Examining Scientific Knowledge Attribution: A Distributed Cognition Approach

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Résumé

Science, operating as a cognitive institution, is often characterized as a collective entity subject to knowledge attributions, such as "Science knows that p." This talk aims to provide additional support for Alexander Bird's (2022) argument, challenging the notion that scientific knowledge, when viewed collectively, simply stems from or supervenes on the mental states of individuals. A key underpinning of this argument lies in the distributed model of social cognition.
Within this model, cognitive labor is distributed within research teams, dividing the task of gathering evidence into subtasks assigned to different members based on their expertise. This approach results in a scenario where no single member fully comprehends each other's tasks. Consequently, scientific work may exhibit instances where communal or group evidence or knowledge diverges from individual evidence or knowledge. Specifically, cases can be drawn where a discovery contributes to scientific knowledge without any individual possessing knowledge of it. This challenges the assumption that scientific knowing necessarily supervenes on individual knowing or other mental states.

This talk not only explores the alignment of wider science with the distributed model but also aims to address central objections raised by Jennifer Lackey (2021). Lackey presented two objections: first, the assertion that embracing "social knowing" or "social knowledge" leads to significant epistemological problems, and second, the suggestion that ascribing social knowledge to collective entities can be replaced by describing these entities as being in a position to know. We contend that these objections can be countered by demonstrating that the scientific team possesses evidence and knowledge in a non-reductive manner.

Our discussion will highlight the nuanced sense in which scientific teams hold evidence and knowledge, challenging the traditional and summativist understanding of the relationship between individual and collective knowledge. By delving into the details of distributed cognition and responding to objections, we aim to contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how knowledge is generated and attributed in the scientific realm.

References:

Bird, A. (2022). Knowing Science. Oxford University Press.
Lackey, J. (2021). The Epistemology of Groups. Oxford University Press.

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Mots-Clés: Scientific Knowledge Attribution, Distributed Cognition Model, Collective Epistemology, Social Epistemology, Social Cognition