

# Epistemic Institutional Roles and Truth-Telling

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# Sources

- Seumas Miller “Epistemic Institutions: A Joint Epistemic Action-based Account” *Nous-Supplement: Philosophical Issues* 32 2022
- Seumas Miller “Joint Epistemic Action: Some Applications” *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 35: 2 2018
- Seumas Miller “Assertions, Joint Epistemic Actions and Social Practices” *Synthese* 193:1 2016
- Seumas Miller *The Moral Foundations of Social Institutions: A Philosophical Study* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010)

# Institutions

- Institutions are organisations or systems of organisations.
- Institutions consists of an embodied (occupied by human persons) **structure of differentiated roles**
- Roles are defined in terms of tasks, and rules governing the performance of those tasks.
- **Interdependence of roles** in the service of the common goals (collective ends) of organisation
- On teleological and functional accounts and on the joint action-based teleological account (Miller 2010), these roles are related to one another in part in virtue of their contribution to the **ends or functions** of the institution

# Joint Actions

- Basic building block of social institutions is joint or cooperative action (Miller 2010).
- Joint action consists of set of individual actions performed by multiple agents in order to achieve a collective end
- **Layered structures of joint action** (Miller 2010) consists of multiple joint actions in the service of a larger collective end, e.g. **collective end of building a skyscraper.**
- Building a skyscraper consists of multiple teams of members of a variety of professional/occupational groups, e.g. architects, engineers, carpenters, bricklayers etc.; each team performs joint actions: joint action of designing building; joint action of laying foundations; joint action of constructing structure of pylons etc. etc.

# Epistemic Action

- Coming to truly believe the proposition that p, e.g., police investigator coming to believe that Peter Sutcliffe is the Yorkshire Ripper, on the basis of evidence, is action in two respects (Miller 2016; Miller 2018):
- Action (1) **Investigator intentionally gathers evidence having as an end to know** who the Yorkshire Ripper is, e.g. physical evidence, interviews people in vicinity of attacks
- Investigator decides that he will come to have a true belief with respect to some matter as opposed to not having any belief; **decision** between coming to have **true belief** and being in state of **ignorance**

# Epistemic Action (cont.)

- Action (2) Investigator makes an evidence-based all things considered judgement (mental act) that Sutcliffe is the Yorkshire Ripper (as opposed to that Sutcliffe is **not** the Yorkshire Ripper) having as an end the truth of the matter
- Deciding between p and not p; but A is still **aiming at truth** (not falsity);
- Investigator is **not** deciding to believe what he/she thinks is false or deciding to believe that p irrespective of the evidence

# Joint Epistemic Action

- Much knowledge acquisition is performed by individuals acting jointly to realize a **collective epistemic end** (Miller 2016; Miller 2018) e.g., a team of linguistic experts discover the meaning of some lost manuscript
- Mutual true belief that have collective epistemic end (Miller 2016)
- Speech act of assertion: **collective end (normatively speaking) is that speaker and hearer mutually belief that p**

# Assertion as Joint Action (Miller 2016)

- An assertion *qua joint action* is an instance of a social practice which has as its point or collective end (normatively speaking) the communication of (relevant) truths. Thus, a particular assertion by a speaker qua instance of the social practice of assertion is unsuccessful if it is not true (or is irrelevant), and/or it is a lie, and/or it is not believed by the hearer. A successful and felicitous act of assertion by speaker S to hearer H that p (by means of utterance U) will consist of the following.
- (1) S and H perform a joint action of communication of p (with intended assertoric force);
- (2) S aims at truth (by making a judgment) and H trusts S (by making a judgment);
- (3) S has as an end (in saying that p with intended assertoric illocutionary force) that H judge that p: i.e., S asserts that p (given conditions (1) and (2));
- (4) p is true;
- (5) H judges that p (on basis of an inference from S's assertion that p);
- (6) S and H mutually truly believe that p;
- (7) Collective end, E, of practice of assertion is realized, namely, that S and H mutually truly believe that p\*.
- A speech act can be an act of assertion even if it is false or a lie. However, the use of the terms, “successful” and “felicitous” is intended to rule out such cases. Note that from the Hearer’s perspective, an assertion might be unsuccessful if it is a lie. Moreover, as mentioned above, an assertion *qua joint action* is unsuccessful if it is not true, and/or it is a lie, and/or it is not believed by the Hearer.



# Layered Structures of Joint Epistemic Action

- Human Genome Project (HGP) was international, collaborative research program: **collective epistemic end was complete mapping and understanding of** all the genes of human beings, i.e., the **human genome**.
- HGP involved hundreds of scientists comprising dozens of teams located at numerous cooperating organisations (principally 20 universities and research centres) worked to realize collective end of mapping the human genome (1988-2001)
- National Human Genome Research Institute, “The HGP has revealed that there are probably about 20,500 human genes. The completed human sequence can now identify their locations. This ultimate product of the HGP has given the world a resource of detailed information about the structure, organisation and function of the complete set of human genes. This information can be thought of as the basic set of inheritable "instructions" for the development and function of a human being.” [www.genome.gov](http://www.genome.gov).
- **Realised collective end of HGP was collective expert knowledge of human genome** - web of knowledge consisting of fragments of knowledge; fragments were epistemic contributions of multiple researchers working in different organisations world-wide.
- **HGP involved** realizing multiple, nested, collective epistemic ends (fragments of knowledge) in the service of larger collective epistemic end of mapping the human genome (web of knowledge), and **multiple layered structures of joint epistemic action undertaken to realize this larger collective epistemic end** (Miller 2022)

# Epistemic Institutions

- **Joint epistemic activity is conducted in all institutions** as is joint (non-epistemic) action.
- Joint (non-epistemic) action involves joint epistemic action.
- **Problem: how do we distinguish essentially epistemic from essentially non-epistemic institutions**, e.g., universities from car manufacturers?
- **Collective knowledge** (propositional and practical e.g., knowledge how) **is primary and ultimate collective end(s) of essentially epistemic institutions** but not of essentially non-epistemic institutions (Miller 2022).
- Toyota Corporation is not an essentially epistemic institution even though it undertakes research into electric cars, because primary and ultimate collective end is the production of cars, not knowledge about cars.
- **A university which conducts research into electric cars remains an essentially epistemic institution if it stops short of producing cars** - other than perhaps to demonstrate how this can be done, i.e., its research yields knowledge-how.

# Argument and Response

- **Argument:** Ultimate collective end of the research undertaken in universities is paradigmatically expert-knowledge, as opposed to public-knowledge.
- **Expert-knowledge is means to end of benefitting** wider community e.g., improvement in community's transport system
- **Response:** (i) **Expert knowledge is an end** as well as a means.
- (ii) Expert knowledge is end realized by university but **the university itself acting on that expert knowledge**, e.g., making the improvement to transport system, **is not an end** (and, therefore, not a primary or ultimate end) **of the university** (Miller 2022).
- Ultimate collective end of improving transport system is one to which the university is only one type of contributor; an epistemic contributor

# Species of Epistemic Institutions

- What are differences between universities, news media organizations and national security intelligence agencies?
- **Universities** have, or ought to have, collective knowledge, notably **expert knowledge**, as primary and ultimate collective end (Miller 2022).
- **News media organizations** have, or ought to have, **public knowledge** e.g. regarding political issues, as primary and ultimate collective end (Miller 2022).
- **Public knowledge is not typically new knowledge**; rather it is knowledge possessed by others that is in need of public dissemination; unlike universities, primary and ultimate **collective end of news media organizations is the public dissemination of existing knowledge** (Miller 2022).
- New knowledge is knowledge that no-one currently has (other than current acquirer).
- Thus if knowledge acquired of the activities of a currently existing but remote community would not be new knowledge; but currently acquired knowledge of the past activities of a community that no longer exists would be new knowledge (if this knowledge is not currently possessed by anyone else).

# National Security Intelligence Agencies

- National security intelligence is ideally knowledge, i.e., true or probably true.
- National security intelligence is not new knowledge but paradigmatically **secret knowledge**.
- Unlike academics sources of secret knowledge are highly resistant to it being acquired, e.g. secret intelligence acquired about foreign military organizations.
- Unlike knowledge acquired by journalists, **national security intelligence is typically secret intelligence acquired in the service of collective end of national security** - not for public consumption; rather ‘need to know’ basis (Miller 2022).
- **National security intelligence needs to be actionable** by political leaders and security agencies, e.g. intelligence re planned foreign military attack requires defensive measures –national security intelligence different from knowledge sought by academics and journalists

# Knowledge as an End-in-itself

- Knowledge sought by intelligence officers, journalists and academics have something in common: the pursuit of knowledge as an end-in-itself.
- This might be counter-intuitive in the case of journalists and intelligence officers.
- Knowledge, if it is to be collective knowledge, will be disseminated to academic peers, members of the public and national security decision-makers, respectively.
- National security intelligence **also** needs to be actionable, and knowledge acquired by journalists **also** should enable the citizenry to make informed political decisions.
- Perhaps expert-knowledge acquired by academics merely needs to be knowledge acquired as an end-in-itself and disseminated to academic peers (e.g., in academic publications).

# Argument and Response

- **Argument:** knowledge acquired by journalists and intelligence officers is merely a means to a collective end; the acquisition of this knowledge is not an end-in-itself.
- **First Response:** It is necessary that journalists and intelligence officers have an overriding professional commitment to gaining knowledge rather than seeking directly to realize the public interest outcomes that might or might not flow from the journalists' public dissemination of this knowledge or, in the case of the intelligence officers, the national security outcomes that might or might not result from the decisions of the politicians, military leaders and other decision-makers who receive their intelligence.
- Important that journalists and intelligence officers qua journalists and intelligence officers do not engage in institutional overreach

# Argument and Response (cont.)

- Second Response: acquisition of knowledge is an end-in-itself for journalists and intelligence officers, as it is for academics, notwithstanding that the truths acquired by journalists and intelligence officers are also the means to further ends.
- Truth and, therefore, knowledge is not an external, contingently connected end of the epistemic activities of journalists and intelligence officers which those activities might be directed towards if the journalists or intelligence officers happen to have an interest in truth, rather than, say, an interest in falsity.
- Rather truth is internally connected to epistemic activities, including those of journalists and intelligence officers, as well as those of academics and others.
- To aim at truth by, for instance, making a judgement is to aim at truth as an end-in-itself.
- Relatedly, to make an assertion is to represent one's-self as aiming at the truth as an end-in-itself rather than merely as a means to an end; a means that one might abandon if, say, falsity would be a more effective means to the end in question.
- **Aiming at truth as an end-in-itself and representing one's-self as aiming at truth as an end-in-itself is consistent with also aiming at truth as a means to some other further end**, such as winning a war.
- Journalistic or intelligence activity which **only** aimed at truth as a means to some other end, and presented itself as such, would not be genuine journalism or intelligence activity since it would not be genuine epistemic activity.



# Epistemic vs Non-Epistemic Institutions

- All institutions consist of institutional role occupants who make judgements and perform assertions, i.e., consist of institutional role occupants who aim at truth as an end-in-itself.
- Does not follow from this that all institutions are essentially epistemic institutions.
- For **unlike an epistemic institution, in a non-epistemic institution the kinetic actions that rely on the knowledge provided by institutional role occupants who aim at truth as an end-in-itself are performed by institutional role occupants who are members of this very same non-epistemic institution itself** e.g., Toyota employees produce cars as well as conduct research.
- **In essentially non-epistemic institutions**, although some knowledge is a necessary means to the kinetic action that is their core business, the acquisition of new expert knowledge is not core business. Thus **the acquisition of new expert knowledge could in principle be outsourced by a car manufacturer to another institution without the car manufacturer ceasing to be a car manufacturer.**
- **University would not be university if it outsourced acquisition of new expert knowledge to another institution.**
- National security intelligence agency would not be cease a national security intelligence agency if it outsourced the acquisition of secret intelligence to another institution