

Epistemological Issues in Karl Mannheim's
Sociology of Knowledge – I

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Introduction

This is the first part of a two-part inquiry into some of the many epistemological issues raised in Karl Mannheim's writings on the sociology of knowledge. An attempt has been made to discuss these issues in historical perspective. Consequently, after a few prefatory remarks have been made concerning the relationship of epistemology to the sociology of knowledge, the inquiry will proceed by showing how Mannheim's sociology of knowledge developed, in part, as a response to some of the epistemological problems which Mannheim saw as having been inadequately resolved by classical epistemology, specifically the problem of how to account for conceptual change. Part I, presented here, regards epistemology and the sociology of knowledge in terms of their status as separate intellectual disciplines and briefly offers some distinctions between the two as articulated by some of those authors writing under the rubric of the "sociology of knowledge." Part I also attempts to clarify some of the basic epistemological issues which are central to Mannheim's thought and to reconstruct a critique of post-medieval epistemology from the standpoint of the sociology of knowledge along lines suggested by Mannheim. Part II, to be published separately, presents and critiques Mannheim's own model for epistemology.

Purview of the Problem

In the opening pages of Peter L. Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, it is contended that "... the sociology of knowledge must concern itself with whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society, regardless of the ultimate validity or invalidity (by whatever criteria) of such 'knowledge.'"¹ Epistemology, then, insofar as it attempts to deal with these latter issues, is *ipso facto* excluded from the realm of the sociology of knowledge, although the sociology of knowledge may, of course, avail itself for its own methodological purposes of the findings of epistemology. However, the sociology of knowledge as sociology, and not as philosophy or a substitute for philosophy, constitutes an empirical, descriptive scientific discipline which restricts itself to the study of observable phenomena – in Berger's and Luckmann's definition, just given, to "whatever passes for 'knowledge' in a society." Epistemology, by contrast, may be regarded, for most purposes, as a normative discipline which attempts to establish norms or criteria whereby the validity or invalidity of propositions can be ascertained. The temptation to reduce epistemology to sociology, more specifically to the sociology of knowledge, commits a fallacy akin to that of attempting to derive an "ought" from an "is," and results in sociologism. Reductionistic tendencies of this sort must be avoided if the methodological integrities of both sociology and epistemology are

to be maintained. Consequently, although epistemological issues may be raised by the sociology of knowledge, those issues which are explicitly sociological should not be confused with those which fall under the domain of epistemology, and vice versa.

These concerns are echoed by many, if not most, of those thinkers who have written on the sociology of knowledge. In his *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge*, Florian Znaniecki emphasizes that the sociology of knowledge should not be misconstrued as a "sociological theory of knowledge."² For methodological purposes, Znaniecki uses the word "truth" to mean

... any element of any system of knowledge taken with its humanistic coefficient, that is, taken from the standpoint of the men who believe that they understand this system, who are actively interested in it and regard it as containing objectively valid knowledge about the object matter to which it refers.³

This is decidedly a sociological, rather than a philosophical way of using the term. In Znaniecki's definition, the emphasis leans towards persons, rather than towards ideas or concepts *per se*, and his book develops accordingly as a study of the social roles of those individuals who are the possessors and guardians of knowledge.⁴

Joseph Ben-David, in his *The Scientist's Role in Society*, also concentrates more upon the "man of knowledge" than upon the forms of knowledge he discovers or creates, emphasizing the effect of favorable social conditions, in historical perspective, on the rise of modern science. While his book deals with the more specific area of the sociology of science, rather than with the sociology of

knowledge in general, he distinguishes between two general postures the sociologist can adopt in investigating the sociological aspects of science, depending on which aspects he wishes to concentrate upon and emphasize.⁵ First, there is the interactional approach, which can be roughly defined as an attempt to deal with the various relationships which form between scientists in the scientific community. Second, there is the institutional approach, which deals with relationships between scientists and the institutional structures in which they work. Each of these two areas may in turn be divided into sub-areas which are chiefly concerned either with (1) the effect of interactional or institutional effects on scientific activity and the behavior of scientists, or with (2) the effect of interactional or institutional effects on the conceptual and logical structure of science. Ben-David notes that these approaches are not mutually exclusive; the concerns of each may overlap, and the choice regarding which approach will be emphasized depends to a large extent on the specific areas a sociologist wishes to investigate. However, the second set of areas of concern mentioned by him has the most relevance for a study of the relationships between epistemology and the sociology of knowledge, but Ben-David expresses little hope for fruitful studies in these areas.⁶ Instead, he favors the approach which concentrates on scientific activity, and restricts the scope of his book to institutional rather than interactional aspects of the sociology of science.

Berger and Luckmann follow a somewhat different approach from that adopted by writers such as Znaniecki and Ben-David, in that they do not wish to limit their inquiry merely to a treatment of the theoretical mode of thinking engaged in by "men of knowledge" or "scientists," i.e.,

that type of knowledge which is accessible only to those who have been specifically trained to receive it, but wish instead to include in their purview an investigation of that type of knowledge which appertains to "everyday life," and is accessible to most normal people.⁷ But they do generally agree with Znaniecki's and Ben-David's basic position that epistemological questions raised by the sociology of knowledge must be dealt with by philosophy. In Berger's and Luckmann's words, the sociology of knowledge "...cannot solve these problems within its own proper frame of reference."⁸

It should be evident, even from the limited number of positions considered thus far, that sociologists of knowledge are seldom in agreement with one another as to what the proper scope and subject matter of the sociology of knowledge should be. Still, one verdict of the writers just examined seems fairly clear: epistemology and the sociology of knowledge constitute separate intellectual disciplines, and the purposes of both could be better served if the latter does not encroach on the territory of the former.⁹ Even so, what is also seldom disagreed upon are the philosophical roots of the sociology of knowledge in philosophers such as Marx, Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Scheler.¹⁰ It might be hypothesized that as sociology in general has matured, defined its own sphere of competence, and developed methodologies appropriate to its undertakings, it has become possible, even necessary, for the sociology of knowledge in particular, as it is expounded by Berger and Luckmann, for example, to sever its earlier ties to philosophy.

In this light Mannheim can be seen, perhaps, as somewhat of a pivotal or transitional figure in the historical development of the sociology of knowl-

edge. For while his contribution to the discipline as an empirical endeavor is generally acknowledged as being of decisive importance, he maintained an interest in those epistemological issues which were regarded in the early stages of the discipline as having more than a peripheral significance.¹¹ Mannheim's interest in epistemology can be traced at least as far back as the writing of his doctoral dissertation, entitled "Structural Analysis of Epistemology,"¹² first published in 1922. Although this essay is not specifically concerned with the sociology of knowledge, one can already see in it an emphasis on relating individual concepts to the contexts in which they are formulated and placed, in this particular instance, to the contexts provided by philosophical systems.

While those writings of Mannheim's which bear directly on the problems of a sociology of knowledge do not purport to be, nor should be construed as being, epistemological treatises (with the exception of the essay just referred to), they do raise a number of issues which are of an epistemological nature. These issues are crystallized in one of the questions which may be regarded as being central to Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*, namely, "...how it is possible that identical human thought-processes concerned with the same world produce divergent conceptions of that world."¹³ The fact that divergent conceptions of the world have been produced at various times and in various historical situations is an empirical one which can be observed and recorded by sociology. Yet, once this fact has been recorded, it initially presents at least two types of problems which are relevant to epistemology.

The first problem concerns how epistemology can go about assessing the validity of these various conceptions of the world; this may indeed be

regarded as the central problem for epistemology in general. The second problem results from a recognition of the fact that various epistemologies have themselves been the sources of divergent, and often conflicting conceptions of the world; in other words, epistemology itself can become the subject matter of the sociology of knowledge. In what follows, these problems will be dealt with in reverse order, first by attempting to reconstruct, following leads suggested by Mannheim, an account of some of those issues which were central to epistemological thinking in the post-medieval period,¹⁴ and second (in Part II), by showing how Mannheim addressed himself to the general problem of validity.

Critique of Post-Medieval Epistemology

When Mannheim used the phrase “conceptions of the world,” it is likely that he used it in most instances in a way synonymous with his use elsewhere of the term “*Weltanschauungen*.” Both are equally ambiguous, and Mannheim’s entire analysis of the sociology of knowledge perhaps could have been more successful if he had defined more precisely what he meant by these terms. There are times when Mannheim seems to be consistently speaking of *Weltanschauungen*, i.e., of broad, and sometimes vague, general outlooks on the world; yet, there are other times when he seems to take the idea of “conceptions of the world” to mean the precise, individual statements of fact of which systems of knowledge are comprised. One may speculate that part of Mannheim’s confusion concerning the term “social position,” to be discussed later, arose from an inability to distinguish between these two types of knowledge. However, the confusion may become more understandable — though none the more acceptable — if it is noted that the particular concepts of a *Weltanschauung* in

themselves may be expressed in statements which are similar to, say, scientific statements of fact. If one expresses the statement, for example, that God is the first-cause, and specifies it as part of one’s *Weltanschauung*, as a religious person might do, evidence of a scientific sort for the statement will not likely be sought. If the statement, however, is part of a scientist’s theories on physics, as it was for Aristotle, for example, it becomes open to further scientific investigation, and the person making the assertion must be able to produce factual evidence in its support. A fuller treatment of this ambiguity and other related ambiguities in Mannheim’s thought will be postponed until the second part of this inquiry. For the present, however, these ambiguities must simply be noted.

In Mannheim’s view, the predominant model for much epistemology, at least prior to the modern period, has rested on the conviction that no matter how many divergent conceptions of the world there are or have been, it is at least in principle possible for there to be one conception or set of conceptions which will be true and correct ones. The goal of traditional epistemology, then, has been to ascertain how true conceptions of the world can be arrived at. Under this model, once it is thought that the true conceptions of the world have been ascertained, it would necessarily follow that there would be compelling and inescapable reasons for everyone to accept them as being true, i.e., for a consensus regarding their ultimate validity to be established, and that those conceptions which are not in agreement with them can be treated as “errors,” “half-truths,” or “approximations” to the truth believed to have been ascertained.

For Mannheim, this view of truth was no longer entirely viable, since it seemed evident to him that regardless of the purity of the methods used to

obtain “truth” and the good intentions of those who were attempting to obtain it, it was not always possible to achieve consensus regarding the validity of certain conceptions of the world. Furthermore, there was a danger that a group of investigators at a particular point in history would come to regard the conclusions obtained by themselves thus far as being absolutely true, and not open to further revision. Mannheim writes in “Structural Analysis of Epistemology.”

History offers an abundance of material; a rich variety of successive or co-existing theories of knowledge. But to choose the one correct epistemology among them – assuming it has already been realized in history – that is more than the logician is able to do with the means at his disposal. If he tried, he would be falling into the typical error of the philosophers of the Enlightenment who, having satisfied themselves that there can be only one correct solution, went on to identify the position reached by their own time – an altogether transitory affair – with eternal truth as such.¹⁵

One of the problems Mannheim set about to solve was how it was possible for there to be an epistemological pluralism when it was acknowledged by these same epistemologies that in principle there could only be one set of conceptions about the world which were true and correct ones. He began by tracing the development of modern epistemological thinking itself and by inquiring into how it was thought that a consensus on truth-claims could be established.

Mannheim’s views on consensus can be summarized as follows. So long as there is a widespread consensus among any given group as to

which conceptions of the world are regarded as being true, it is probable that the group will see little reason for engaging in an epistemological evaluation of the validity of their conceptions. Indeed, if the consensus is total, no conflicting assertions would arise which could call the consented-upon conceptions into question. Even so, it would be possible – at least for an observer outside of the consenting group – to observe that even if there is consensus among the members of the group as to which assertions are held to be true, this is no guarantee of their absolute validity. Consensus cannot become the criterion by which the ultimate validity or invalidity of an assertion can be ascertained. In other words, the fact that everyone agrees that something is true, does not necessarily mean that it is in fact true. It may be that everyone agrees upon something which is false. Yet, as long as the consensus of the group is maintained, it is only with difficulty that a member of the group, i.e., one who also consents to the truth-claims of the group, can call these consented-upon assertions into question. From the perspective of the group, then, epistemology becomes a necessary endeavor when, by whatever means, the consensus of the group is in some way broken.

In assessing Mannheim’s views on consensus, one may question to what extent such a consensus on any issues has ever been realized or is actually realizable in history. Again, two answers are possible, depending upon how one interprets Mannheim’s phrase “conceptions of the world.” If one is thinking primarily of a consensus regarding *Weltanschauungen*, he may ask if any society at any point in history has actually attained such a degree of unanimity that no degree of pluralism in opinions could be found. On the other hand, it does seem slightly more plausible to say that

within a social group — particularly in a group where intellectual matters are discussed, and where facts, rather than *Weltanschauungen* are given top priority — there must be a consensus on certain fundamental assumptions, such as what will be allowed to count as a “fact,” how these facts may permissibly be obtained, etc.; certain theories may also be widely consented upon. To look at the matter somewhat differently, the extent to which one can assimilate himself into an intellectual tradition, depends in part on the extent to which he can come to share the consensus of the members of that tradition, taking into account the fact that the consensus may shift as the tradition grows and develops. But again, one may rightly ask to what extent a consensus within such traditions has ever been fully realized in history. These are questions for the historian. What becomes potentially interesting about Mannheim’s views on consensus from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge, are the various *ideals* which have been set forth in history regarding how such a consensus might be obtained especially with reference to how facts about the world might be established.

Regardless of the extent to which a consensus has actually ever been achieved, the dissolution of even a limited consensus, according to Mannheim, is typically occasioned by the interjection of competing truth-claims which conflict with previously agreed upon truth-claims into the awareness of the consenting group. It is when this happens that an assessment of the validity of the new truth-claims, and perhaps also of the previously adhered to truth-claims becomes a crucial matter for any given consenting group. The individual who finds himself in a position where a new set of truth-claims impinges on the older established set of truth-claims, confronts what Mannheim called

“double scepticism.”¹⁶ It becomes difficult for him to accept either the older or the newer set of truth-claims. According to Mannheim.

This puzzlement marks the origin of a *genuine epistemology*, which is more than a mere elaboration and justification of a preconceived view. For epistemology is an expression of a shaken faith not only in one particular truth, but in truth as such and in the human capacity to know.¹⁷

Still, it was out of such a “shaken faith,” according to Mannheim, that the attempt to establish a new basis for truth is begun.

Such a situation existed, according to Mannheim, though admittedly not in quite the idealized form that has been sketched here, towards the end of the medieval period, and Mannheim describes the rise of post-medieval epistemology as “. . .the first significant philosophical product of the breakdown of the unitary world-view with which the modern era was ushered in.”¹⁸ How this “breakdown” occurred, in Mannheim’s view, must be briefly described. One may note that here Mannheim is indeed primarily concerned with *Weltanschauungen*, and that his analysis as a specifically *historical* analysis is particularly susceptible to objections by historians.

The truth-claims generally agreed upon in the medieval period were sustained, in part, according to Mannheim, by the authority of the Church. Thus, not only could the validity of assertions be tested with respect to how well they measured up to the canons of truth upheld by the Church, but the Church also had the authority, and perhaps more importantly, the power, to insure a certain amount of intellectual conformity. Hence, a

general consensus, i.e., a fairly agreed-upon (even if at times by force) conception of the world, taken as being true, could be maintained. One may note that this is not to say that the period was completely inflexible with regard to the breadth of opinions it was capable of tolerating, as Mannheim vaguely seems to indicate. But there were limits, and a more or less clear line was drawn between orthodoxy and heresy. Moreover, on many points there was wide-spread, even if not total, consensus. At the very least, the possibility of achieving and maintaining total consensus remained an ideal for those who were invested with the guardianship of the Church's teachings, and it was this ideal which seemed to concern Mannheim most.¹⁹ When those within the domain of the Church came into contact with conflicting truth-claims from outside the Church, as was the case in their encounters with "barbarians" and Moslems, the truth-claims of the latter could be judged in light of the generally acknowledged standards of truth set by the Church. It became more difficult, however, for the Church to maintain a consensus on central religious and philosophical matters with the advent of secular learning in the Renaissance and the new interest in science. These latter forces came from within the European Christian community, rather than from outside of it (as with the "barbarians" and Moslems), and one may hypothesize that it is usually easier to preserve a consensus from outside influences than it is to maintain one when individuals within a consenting group begin to question the foundations on which a consensus is based.

The epistemological assumptions implicit in medieval thought were, according to Mannheim, oriented towards the objective side of what he sees as a basic polarity in epistemology between subject

and object.²⁰ Thus, Mannheim writes,

. . .in the Middle Ages, which not only believed in an unambiguous world-order but which also thought that it knew the "existential value" to be attributed to every object in the hierarchy of things, there prevailed an explanation of the value of human capacities and thought which was based on the world of objects. But after the breakdown [of the medieval world-view], the conception of order in the world of objects which had been guaranteed by the dominance of the church became problematical, and there remained no alternative but to turn about and to take the opposite road, and, with the subject as the point of departure, to determine the nature and the value of the human cognitive act, attempting thereby to find an anchorage for objective existence in the knowing subject.²¹

Regardless of the external factors one might cite as to why what Mannheim regarded as a breakdown of the world-view of the Middle Ages occurred — the rise of modern science or the changing economic and political structure which ushered in the Renaissance, etc. — philosophy had little choice but to abandon the medieval attempt to ground epistemology in the objective world. Instead, the new epistemologists attempted to work towards an understanding of the objective world by first examining the nature of the human subject. On the one hand, according to Mannheim, was the rationalistic current, typified by the Continental Rationalists and their successors, who endeavored to map the structure of human reason. On the other hand were the British Empiricists who undertook an analysis of perception as their starting point.²²

Another current, not touched on by Mannheim extensively, but which undoubtedly had a considerable impact on furthering what he regarded as the breakdown of the world-view of the Middle Ages was the Protestant Reformation. A few remarks on this subject may be instructive with regard to how it contributed in the shifting of the notion of consensus away from a purely collective posture towards a more individualistic one. In breaking with the Roman Catholic Church, Luther attempted to transfer the authority over the believer's life from the office of the Church to the Holy Scriptures. Hence, the authority of the Church and its power to enforce this authority, it was thought by the Reformers, could not longer be relied upon to demand and obtain a consensus in matters concerning which truth-claims could be taken as valid. This authority, according to Luther, could only reside in the Bible; arguments over conflicting truth-claims in religious matters could only be settled by appealing to the Scriptures. Against the charge that the individual needed the authority of an ecclesiastical body in order to give him the proper interpretation of Scriptures and in order to prevent disputes, Luther maintained that every individual who reads the Scriptures under the guidance of the Holy Spirit will always arrive at the same conclusions in issues regarding faith and practice.

Historically, however, this idea has not always been realized. Indeed, once Luther had made the initial break with the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and emphasized the ability of the individual to discern spiritual truths apart from that authority, it became relatively easy for anyone who wished, to assert that his own particular interpretation of Scripture was the correct one as against all others. Luther had not allowed for the

possibility that there could be equally viable alternative interpretations of Scripture, with significant amounts of evidence drawn from the Scriptures themselves to support them. Hence, it was not long after Luther's break with the Church that a proliferation of sects came into being, all of which claimed to be in possession of the true interpretation of Scripture. The notion that a complete consensus regarding spiritual truth was still, in principle, possible, was not abandoned. But the actual means by which this consensus could be reached in practice was complicated by the fact that each group held its own views to be the correct ones, while those which were in conflict with them were regarded as being wrong.

While one could probably not point out too many similarities between these types of disagreements and those encountered in a scientific community—since scientific controversies can be more readily solved in light of harder, more concrete evidence — it would probably be fair to say that similar problems running almost parallel to these confronting early Protestantism were encountered in the history of epistemology in the period following what has Mannheim has called the breakdown of the medieval world-view. Authority in intellectual matters no longer resided in the Church, but rather in the individual knowing subject. In the formulation posited by the rationalists, conflicting truth-claims could be resolved by appealing to reason. In the formulation provided by the empiricists, conflicting truth-claims could be resolved by appealing to what the senses revealed. Yet, it was still believed that, in principle, a consensus could always be reached, either because it was thought that reason would compel all rational men to accept the same conclusions, or because it was thought that since the senses revealed the

same data to all observers, which could be interpreted uniformly, all observers would be compelled to draw the same conclusions. The threat of philosophical solipsism, however, which both rationalism and empiricism had to contend with, endangered the possibility of coming to consensus, because the solipsist did not even have to accept the existence of his opponent apart from his own mind, let alone the truth-claims his opponent regarded as being valid. Solipsism had the potential of becoming a problem for epistemology in much the same way that a proliferation of sects had become a problem for Reformation thinkers, in that both threatened the ability to achieve and maintain consensus.

The ironic result of both the theological and the philosophical assaults on the authority of the Church, according to Mannheim, was that while it was thought that the authority of the Church could no longer be relied upon as a basis for establishing consensus, the notion of the possibility of coming to a consensus on other grounds was still maintained. Even if the world-view of the medieval period had collapsed, there still existed the possibility, it was thought, of constructing a coherent, non-contradictory body of truths on some basis other than the Church's authority. Hence, truth was still viewed as being essentially unitary, or "one," in the sense that two conflicting truth-claims could not both be true at the same time. As a consequence, the criterion of logical consistency has remained one of the important tests of validity even into the present. And even though it can be seen that a mere consensus could not be the sole test of the validity of truth-claims — since, as previously mentioned, it is possible for there to be total consensus on a false assertion — the new epistemological orientation insisted that

all truth-claims would still have to survive the test of universality. In other words, if an assertion is regarded as being true, it must be true for all men, at all times, and in all places. This is not a restatement of the fallacy that if everyone agrees something is true, it must therefore be true; what it means is that if all individuals with sufficient mental capacities apply the same criteria of validity established by epistemology to the same phenomena, the same conclusions will be obtained. And if the assertions which are postulated are indeed valid, there can be no significant problems concerning consensus, since all divergent conceptions will be necessarily false. It may be concluded, then, that any view of truth which maintains that there is one and only one set of conceptions about the world which will be correct ones, also required the criteria of both logical consistency and universality, regardless of whatever other criteria, such as reasonableness or confirmation by the senses, might also be called for by traditional epistemologists.

In an essay entitled "The Democratization of Culture," Mannheim correlated these tendencies in epistemology with the rise of democratic thinking:

When Descartes proclaims 'clear and distinct' ideas as necessary for true knowledge, or when Kant specifies 'necessity' and 'universal validity' as the essential characteristics of scientific judgments, they apply 'democratic' criteria to epistemology. These criteria imply that nothing can be accepted as true unless every human mind can grasp it. . . . The democratic mind rejects all alleged knowledge that must be gained through special channels, open to a chosen few only. It accepts as truth only that which can be ascertained by everybody in ordinary ex-

perience, or that which can be cogently proved by steps that everybody can reproduce.²³

While it is possible that a direct correlation between the rise of democratic thinking and a new “democratic” tendency in epistemology could be plausibly established, what is of most concern here is simply Mannheim’s suggestion that many post-medieval epistemologists took the position that for a set of conceptions about the world to be true, the appertaining truth must be universal.

It should still be noted, however, that while Mannheim was critical of this “democratization of epistemology,” other arguments besides Mannheim’s could be advanced against it. Plato, for example, might argue that only those individuals with sufficient mental abilities are capable of perceiving and understanding the truth. His myth of the divided line shows, he thinks, that there are various levels of understanding, and the higher levels are not accessible to all men. Yet, even in Plato, the highest truths will be the same for all men, although not all men will be able to appreciate them equally. Still, of course, the historical question as to whether or not anyone has ever actually grasped these higher levels presupposes that one already knows what these higher levels are. For Mannheim, however, the central question was not the epistemological question of how men might attain truth, but the sociological question of how to account for the differences which arise in judging what that truth is. Attributing such differences to differences in mental capabilities at attaining one absolute, universal truth, as Plato might have done, was unacceptable to Mannheim. Moreover, Mannheim was more interested in discussing the ideals of truth set forth by various groups, rather than how these ideals might actual-

ly be attained, by, for example, persons of differing mental capabilities.

To summarize briefly Mannheim’s analysis, it has been seen that the epistemologies which developed out of the breakdown of the world-view of the medieval period initiated a radical individualism, balanced by an equally radical emphasis on objectivity. Both emphases harmonized well with the methods being adopted by the natural sciences, which were developing at about the same time. The emphasis on individualism gave the scientist the freedom to pursue his investigations and draw his own conclusions regardless of what the Church authorities might have to say about the matter. In practice, of course, this freedom was not won from the Church without difficulty. Secondly, the emphasis on objectivity made the scientist continually aware of the need to only accept as true those conclusions which could be proved to anyone who wished to take the trouble to examine his arguments and his evidence.

Despite the enormous success in utilizing both these emphases in the formation of epistemological models, especially for the foundations of the new science, the ensuing models also present several difficulties, which according to Mannheim, have only become more apparent with the advent of sociological thinking.²⁴ In the first instance, the emphasis on individualism, in the sense outlined above, has made it difficult to discern the effect that collective associations can have on the process of an individual coming to regard certain assertions as being true. It has also made it difficult to discern the effect which the process of coming to a consensus — a collective activity — in intellectual matters, has on what the group as a collective entity comes to regard as being valid assertions.

Mannheim states,

..it is far from correct to assume that an individual of more or less fixed absolute capacities confronts the world and in striving for the truth constructs a world-view out of the data of his experience. Nor can we believe that he then compares his world-view with that of other individuals who have gained theirs in a similarly independent fashion, and in a sort of discussion the true world-view is brought to light and accepted by the others. In contrast to this, it is much more correct to say that knowledge is from the very beginning a co-operative process of group life, in which everyone unfolds his knowledge within the framework of a common fate, a common activity, and the overcoming of common difficulties....²⁵

Essentially, then, an individual is not expected to learn everything from the ground up so to speak, as if each generation would have to re-discover and re-prove Euclid's theorems, for example. Thomas S. Kuhn argues that, so far as science is concerned, the initiate into a particular scientific enterprise inherits a "paradigm" from his predecessors,²⁶ though a paradigm is, of course, quite different from a *Weltanschauung*. (One encounters again here the ambiguities surrounding this term.) The transmission of knowledge from generation to generation is essentially a social activity, in the sense that there is an intellectual tradition which is handed down to researchers' successors. This is not to say that it is merely a social activity, since, after attaining a level of competence to do so, the student will begin undertaking research on his own and will be in a position to test and evaluate the views which have been handed down to him. Although he works within the tradition and absorbs what is best in it,

he later will be involved to a large extent in finding ways to improve it by resolving the unresolved problems which were handed him, and occasionally, by discovering new problems and new ways of thinking about the subject matter of the discipline. As the store of knowledge increases with each generation, specialization becomes possible – indeed necessary – since an individual becomes incapable of knowing all there is to know within his particular field within his own lifetime. This in turn makes possible a division of labor in intellectual endeavors, which can be guided more or less by the individual's intellectual interests. In any event, the knowledge which the initiate into the intellectual world receives, according to Mannheim, will in most cases be given to him as it is seen by and from the perspective of those who transmit it to him.

The new emphasis on objectivity also had several important consequences in another way. The rigorous individualism of the new science in no way entailed subjectivism, according to its proponents. Even though the epistemology of the time began with the knowing subject, it always worked its way back to an account of the external world – the external world which the new science took as its duty to describe. The view that a complete consensus could be obtained rested on the assumptions that the world was the same for all knowing subjects, and that the means of acquiring knowledge of the external world was the same for all knowing subjects. However, if any conclusions were obtained which were later regarded as being false, the responsibility for error was thought to consist solely in the probability that the knowing subject had used a faulty means of acquiring his knowledge; it was simply unacceptable to think that the world would provide conflicting data to

different knowing subjects, or that the same data could admit of divergent interpretations.

For epistemology to eliminate any element of subjectivity, Mannheim writes,

. . .the quality of “being human” was conceived as “merely being human” – which had been stripped of everything vital, corporeal, historical, or social – so an attempt was made to set forth a conception of knowledge in which these human elements would be submerged.²⁷

Bringing to the surface and explicating how these “human elements” – what Mannheim referred to elsewhere as “non-theoretical conditioning factors in knowledge”²⁸ – contribute to a group’s understanding of what constitutes valid knowledge is, in part, what Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge attempted to do. Mannheim also thought that such an explication could help resolve the problem, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, of how it is possible that different persons come to have divergent conceptions of the world. As has been shown, traditional epistemology held that once it has established the means for acquiring true knowledge, no conceptions of the world which diverged from that knowledge would be possible, in principle, unless one had deviated from the means for acquiring knowledge so prescribed. Yet, for Mannheim, it seemed clear that divergent conceptions of the world could not be properly explained in light of some supposed universal test of validity, in part, because even this test of validity could not be completely agreed upon by various epistemologists. And it also seemed clear to him that the presence of divergent conceptions of the world could be better explained, not in terms of deviations from a partially agreed

upon set of epistemological norms or criteria which denied any social element to knowledge, but in terms of the differing contexts in which these conceptions of the world are formulated and the purposes to which they are put. These topics will be discussed in greater detail in the second part of this inquiry.

NOTES

1. Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1966), p. 3.
2. Florian Znaniecki, *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge* (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1965), p. 4.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
4. See also *ibid.*, p. 10:

...while admittedly systems of knowledge—viewed in their objective composition, structure, and validity – cannot be reduced to social facts, yet their historical existence within the empirical world of culture, in so far as it depends upon the men who construct them, maintain them by transmission and application, develop them, or neglect them, must in large measure be explained sociologically. And this is what 'sociology of knowledge' has actually been doing, whenever it was not vainly trying to become epistemology.

It is not always clear that Znaniecki himself does not succumb to this temptation. Especially in light of his operative definition of "truth," given above, a case could be made, perhaps, that Znaniecki is not entirely consistent in his use of the term in this way throughout *The Social Role of the Man of Knowledge*. Particularly in Chapter Four, the concept of truth in an absolute, rather than in a merely cultural sense, seems to become a critical issue for Znaniecki.

See also Werner Stark's somewhat critical comment in *The Sociology of Knowledge: An Essay in Aid of a Deeper Understanding of the History of Ideas* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), p. 28, that Znaniecki

...considers knowledge in itself as a realm altogether divorced from social reality, as the possession of and participation in a truth which is suspended, as it were, far above us in the skies, but which we can see as we do the stars. There

can be no sociology of knowledge, but only a sociology of the carriers of knowledge.

5. Joseph Ben-David, *The Scientist's Role in Society: A Comparative Study* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971), p. 2.
6. For his reasons, see *ibid.*, pp. 2-14.
7. See, for example, Berger and Luckmann, p. 15:

...only a few are concerned with the theoretical interpretation of the world, but everybody lives in a world of some sort. Not only is the focus on theoretical thought unduly restrictive for the sociology of knowledge, it is also unsatisfactory because even this part of socially available "knowledge" cannot be fully understood if it is not placed in the framework of a more general analysis of "knowledge."
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
9. Stark thinks somewhat differently. See, for example, his article on the "Sociology of Knowledge" in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. VII, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc. and The Free Press, 1967), pp. 476 ff.: "The main philosophical importance of the sociology of knowledge consists in its claim to supplement, if not to replace, traditional epistemology."
10. See, for example, Berger and Luckmann, pp. 4-8, and Stark's article on the "Sociology of Knowledge" cited above.
11. One may think here of the philosopher, Max Scheler, who is generally recognized as having been one of the first to use the phrase "sociology of knowledge," and who, in his *Problems of a Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Manfred S. Frings, ed. Kenneth W. Stikkers (London, Boston, and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 33, wished to discuss, among other things, the "...relationship of the sociology of knowledge to the theory of the origin and validity of knowledge (epistemology and logic)...."
12. Included in Karl Mannheim, *Essays on Sociology and Social Psychology*, ed. Paul Kecskemeti (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).

13. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1936), p. 9.
14. Certain supplementary material on matters not extensively treated by Mannheim has been included.
15. Mannheim, "Structural Analysis of Epistemology," *op. cit.*, p. 30.
16. Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*, ed. Ernest Mannheim and Paul Kecskemeti (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1956), p. 150.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 151.
18. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 13. Mannheim also saw the rise of classical Greek philosophy, beginning with Socrates, as a period of significant epistemological activity for much the same reasons. See *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*, p. 151.
19. Commenting on Mannheim's view of the religious ideal of truth, Ernest Mannheim succinctly summarizes, "In the theological doctrine of nearly all Christian churches and denominations, the revealed truth as held by the Church is addressed to all men and can be accepted by all." In Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*, p. 184 n.
20. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 13-14.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
22. *Ibid.*
23. In Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*, pp. 184-185.
24. Mannheim also acknowledges the influence of Hegel. See *Essays on the Sociology of Culture*, p. 59: "What makes Hegel's original point of view still worth remembering is his collectivistic, and potentially sociological, understanding of ideas."
25. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 29.
26. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970).
27. Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 297.
28. See *ibid.*, p. 264. For Mannheim, these "non-theoretical conditioning elements" related to a person's "social position," an equally ambiguous term which

will be discussed in some depth later in Part II. One could also, however, interpret the term, though with less fidelity to Mannheim, to mean those factors relating to what has earlier been referred to in connection with Ben-David as the institutional structures in which a researcher works or the interactional settings he participates in.

Note: A complete bibliography follows "Epistemological Issues in Karl Mannheim's Sociology of Knowledge-II."