

Inclusion and Epistemology: The Price is Right

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In his address, Harvey Siegel presents us with a position which seems provocatively paradoxical, that of championing the cause of inclusion as a conversational and theoretical ideal while at the same time refuting the principal arguments usually adduced in its favor. By diffusing the epistemological case for inclusion, Siegel can argue that embracing inclusion is epistemically benign. Inclusion does not have to be purchased at the cost of traditional epistemic values such as universalistic theories or scholarly standards. Epistemically speaking, the price is right.

Let me begin by saying that, in general, I find Siegel's argument regarding universality and particularity and their relationship to inclusion compelling. I also have considerable sympathy with Siegel's claim that the most powerful argument for inclusion is a moral one. Nonetheless I believe that the issue of the relationship between inclusion and epistemology is more complex than might be indicated by Siegel's treatment of it.

Siegel argues that the prime reason for embracing inclusion is that it is morally wrong to do otherwise. Excluding people or silencing them in conversations in which they have an interest or stake involves a failure to treat such persons with respect, and constitutes a violation of the demands of justice. It does not, however, constitute an epistemic failure. He argues and offers examples to demonstrate that inclusionary discourses are not, in general, more likely than exclusive discourses to yield epistemically worthy theories, and that there is no necessary connection between inclusion and epistemic worthiness, or between exclusion and epistemic defectiveness.

I think that this treatment of the relationship between inclusion and epistemic worth is perhaps a little too hasty. There is, I shall argue, a weak version of the claim that inclusion is an epistemic virtue which has more merit than Siegel is willing to grant (although he does go some distance toward acknowledging its main point). In addition, there is a strong version, a version which presents complexities and challenges which are not given attention in Siegel's argument.

THE WEAK VERSION

The weak version involves the claim that more inclusive discourses are more likely to yield worthy theories *according to traditional epistemic standards* than are less inclusive discourses. An example is the claim made by Longino and cited by Siegel that the inclusion of more points of view is likely to result in more objective scientific practices and more reliable descriptions and explanations -- objectivity and reliability being traditional standards of epistemic worth. Siegel's argument demonstrates that there is no *necessary* connection between inclusion and epistemic worthiness, but a necessary connection is not required by those who hold this version of the view. All that is required is the reasonable expectation that, on balance, "inclusive research communities...stand a better chance of obtaining worthwhile results than exclusive communities" -- a point which Siegel goes a considerable distance toward conceding. Indeed, theorists of critical thinking, among whose ranks our president figures prominently, enjoin us to consider alternative theories in the effort to arrive at epistemically worthy beliefs. Granted that a reasoned consideration of alternatives does not guarantee that the beliefs one arrives at will be true, but neither does assessing the credibility of sources, recognizing fallacies in arguments, or carefully controlling our experiments. Nonetheless

these are all to be recommended on epistemic grounds. Siegel argues that inclusive discourses are not, in general, more likely than exclusive discourses to yield justified theories, yet an important aspect of justification involves defending a theory against objections and demonstrating its merits with respect to plausible alternatives.

It is certainly the case that alternatives may emanate from a variety of sources, not just from excluded others. But here it may be useful to consider some of Siegel's comments regarding universality and particularity. Siegel argues, rightly I believe, that particularity and universality are not mutually exclusive and that inclusion and valorization of the particular do not entail a rejection of the universal. We can acknowledge that humans are always located, that we judge from our own conceptual schemes, and that our judgments are always partial and limited by our cultural and historical circumstances, but this does not mean that our judgments can have no force beyond our location. Indeed, I would argue that putting forth claims to universal validity can be a way of trying to transcend our partiality by inviting intellectual scrutiny and possible refutation of our claims and thereby testing their scope and limitations. If this is the case, then it would seem to be crucially important to include in the debate those who are differently situated and might thus be more likely to probe unexamined assumptions, raise unasked questions, challenge accepted frameworks for understanding, and generally reveal the possible limitations of universal claims. Thus the aim of arriving at more valid and better justified beliefs, both particular and universal, seems to be enhanced by inclusion.

A similar argument can be mounted with respect to standards. An important point in Siegel's defense of standards is that particular standards are always open to revision and that intellectual advance comes through the criticism and improvement of standards. One important source of such criticism would be those who have traditionally been excluded from practices governed by the standards and from discourses about the standards themselves -- those whose cultural and historical circumstances may give them unique insights into the operation of the standards.

I acknowledge the point that included views may sometimes be irrelevant to the issue in question, that inclusionary discourses can yield epistemically defective theories, and that a proliferation of points of view may not always be productive. Nonetheless the preceding arguments seem to me to constitute epistemic grounds for the valuing of inclusion. Inclusion can produce epistemic benefits.

THE STRONG VERSION

The preceding deals with the weak version of the claim that inclusion is an epistemic virtue. This version rests on an assumed correlation between inclusion and traditional standards of epistemic worth. There is, however, also a stronger version represented in Siegel's address by the quotations of Weinstein and Code. This is the claim that some discourse frames are epistemically inadequate *by virtue of their exclusionary nature*. Weinstein, for example, states that "[d]iscourse frames...are to be judged for their adequacy *in terms of their ability to include*, without prejudice, all points of view within their scope" and further that "[i]t is the disregard of women's perspectives...*that marks patriarchal frames as inadequate*" (emphasis added). The argument here is not that inclusive frames necessarily produce theories which are more adequate according to independent epistemic criteria, but rather that inclusivity is, itself, a criterion of epistemic worth. That is, exclusion is a ground for considering a discourse frame inadequate although included perspectives may be deemed inadequate for other reasons. Thus a view such as Weinstein's does not entail a wholesale rejection of traditional epistemic standards. Nonetheless this view is significantly different from the weak version. It is not simply that the disregard of certain perspectives makes a discourse frame less likely to produce theories which are worthy by other standards. Rather, the fact that a frame disregards certain perspectives despite their apparent availability *constitutes* an epistemological failing in that this reveals a pathology in the frame (for example, with respect to how power has operated). Thus inclusion becomes an epistemic criterion in an unusual way: it is not that excluded perspectives are more likely to be epistemically worthy, but rather that they are *dialectically invaluable*. They are

necessary to the worthiness of the discourse. This brings an ethical norm into the epistemological realm, as Weinstein has pointed out. Siegel would doubtless counter that this involves a confusion between the ethical and the epistemic, and that epistemic criteria are necessary for the justification of the ethical norm.

There is, of course, an even more radical version of the strong version. On this view, the epistemic value of inclusion is not conceived of in terms of a correlation between inclusivity and traditional epistemic standards, since the very possibility of standards of epistemic worth independent of the knower/inquirer is under challenge. Such standards, it is argued, are constructed by groups of persons in the context of their particular situations and interests. Therefore it makes no sense to talk of epistemic standards which have universal applicability and which are independent of who is doing the knowing. Attempts to evaluate according to such supposed standards amount to an imposition of a dominant group's particular standards in the guise of universality. Thus notions of power and privilege play a key explanatory role. On this view, the very terms of Siegel's argument against inclusion as an epistemic virtue would be rejected as would the idea of justified exclusion. Inclusion, particularity, and the rejection of standards and universality are all part and parcel of the same conceptual package.

CONCLUSION

Siegel's paper initially presents us with a rather unexpected state of affairs -- complete agreement regarding the value of inclusion as a conversational and theoretical ideal. Such apparent unanimity over a topic which usually generates strong debate will doubtless come as a surprise to many. Yet agreement vanishes once it becomes clear what inclusion will look like in its various versions.

For Siegel, and also for the weak version of the "inclusion as an epistemic virtue" argument, inclusion involves including all groups in conversations in which they have an interest or stake, except as exclusion is justified, for example, by a lack of qualifications or expertise. It also means evaluating the various contributions according to epistemic standards and excluding those contributions which fail to meet those standards. Specific judgments and theories arrived at as well as the standards themselves are seen as fallible -- always subject to critique and revision by the members of the discourse community. Such conversations aim to propose valid universal, as well as particular, claims and theories.

A stronger version of the inclusion argument also involves including a range and diversity of views into the conversation and subjecting the various contributions to critical assessment. But inclusion itself is added to the epistemic criteria of evaluation.

Inclusion, in its strongest version, involves a radical pluralism and relativism of perspectives. All are included and exclusion is never justified in any overarching sense. Evaluation among various perspectives is not a valid possibility, although there may be a struggle for ascendancy among perspectives in terms of power. The possibility of universal claims and theories is rejected in favor of illuminating the particular.

There seems to be agreement to embrace inclusion, but the implications of inclusion for universality and standards depend on which version we accept. How do we decide? It may seem that choice is not required -- that a plurality of views is possible. But to the extent that inclusion is more than an academic question and requires action in the world, choice seems inevitable. I want to say that we ought to decide on the basis of a critical evaluation of the various versions -- an evaluation which takes place through conversations within an inclusive community according to standards which are acknowledged to be non-absolute and located, and which are seen as fallible and subject to revision by the members of the community, in an attempt to make a judgment which transcends the particular. Now perhaps this move begs the question. Perhaps some question will inevitably be begged in the context of this conversation. But if we give up on the possibility of such conversations, what is the alternative?

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