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Poverty Knowledge, Coercion, and Social Rights: A Discourse Ethical Contribution to Social Epistemology

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In today's America the persistence of crushing poverty in the midst of staggering affluence no longer incites the righteous jeremiads it once did. Resigned acceptance of this paradox is fueled by a sense that poverty lies beyond the moral and technical scope of government remediation. The failure of experts to reach agreement on the causes of poverty merely exacerbates our despair. Are the causes internal to the poor – reflecting their more or less voluntary choices? Or do they emanate from structures beyond their control (but perhaps amenable to government remediation)? If both of these explanations are true (as I believe they are), poverty experts will need to shift their focus to a hitherto under-theorized concept: coercion.

I defend this claim by appealing to distinct areas of philosophical inquiry: social epistemology and moral theory. Poverty knowledge is directly related to both of these inquiries. The aim of poverty knowledge is clearly moral: to reduce suffering and to empower the weak. While the former aim is grounded in utilitarian thinking, the latter aim is grounded in the social contractarian insight that poverty is unjustly coercive, imposing excessive limits on the opportunities and choices of the poor that render them vulnerable to domination by others. Equally obvious is the social nature of poverty knowledge. All knowledge depends on the reliable testimony of others. Poverty knowledge not only ostensibly offers us the most reliable, *scientific* beliefs about the causes and effects of poverty, thereby determining how we morally judge the poor and their poverty, but it reciprocally bases its understanding of poverty on what the poor themselves have to say about it.

What unites both social epistemology and moral theory – at least the social contract variants I will be examining here – is concern about the limits and possibilities of rational choice. As poverty knowledge came of age in the fifties and sixties, it absorbed the language of rational choice prevalent in economics, especially the Keynesian economics whose moral underpinnings can be found in Rawlsian social contract theory. Echoing a different economic theory supported by a different, more libertarian, brand of social contract theory, poverty expertise in the eighties continued to use an abstract model of rational choice. I submit that, in both early and later epochs of poverty expertise, reliance on rational choice reasoning

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prevented poverty experts from appreciating the coercive impact of poverty on the poor. Social epistemology explains this failure by demonstrating the poverty of rational choice thinking and its mistaken reliance on inflated commonsense expectations about the capacity of individuals to calculate their long-term interests, free from the distortions of social bias. Social epistemology not only exhibits the dangers of not relying on expert testimony, but it also exhibits the dangers of relying on an unreliable source of expert testimony that has removed itself from its human subject matter.

In order for poverty experts to become more reliable educators about poverty's coercive impact on the poor they must return to their discipline's social epistemological roots. Only a more descriptive and explanatory sociology can narrate a comprehensive story about how the lived experience of poverty relates to the larger social system. The social contractarian model best suited to underwriting this kind of poverty knowledge, I submit, is the discourse theoretic model that has been championed by Jürgen Habermas. When applied as a pedagogical method of dialog and not as a social contractarian model of rational normative consent, discourse theory highlights the unique epistemological advantages of empathetic understanding that are so essential to dispelling stereotypes about the poor. Dispelling these stereotypes is the first step toward respecting the poor as free agents who are nonetheless forced to make suboptimal choices.

My defense of these claims proceeds as follows: Part One argues that poverty expertise rightly deserves the opprobrium critics have heaped on it. The charge – leveled by progressives and conservatives alike - that such expertise is ideological (unscientific) is true to the extent that poverty knowledge has all-too-easily accommodated the political aims of the agency that has funded it: the federal government. The shift from the war on poverty to the war on the poor – and the resulting shift from blaming poverty on economic structures to blaming it on the culture of poverty – would not have been possible without an increased emphasis on data gathering aimed at measuring poverty rather than describing it. Part Two assesses the consequences of turning away from qualitative research to statistical analysis: the coercive nature of poverty becomes invisible beneath the surface of aggregate individual

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choices. The failure to grasp how voluntary choices, ostensibly based on rational, self-interested calculations, can be coerced by social structures - and thereby lead to sub-optimizing behavior – invites the conclusion that the poor have only themselves to blame for their misery. Part Three suggests that this pathologization of the poor directly controverts the major aim of poverty research: to empower the poor as free and equal parties to the social contract. I argue that the different varieties of social contract theory that have justified poverty expertise over the last forty years – the welfarist (distributivist) model pioneered by Rawls and the market-based (libertarian) model defended by Nozick – embrace the same rational choice models favored by poverty experts and so conspire with the latter in neglecting important dimensions of poverty-related coercion. While the welfarist model conceals the coercive nature of bureaucratically administered entitlement programs and top-down urban renewal policies, the market-based model conceals the coercive nature of economic class structures. The discourse-theoretic alternative proposed by Habermas endorses a populist, democratic response to the overly abstract rational choice assumptions embedded in these other models.

Despite this advance over its counterparts, the chief advantage of discourse theory for poverty knowledge, I submit, resides less in its proposed procedure of rational collective choice than in its heuristic as a dialogical method of social learning. I demonstrate this claim in Part Four, where I turn to the social epistemological insights of Allen Buchanan. Social epistemology offers a much needed corrective to theories of knowledge that rely on the reasoning capacities of isolated individuals. By stressing the connection between moral response and social belief, on one hand, and the dependence of social belief on epistemic authorities, on the other, social epistemologists suggest ways in which we can learn to distinguish reliable from unreliable authorities and become aware of our own error-prone cognitive proclivities. Their insights need to be supplemented by moral epistemologists who stress the affective dimension of knowledge, above all, the role that empathy plays in understanding the plight of others. Drawing from victim narratives, Diana Meyers shows that switching between first-person experiences of one's own and third-person (imaginative) reconstructions of others' experiences is essential

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to appreciating the gravity of human rights violations and the seriousness of human rights claims. It goes without saying that such empathy is just as essential to understanding the plight of the poor. Meyers mainly has in mind empathetic understanding that has been facilitated by third-person observation and literary encounter, but the importance of visceral and corporeal representation suggests that face-to-face dialog may sometimes be a more effective way to facilitate empathetic understanding.