share common standards for the evaluation of claims. AI systems contribute to this because they no longer provide individuals with access to the same sources of information. Thus, individuals no longer share an environment in which they can gain an understanding of the world that is similar from

³⁰ Alvin I. Goldman, "Social Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University).

³¹ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

individual to individual. Each individual begins to develop their own understanding of the world and their knowledge of the facts in it.³²

Beyond the development of individual epistemic experiences and beliefs, AI systems also contribute to the decline in opportunities for individuals to resolve their disagreements with one another. Within traditional epistemic environments, individuals all had access to the same systems, individuals, sources of information, and understandings of the world. In fragmented environments created by AI systems, there are numerous communities within those societies that have different accesses to knowledge, trust in different groups and individuals as providers of knowledge, and understandings of the world that different from other members of that community.

Related to the concept of testimony and trust is the credibility of the information that is delivered to the individuals from AI systems. AI systems do not eliminate the need for individuals to rely upon testimony. In fact, AI systems may increase the reliance upon testimony by individuals. Individuals must trust not just the experts in fields of knowledge but also the algorithms that inform the AI systems with the information that it disseminates. Furthermore, individuals often have no understanding of the reasons why the AI systems provide the information that it does. Thus, individuals place their epistemic trust in systems that are invisible to them.³³

The concept of credibility is also complicated by AI systems. Knowledge from AI systems often comes without any markers of credibility. Furthermore, information that is emotionally engaging receives more amplification through these systems than information that may be true but lacks the emotional impact upon the individuals in the system. Additionally,

³² Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

³³ Robert Audi, "The Sources of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 83–92.

false information spreads rapidly through these AI systems. As discussed in class, the continued exposure of individuals to specific information allows them to develop a sense of familiarity with the information; they may believe it to be true due to this feeling of familiarity.

The concept of the Dunning-Kruger effect is also related to AI systems. Throughout the course, Professor Karageorgieva discussed the ways in which AI systems provide individuals with access to knowledge that was once only available to experts in those fields. Thus, while there are benefits of providing individuals with such knowledge and allowing them to participate in fields that were once limited to experts, there are also risks of the knowledge gap between experts and nonexperts. Furthermore, AI systems provide this information to individuals without also providing the knowledge of the experts with regard to that disseminated knowledge.

Furthermore, incorporating the perspectives of feminist epistemology into the discussion of AI systems reveals that the knowledge that is provided by these systems is created from the perspective of those who created those systems. Thus, claims of knowledge from AI systems may reflect biases or perspectives of those few individuals rather than the many citizens of those societies.³⁴ The distinction between pluralism and fragmentation is another concept that can be applied to AI systems. Technology has enabled the information that is shared by AI systems to be pluralistic in the extent to which there are various perspectives included in the information. However, if personalization of the information that is disseminated by those systems becomes too prominent, the concept of pluralism can become fragmentation of individual epistemic understandings. Thus, individuals may have access to information, but they no longer have shared understandings of the world, other knowledge sources, and are no longer able to work together to evaluate the knowledge that exists within their societies.

³⁴ Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

Overall, AI systems do not lead to social conflict or fragmentation of shared knowledge. However, they do play significant roles in contributing to the erosion of trust in testimony, knowledge, credibility, and shared institutions. When these elements of shared knowledge begin to erode, it becomes more difficult for societies to manage the disagreements that exist between their members in peaceful ways.

The significance of AI systems and mediated information is that it reveals the fragmentation of knowledge and beliefs within societies today. Furthermore, it allows individuals to recognize the ways in which trust, testimony, and credibility erode as a result of these systems. Thus, AI systems provide an example of the arguments that were made throughout this paper regarding the importance of shared knowledge and understanding in enabling peaceful democratic societies.

Counterargument and Response

A strong objection to the argument presented in this paper is that conflict among individuals is not an epistemic problem. Wars, revolutions, and other forms of unrest among the members of a society are the results of material issues within that society. People do not fight with one another over an issue because they believe that they do not know about the knowledge of the other side of the conflict. They fight with one another over an issue because they believe that they have an interest that is threatened by the other side of the conflict.³⁵

This objection to the argument is worthy of consideration. Material issues are often a cause of conflict between individuals in a society. It would be naïve to believe that epistemic fragmentation is the cause of these conflicts between individuals. There are a number of societies

³⁵ Alvin I. Goldman, "Social Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University).

throughout the world that have experienced epistemic fragmentation without any conflicts between their members.

However, the objection to this argument misunderstands the scope of the argument altogether. I did not state that epistemic fragmentation was the sole cause of conflicts between individuals in a society. Rather, I stated that epistemic fragmentation was one of the enabling factors in the ability of societies to peacefully resolve any conflicts that may emerge between their members. While almost every society has some level of material conflict between their members, it is the ability of those societies to peacefully resolve those conflicts that determines whether the society is stable or not.³⁶

Consider any democratic election held in any society. It is common for individuals to have conflicting ideas regarding issues such as taxes, education, immigration, healthcare, or even foreign policy. These conflicts are often based upon individual interests. Yet, there is peace in the resolution of those election conflicts due to the accepted procedures of the election process. Should one lose an election, it is considered only disappointing rather than threatening to the individual's peace. However, if there is no peace in the acceptance of elections as legitimate, then the loss of an election can begin to appear fraudulent or even existentially threatening to those who have lost the election. The same material conflict between individuals can become difficult to resolve peacefully under these conditions.

Another objection to this argument relates to the idea of relativism. Some philosophers state that there has never been a time in the history of the world when any society did not have an epistemic conflict between their members. Each of the societies throughout time have had different interpretations of reality than some of the members of other societies. While it is true that there has never been a time in human history when all of the members of a society did not

³⁶ Goldman, "Social Epistemology."

hold some interpretation of reality that was different from another member of that same society, it is not a reflection on the ability of any society to share a reality. The concept of a shared reality does not refer to the ability of all members of a society to agree with the conclusions of others. It refers to the shared epistemic procedures that all members of that society use in evaluating the knowledge of others.

While relativism denies the possibility of a shared standard in the evaluation of knowledge, pluralism allows for the recognition of the diversity of views that exist within a society and the need for the acceptance of such views. Democratic societies require the acceptance of pluralism and have struggled with relativist arguments.³⁷ One of the final objections to this argument is concerning the role of expertise in the resolution of conflicts between individuals. Some of the most prominent objections to the role of expertise within any given society is the suggestion that relying upon the knowledge of any individual or group as a means of resolving a conflict is often just a means of the powerful to maintain their power over the non-powerful members of that society. The abuse of expertise is prevalent throughout history.

Feminist epistemology provides one way of countering this objection to the argument. Rather than blindly trusting any society's or institution's experts, it is possible to create an epistemic framework and trust that allows for the acceptance of different viewpoints of the issues between those who conflict with one another. The epistemic framework does not require individuals to accept all suggestions or solutions to a conflict proposed by a single group. However, it does require that all viewpoints be able to be considered and potentially challenged to ensure that the resolution of a conflict is truly beneficial to all of the parties involved. Such a framework will work to ensure that those who wish to conflict with another society are actually

³⁷ Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

able to contribute to the resolution of that conflict.³⁸ These objections to the argument are, therefore, actually beneficial to the argument put forth in this paper. They help to highlight the role of both material and epistemic factors in the creation of peaceful societies. They work to distinguish between relativism and pluralism, and between cynicism and criticism. In both the past and the present, one of the major concerns of humanity is whether or not the conflicting individuals in a society can continue to conflict with one another while maintaining a shared framework of trust between one another.

Conclusion

What happens when the concept of shared reality within a democratic society begins to unravel? While many democratic societies include disagreements among their citizens, the shared aspects of those societies often act as a means of ensuring that those disagreements do not become too great or difficult to manage within the society. Not all citizens need to believe in the same ideas regarding politics, religion, economics, or even other aspects of their society. However, there must be an agreement as to how beliefs should be evaluated, how to trust others with those beliefs, and which individuals or institutions may be trusted to resolve any disagreements between those individuals or citizens of the society.

Through the use of epistemology, social epistemology, and even feminist epistemology, it is possible to understand that the likelihood of conflicts between the citizens of a society is actually mathematically likely to rise with the decline of that shared reality within the society. Disagreements within a society are actually a normal part of the knowledge of those individuals. However, if individuals begin to disagree with the methods by which those beliefs are to be

³⁸ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*.

evaluated, trusted, and resolved, the likelihood of conflicts between those individuals rises. Additionally, as will be explained throughout this paper, those conflicts have the potential to develop into a type of epistemic fragmentation within the society that undermines its social stability overall.³⁹

There are a few main arguments that can be made regarding the concept of epistemic fragmentation. First, the concept of shared reality within a society requires that individuals place trust in testimony, trust in the credibility of others, and trust in the institutions within the society that are intended to help those individuals create and share knowledge. Human beings are social beings that require trusting others in order to gain the knowledge that they require to function within society.⁴⁰

Second, epistemic fragmentation is best understood as a breakdown of the shared beliefs of a society as to how beliefs should be evaluated, rather than the fragmentation of the beliefs themselves. Societies exist with diversity in their beliefs and experiences. Feminist epistemology, for instance, suggests that diverse knowledge and experiences are actually beneficial to the development of knowledge within a society. Rather than the shared procedures within a society for evaluating knowledge and beliefs is lost.⁴¹

Third, epistemic fragmentation can lead to the breakdown of social stability through the reduction of trust within a society, the weakening of the standing of the institutions that are trustable within society, the inability of individuals to coordinate with one another within their society, the growing appearance of the political views of an individual as disconnected from the

³⁹ Alvin I. Goldman, "Social Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University).

⁴⁰ Robert Audi, "The Sources of Knowledge," in *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 71–94.

⁴¹ Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990); Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

reality of the nation of that individual, and the weakening of peaceful means of resolving conflicts between those individuals. Such fragmentation within knowledge and beliefs can be seen as a foundational element for the development of political instability within a society.

Finally, the observation of some of today's major developments within society, such as the development and growth of AI in the dissemination of information, suggest that epistemic fragmentation may already be occurring within society today. The growing personalization of the information that individuals are provided enables each individual to develop different beliefs of the same concept. Additionally, the decline of trust in the information provided by the media or other institutions today is another sign of the development of epistemic fragmentation within society today. While such fragmentation is not a threat to peaceful coexistence between individuals in a society today, the threat of such fragmentation is one of the main reasons to work to preserve the shared knowledge and beliefs of citizens of a nation.

Perhaps the most important of the insights into shared reality is that shared reality does not require all individuals in a society to share the same beliefs. While the elimination of disagreements among individuals in a society is not required, shared procedures for evaluating, challenging, and resolving those disagreements is essential to the functioning of the society. This concept is one of the main counterpoints to both relativistic and authoritarian claims to knowledge within society, and one that should be emphasized in any discussion of the concept of reality within a democratic society.

The future of democratic societies, then, may depend upon the preservation of the knowledge, trust, credibility, humility, and general openness of those societies towards new knowledge of their citizens.

Thus, the main argument that can be made regarding peaceful coexistence between individuals within a society is that peaceful coexistence within a society does not require that the individuals of that society share the same beliefs. Instead, peaceful coexistence within a society requires that the individuals of that society share enough beliefs and knowledge to enable each individual to recognize how their beliefs should be evaluated. Thus, the weakening of such shared beliefs can lead to the weakening of the social stability of that society, and the erosion of such beliefs entirely can lead to the inability of those societies to maintain peaceful and democratic disagreements between its citizens.

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