
Richard Foley’s latest book is an intellectually exciting contribution to contemporary epistemology. Foley covers a number of important classical and current figures in the field—including Descartes, Locke, Hume, Reid, Chisholm, Davidson, Gettier, Goldman, Quine and Putnam, not to mention Foucault, Marx and Rorty—yet manages to keep the text accessible, clearly written, and jargon-free. Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others is particularly worthwhile reading for those interested in questions concerning knowledge, rationality, social epistemology, pragmatism, and the nature of personal identity over time.

Recognizing the impossibility of obtaining a complete proof of our beliefs or defeat of skepticism, Foley constructs a practical and realistic account of rationality based primarily on intellectual self-trust. While acknowledging that our beliefs are profoundly shaped by others, Foley retains a central role for intellectual autonomy and careful reflection on one’s current epistemic perspective. In so doing, he is able to explain why we trust others and our past, current, and future selves to the extent we do, as well as how such trust functions philosophically.

Since our beliefs cannot be apodictically proven, self-trust is pragmatically necessary; the question is, how far should that self-trust range? Foley answers that we should trust ourselves intellectually insofar as we have for the relevant beliefs an epistemic confidence so deep
that it would survive critical reflection. This cannot guarantee the truth of these beliefs, but it can constitute an account of rationality concerning their acceptance.

Foley uses his account of trust in our current beliefs to construct bases for trust in others, in our past selves, and in our future selves. Given that my own beliefs are in most cases shaped by others, and that others' beliefs have been constructed in an intellectual environment strongly resembling my own, I am pressured to trust others even if I know nothing about their epistemic location, on threat of inconsistency with trust in myself. My attitude toward even fully anonymous others should be one of prima facie epistemic trust, but that prima facie trust can be defeated. The most significant cause of such defeat is a conflict between others' beliefs and my own. Since self-trust is the foundation of my trust in others, self-trust generally trumps other-trust. If, however, I have what Foley calls "special reasons" to think that another person whose beliefs conflict with mine is in a position epistemically favored over mine, I ought to trust that person's belief in preference to mine.

Foley's analysis of intellectual trust in my past and future self is structurally similar to his account of trust in others. In all cases, I ought for consistency's sake to grant prima facie credibility to the cognizer in question—others, my past self, my future self—unless there is a doxastic conflict between that cognizer and my present self. Such a conflict defeats this prima facie credibility, but credibility can be restored through "special reasons" to favor the account I do not currently accept. Perhaps I recognize I had more recent training in the relevant field a decade ago, or will be in sharper fettle three months from now.

Despite the many strengths of Foley's program, there are aspects of his approach that merit further discussion. His representationalist account of truth enables him to make a radical and invidious distinction between value and aesthetic beliefs and what he calls representational beliefs; his program for intellectual self-trust explicitly applies only to the latter. Those whose pragmatism involves a denial that any truths are representational, favoring instead an approach construing "true" beliefs as useful tools, will be uncomfortable with this distinction.
Foley’s central focus on self-trust enables the avoidance of many problems associated with objectivist epistemologies, but one wonders if the resulting account is in fact too subjectivist. Is one’s feeling of epistemological confidence (obtained, of course, through self-critical reflection) sufficient to establish one as a rational cognizer? What of the religious fundamentalist who concludes after sustained introspection that the work of evolutionary scientists is necessarily flawed, since it conflicts with creationism? (Such questions further the point that “representational” beliefs may not be neatly separable from value judgments.)

Conversely, Foley’s program appears insufficiently subjectivist. Rationality as Foley conceives it appears to be a purely intellectual matter, which poses difficulties for a view so focused on epistemic self-confidence. An agent with a brash personality may take less epistemic care than necessary before concluding that her opinions are invulnerable to self-criticism, while another agent struggling with insecurities might fail to experience intellectual confidence when he ought. Epistemic self-trust involves emotional as well as intellectual factors.

Finally, Foley disallows the Foucauldian worry that we are being intellectually dominated by our society in a manner that would violate our right to autonomous self-trust. He does so on analogy with skepticism, maintaining that although we are not able to disprove the possibility, we are entitled to assume it false and proceed as thought we have intellectual autonomy. The analogy seems problematic, since a skepticism that takes seriously cannot be ameliorated. Intellectual domination by societal standards, however, can. Ignoring this disanalogy, which results from the human and hence potentially malleable nature of cultural domination, may make us epistemically quietistic when Foley’s ultimate concern is, quite properly, to increase our reflective understanding.

William Jewell College Elizabeth A. Sperry


Since the turn of events in Germany that started with