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Epistemology of Folk-Lore

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ABSTRACT

Testimony is a central concept in the epistemological debate on knowledge and learning. It is therefore surprising that testimony plays a minor role in the empirical literature on cultural learning. This raises the question of whether our approach to knowledge in epistemology might be missing out on some things when applied to cultural knowledge and its transmission. By taking the semantic component of knowledge in the compound folk-*lore* at face value, we aim to explore whether the concept of folklore could potentially help out here. Three persistent puzzles concerning folklore and its study are discussed to this end: (1) What is the ontological status of folkloric objects of study? (2) How shall one safeguard folkloric objects, depending on different possible answers to the ontological question? (3) How could we distinguish *fake*-lore, i.e. folklore that is merely seemingly representative of epistemic groups, from more generally representative folklore?

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1. The Broader Picture

Recently, the question has been raised as to whether the focus on expert testimonial knowledge in contemporary epistemology may be limiting our understanding of cultural knowledge and cultural learning (McMyler 2022b; Müller 2024). Testimony occupies a minor position within the cultural learning literature (McMyler 2022a, 2022b). And furthermore, this literature seems to suggest that besides testimony, many practices like 'scaffolded trial and error, emulation, imitation, and various forms of active instruction including demonstration, advice, [. . .], and explanation' (McMyler 2022b, 314) might all be jointly responsible for the success of what McMyler calls *high-bandwidth, cultural knowledge transmission*.[1]

Crucially, many of the just-mentioned candidates for knowledge transmission channels appear to be non-testimonial, if one adopts a developmental perspective (McMyler 2022a, 2022b; Müller 2024). Whereas, 'adopting a developmental perspective' means investigating the respective phenomena from a biological/anthropological point of view, which in turn breaks down into an ontogenetic perspective (i.e. an analysis of the development of individuals over lifetime) and a phylogenetic perspective (i.e. an analysis of the development of generations of individuals) (McMyler 2022a, 2022b). Therefore, the cultural approach in epistemology also aims to focus on non-testimonial sources of knowledge and forms of knowledge transmission that are typically not at the centre of the epistemological discussion. The aim of said project is to thereby understand and '[. . .] disentangle these various [knowledge] transmission channels' (McMyler 2022b, 315).

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Roughly speaking, folklore is here understood as an umbrella term, potentially referring to, or maybe just helpful in narrowing down, a subset of all possible (cultural) knowledge transmission channels, especially of those that are not primarily testimonial. Consequently, the present essay can be understood as part of the broader project of a cultural epistemology. We try to place the phenomenon of folklore at the centre of epistemological attention on a trial basis, asking if this can help to explain cumulative cultural knowledge.

The following chapters are structured as follows: Chapter 2 is mostly introductory, aiming to provide a basic overview on the topic of folklore, which may appear foreign to some in philosophy. Also, the general relationship between knowledge and folkloristic objects is worked out there to some degree. Still, in Chapter 2, we briefly try to determine the extent to which folkloristics can be demarcated from related fields of inquiry in cultural studies. Only then, in Chapter 3, we turn to the more philosophical questions surrounding folklore, discussing three in our view persisting difficulties surrounding folklore and its study: What is the ontological status of folkloric objects of study (3.1)? How can we safeguard these (often immaterial) objects depending on the findings concerning the ontological question (3.2)? How could we distinguish *fake*-lore, i.e. folklore that is seemingly representative of epistemic groups, from more representative folklore (3.3)?

An important systematic remark should be made at this point: The fact that we focus on the epistemic dimension of folklore in what follows does not mean that the phenomenon should be studied only in this way, preferably in this way, or mainly in this way. The 'epistemological perspective' on folklore is one (arguably central) perspective – among others. When we use examples for folklore, we will focus on folkloric objects that can be subject to an epistemic evaluation.

2. What is Folklore and How Does it Relate to Knowledge?

The scholarly study of folklore shows an interest in a wide variety of objects ever since. Nowadays, at least according to the publications, the subject matter of folklore studies ranges from the more 'established' objects, such as songs, folktales and proverbs, to fake news as well as internet memes (Bronner 2011, ch.10; Mould 2018; Frank 2015). The expression folklore is no older than the subject that explicitly deals with it. Many, though not all, attribute the coinage to the antiquarian William Thoms (Roper 2007). Publications by Thoms, which presented the neologism to a wider audience, bear witness to how he saw it semantically connoted, namely in the still rather obvious sense of a compound noun. Around the 1850s, one would read things like: '[. . .] *The Folk Lore* of England, the Manners, Customs, Observances, Superstitions, Ballads, Proverbs, &c. of the Olden Time' (Roper 2007, 204–205), or '[. . .] the History of our National Folk-Lore' (Roper 2007, 204–205).

The etymology of the expression, most likely taken into account by Thoms, indicates that it was meant to refer to the 'knowledge of a group', as it is a compound of the Old English words *folc* (group of people) and *lār* (knowledge, teaching).[2] This does not mean that folklore did not exist before the compound 'folklore' came into existence; folklore has been with Homo Sapiens for far longer than scholarly neologisms have. It is striking, however, that some of the older names for what we now call folklore literally suggest a component of knowledge too (Kongas 1963, 70). On this basis, we believe it is only reasonable to take the etymology a little more seriously than it is probably usually done.

Given that the term folklore is not merely a helpful heuristic, one can inquire into the relation of knowledge and folklore in very different ways. Let us start with the *folk* aspect. In order to capture the folk aspect of folklore, one must arguably necessarily adopt a perspective that takes into account groups, for folklore always concerns *groups* of individuals. In many cases, this focus on a group also requires a phylogenetic perspective, as soon as the phenomenon under investigation concerns longer time periods.[3] Individuals from groups involved in folklore pass something on, share something with each other, through folklore. Be it a dance, a story, a craft skill, internet memes or jokes.

Expressed in epistemic categories, folklore therefore can mean the transmission of epistemic goods and abilities across groups and generations of individuals (Kittilä 2020) – hence the 'folk' in the term. It may not always be clear whether true or false beliefs and related practices are folklorically disseminated

because they are relevant, or whether they are considered relevant because they are folkloric, but the main takeaway here with regard to folklore seems to be that beliefs, knowledge or skills are *shared and handed down*:

> **The group criterion**: If *a* is a folkloric object according to some definition of folklore, a is (or was) *shared* throughout many members of a specific group over time.

Now, how does knowledge further relate to folklore? Let us assume for now what we will problematise only in the next chapter, namely that folkloric objects are just given to us *as concise objects* without further ado. Suppose *a* is a folkloric object (according to *some* definition of folklore) and suppose it is, say, a song. We can know stuff about similarities to other objects: *a* might have the form of a shanty. Often, we also know who collected/wrote down a version of *a* and where he/she did it, who usually performed the song – a fisherman, for example.[4] You get the idea:

> **Possibility of basic knowledge about folklore**: If *a* is a folkloric object according to some definition of folklore, it is usually easily and reliably possible for us to get to know some basic truth *p* about the folkloric object *a*.

Folklore, like other cultural goods, can also *encode* propositional truths – *knowing-that*.[5] We are thus not talking here about basic knowledge about folkloric objects, but about potential knowledge to be retrieved from such objects in terms of encoded information. Although basic knowledge, as it is understood here, is also just a case of knowing that basic propositional knowledge differs from *encoded* propositional knowledge in terms of the type of the information source. Knowledge-that from encoded information does not concern, for example, the dialect used in a song, but the information that is conveyed by it.[6] Here is an example of folkloric objects that apparently encoded information that amounts to propositional knowledge once retrieved:

> Collectively, Aboriginal people [. . .] have known and performed thousands of songs which variously refer to hundreds of plants and animals [. . .]. Traditionally, detailed knowledge of these species was crucial to sustenance and survival through long periods, sometimes years, when certain species were dormant, scarce, or absent. Everyday activities may not have provided people with the experience needed to know about certain species, so knowledge of them may have lain dormant. (Curran et al. 2019, 366)

So we also want to introduce this way of speaking of knowledge with regard to folklore as a conditional definition:

> **Possibility of knowledge-that encoded by folklore**: If *a* is a folkloric object according to some definition of folklore, it is possible that *a* encodes some propositional truth *p* that we can get to know.

There is another kind of knowledge that is arguably really significant with regard to folklore: *practical knowledge* – that is *knowledge-how* (Fantl 2008, 452). There are, for instance, folkloric work songs that were used to organise work operations themselves. One documented example is the *Steel-Driving Song*. Its repetitive lyrics, although thematically related to the work, actually seem to have coordinated the effective hammering of the material at an appropriate speed, more or less independently of the semantics of the words, through its performance. His surviving lines testify that it must have consisted of variations on the following structure: 'Steel driving,/soon in the morning,/steel driving,/right at noonday,/steel driving,/all the day long [. . .]' (Lomax, Lomax, and Truvillion 1939).

At first glance, at least, we do not seem to be dealing here with a folkloristic object whose pragmatic value is centred on encoded propositional truths, but rather on practical knowledge: For the ability to work on the track appears to be guaranteed also by *knowing how* to produce the right rhythm, at the right speed, in the recursive structure of what *is* the *Steel-Driving Song*. It is about how to sing it, rather than about knowing something to be the case, one might argue.

The relation between propositional and practical knowledge, however, is a matter of debate; it needs to be clarified which of the following relationships is the correct one:

(1) Knowing-how reduces to or is a species of knowing-that; at the very least, knowing how to do something importantly requires a prior bit of propositional knowledge;

(2) Knowing-that reduces to or is a species of knowing-how; at the very least, knowing that something is the case importantly requires a prior bit of know-how;
(3) Knowing-how and knowing-that are independent kinds of states: neither is a species of nor reduces to the other, nor does either importantly require the other (Fantl 2008, 452).

The first option is often called the *intellectualist* approach, as it prioritizes knowing that. The second and the third ones are *anti-intellectualist* approaches; the stance (2) is sometimes called *strong anti-intellectualism*, as it contradicts (1), and (3) *weak anti-intellectualism*, as it understands knowing-that and knowing-how as essentially different but not necessarily as contradictory phenomena (Fantl 2008, 452–453). From the definition of intellectualism, it likely follows that if intellectualism implies that knowing-how is just a form of knowing-that, then its proponents must accept that, in principle, there must be a way to explain in terms of knowledge-that what only *appears* to be knowledge-how. Anti-intellectualism, on the other hand, does not exclude that some cases of knowing-how cannot be explained in terms of knowing-that at all (Pritchard, John, and Adam 2022, ch. 5). It is relevant to keep this in mind in order to hold fixed a helpful notion of knowledge-how encoded by folklore:

> **Possibility of knowledge-how encoded by folklore**: If *a* is a folkloric object according to some definition of folklore, and if either strong anti-intellectualism or weak anti-intellectualism is true, it is possible that *a* encodes some practical knowledge that possibly cannot be explained in terms of knowing-that at all.

It can also be said that there are folkloric objects for which it is the case that things are true *according to the information encoded*, but not in the sense of an encoded truth about the world. This explains quite well why the term folklore is sometimes used in a pejorative sense. It is rather obvious that folklore can mean falsehood, as in the case of fictional speech, folklore can often have merely possible, fictive content. A concrete example is fake news about an extraterrestrial invasion, which is then allegedly exposed as flashes of lightning in Morocco in the course of a failed fact check, although the misinterpreted recordings do not even show flashes of lightning in Morocco – We did not make this case up (cf. Goldin 2023). Similar to a case of fictional speech, then, it can be claimed for such cases of informational content of folklore that it is true that lightning was sighted in Morocco during an earthquake in Morocco and even that it is true that an alien invasion took place, but, importantly, only according to the folklore. From the bird's eye view of epistemology, knowledge of this kind is generally not to be considered as propositional knowledge, but rather as knowledge about the asserted, more or less as in the case of fictional speech.

At this point, it is important to ask how far this analogy between fictional speech and 'folkloric speech' with fictive content is allowed to go, since the recipients and producers of folklore do not conventionally establish and take into account a so-called fictional contract, as it could be claimed for fictional speech: false beliefs conveyed via folklore are and were often simply taken to be true, whereas no rational, imagining being (except maybe kids who have not yet learned about the workings of fictional speech) would seriously expect to be able to fly around in the sky with Harry Potter (Haferland 2014; Sutrop 2002).

This only apparent detail reveals an important point for an understanding of folklore, because it draws attention to the fact that folklore does not usually refer to highly institutionalised, top-down practices and phenomena. Take, again, the institution of fictional literature as a comparison: the recipient's knowledge about the linguistic and behavioural conventions surrounding the institution of fictional literature makes it possible for cognitive agents to adopt the relevant reception attitudes (i.e. not to expect all contents of a narration to be true from the outset, and so on). Highly conventionalised and institutionalised modes of reception such as this one can only seldom be observed in cases of folklore. Folklore, therefore, arguably generally describes a less institutionalised, regulated, edited, guided, controlled, top-down, or written-down phenomenon than other culturally relevant phenomena, such as the institution of fictional speech (of course, not all of these exemplary criteria have to apply to every case of folklore). Generally speaking, it is thus the agents directly involved in the genesis and performance of folklore who make it up and shape it – i.e. as a rule, not 'the publishing industry',

'the university', 'a political party' or the like. Folklore therefore, arguably often, is characterised by its practices and performance, by its dynamic character, its bottom-up, social nature and individual preferences of the agents involved.

However, the fact that folkloric phenomena for the most part likely are non-institutionalized phenomena does not mean that folklore cannot be observed in the context of institutions, to be precise at this point (cf. Jones 1991). For example, the custom of cleaning procedures at a physics institute that are not written down in a protocol or precisely defined by the institution may become an object of folkloristics, without classifying the institution university as a whole as folkloric because of this in any way.[7]

With regard to the set of all possible knowledge transmission channels mentioned in Chapter 1, we can therefore state that the term folklore, *if* it helps to refer to a subset of these channels, then it refers to a restricted subset in the just described, meaning non-highly-institutionalised, non-top-down sense.

By summarising these findings, we can now provide a working definition of folklore, which we will rely on in the following chapters to further discuss folklore philosophically:

> **Folklore as common knowledge, belief and memory**: If *a* is a folkloric object according to some definition of folklore, *a* can encode propositional knowledge, practical knowledge or knowledge about falsehoods that is (or was) shared throughout many members of a specific community over time. Moreover, common basic knowledge about *a* might be/have been given as well with regard to the same group. Additionally, *a* is generally not the product of highly institutionalised, top-down social practices.

We hope that this introduction makes plausible why, in the context of social epistemology, specifically in the context of a cultural epistemology mainly not focusing on testimonial knowledge transmission channels, it could be fruitful to engage with the concept of folklore.

3. Some Puzzles Concerning Folklore and Its Study

There does not seem to have been a moment in the history of folklore *research* that was free from doubts about the legitimacy of one's own subject. – William Bascom in (1965) wrote:

> [. . .] if any field of study needs clarification of its basic terminology it is clearly folklore, which has so long been plagued by inconsistent and contradictory definitions. (Bascom 1965, 3)

Referring to Bascom's article, Simon J. Bronner writes fifty years later:

> If folklorists struggled to define themselves between anthropologists and literary scholars during the 1960s, arguably scholars with folkloristic identities now seek their place among a myriad of integrative studies. (Bronner 2016, 10)

We will now introduce the reader to philosophical difficulties that likely are relevant to folklore and its study in the form of three puzzles:

(1) **The material puzzle**: A probably fundamental difficulty of folklore research consists in the fact that one is not usually dealing with 'simple' objects, such as 'a book by an author', but often with a multitude of *versions* of a folkloric object that thereby appears to be more complex by nature. This situation can be seen as a puzzling one insofar as folklorists sometimes apparently speak and act *as if* they are dealing with concise objects of study that, in a way, do not exist (cf. Section 3.1).
(2) **The puzzle of cage-death**: A dynamic, performative, *handed-down* nature seems to be necessary for folklore. Folklore, some argue, is in danger of 'dying' if detached from its social context. An attempt to 'objectify' folkloristic goods, which probably inevitably accompanies the folkloristic effort to 'understand' its content or cultural importance, thus seems to lead to the loss of the very good. On these grounds, we make some considerations on the possibility of safeguarding (intangible) folkloric objects in Section 3.2.

(3) **The puzzle of fakelore**: Finally, there is another puzzle that could be called the puzzle of *fakelore*, as it sometimes seems to be the case that the more we know about folkloric objects, the more these objects are in danger of losing their status as folklore. For the more one learns about folkloric objects, the more the aspect of *collective* knowledge that is actually representative of a *folk*, i.e. of a group, seems to be lost; we will see that likely in many cases it cannot be claimed or reconstructed that folkloric objects encode collective epistemic goods with respect to all relevant members of the respective epistemic environment. We suggest that this third puzzling situation can only be resolved if one rejects some implicit premises that date back to the epoch of Romanticism in the humanities (cf. Section 3.3).

The puzzles just introduced will now be discussed in separate (sections 3.1–3.3).

3.1. The Material Puzzle in Folklore- and Heritage-Studies

How exactly should we conceive of the ontological status of folkloric objects, the materials to be studied in folkloristics? Assuming the standpoint of a folklore scholar, one might wonder what it means to say that one *version* of, say, a song is paradigmatic for *the* song. One might also think of internet memes as an example: it is often not possible to identify the first version of a meme, and additionally, users alter the individual instances of memes. Nevertheless, we generally speak of *a particular* meme (Evnine 2018). In most cases, folkloric objects are products of dynamic group processes of selection and reconstruction. Folklore researchers therefore are regularly faced with the task of compiling and systematising folklore and, where necessary, highlighting or even constructing paradigmatic folkloristic objects from what they observe.

Based on the way so-called *plot-determined folktales* are treated in some places (Gervás 2013; Haferland 2014), it is quite easy to further understand what is meant here by the possibility of selecting or constructing paradigmatic folkloric objects from collected versions:

Let us assume that there are two different traditional tales from a particular region. Let us name the two hypothetical tales *The Tale of Adam the Taxi Driver* (A) and *The Tale of Bettina the Woodcutter* (B). The two tales may now resemble each other in that they are orally transmitted, as well as in that they both fulfil, for example, the reception and production conditions for folktales. Therefore, one could say that due to their structure, production and reception conditions, they not only belong to each other but also to the general class of folktales. Now, in different versions of folktales, there is often a semantic core, the plot, which is then embellished with non-essential attributes, which are optional. For this reason, folktales for which this applies are sometimes called *plot-determined* (Haferland 2014).

On this ground, assume that there are three documented versions of A and three of B: A',A'',A''', and B',B'',B'''. Although each version of A may have the same core, and although the collected versions of B also share the same core, the respective embellishments may differ. For example, Adam may wear a checked shirt in one version, and a white one in another. But he is always a cab driver according to the tale. The same may apply to the embellishments in the case of B''-B''', although Bettina is always a woodcutter according to the tale.

Folklore researchers would take a much closer look at what we have simplified here. For example, they would make use of the *ATU tale-type index* (cf. Uther 2004). This index makes it possible to capture more precisely what we have called the core, i.e. the invariable structure of a tale. The index allows a tale to be assigned to a standardised, semantically defined tale-type category, a function category (which takes into account the function of a plot) and a standardised motif-index-number, which describes the smallest definite element of a tale (Uther 2004).

How one exactly handles standardisations such as the *ATU tale-type index*, if one selects or even constructs a single version out of a series of versions, is not relevant to the fact that there might be one general folkloric object to be identified by folklorists. An object that, although

possibly just as an *abstraction/mental object*, might constitute what one ultimately talks about in folklore studies:

(1) If there are different versions of the same folkloric object, they are versions insofar as they share a *core*.
(2) The core, together with the group criterion (compare Chapter 2), is likely a necessary condition for the respective folkloric object.
(3) Different versions of an object can have different, varying embellishments.
(4) However, the core is likely not yet a sufficient condition for a folkloric object; the sufficient condition might additionally be constituted by, say, the dynamic character of the encoded information, the freely handed-down nature of the versions, the way in which versions of the object are performed, the non-institutionalised nature of related artifacts, social origins, the related kind of knowledge, etc.[8]

At this stage, one might therefore argue that there is no reason why folklore studies should not be demystified with respect to its objects of study. Because there seems to be no apparent reason why 1–4 shouldn't be a general (even if underdetermined) understanding of folkloric objects. The fact that folklorists often have great difficulty in delimiting their subject and defining their objects could therefore be, one might continue to argue, primarily due to the fact that the sufficient conditions for folklore are so difficult to capture, but not necessarily to the ephemerality of the corresponding folkloric objects.[9]

In the *UNESCO Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention* (WHC 12/01, July 2012), which can hardly be bypassed in the current discussion of folklore, an ontologically helpful distinction is made between (1) tangible/material and (2) intangible/immaterial cultural heritage (from now on ICH). Where tangible refers to buildings, artefacts, etc., and ICH refers to a set of objects that is very similar to the subject area of folkloric objects: ICH aims at subsuming customs, skills, literary products, folk beliefs, religious practices and some of the folkloristic objects already mentioned in this essay (Lenzerini 2011). Towards the end of the last century, this dichotomy was introduced as a reaction to an increasing awareness of the interdependence of materialized cultural goods on immaterial phenomena (think, for example, of the specific human knowledge, behaviour and construction practices associated with safeguarded buildings). Another reason for the introduction of the dichotomy has been the arguably genuinely immaterial nature of some culturally relevant, dynamic phenomena, such as educational practices or belief systems (cf. Lenzerini 2011).

But the term folklore does not just refer to a subset of the objects referred to by the term ICH.[10] For it is true that the range of objects subsumed under ICH is, in one respect, larger than the set of objects that is often referred to with the term folklore (in contrast to folklore, it also subsumes things that are top-down, institutionally organized, such as educational institutions or literary publications by individual authors). But it is also true that folklore can refer to morally problematic practices that are not worthy of protection in the sense of ICH, since ICH only includes practices that do not heavily conflict with human rights (Lenzerini 2011). Consider, for example, anti-Semitic jokes studied by folklorists Linke and Dundes (1988). Such phenomena do not fall under ICH for moral reasons, but methodologically speaking, it would still be wrong to deny folklorists such objects of investigation (assuming they respect the usual moral research standards).

In addition, phenomena that are (perhaps) less worthy of protection by UNESCO, such as humorous internet memes, can also become the subject of folkloristic investigation. Here, too, subsuming these objects under ICH might be mistaken. So although the dichotomy of material and immaterial may be helpful for our concerns, one should not be too hasty in abandoning the term folklore, and one shall rather see its weaker moral connotation compared with the term ICH as conceptual sharpness. The applicability of the term folklore to culturally (arguably) less significant or marginal traditional phenomena speaks in favour of

not equating the term with the ICH concept. It is this sharpness resulting from moral neutrality and from a lack of demand for cultural relevance that has led us to link a discussion of the concept of folklore – and not, i.e. of ICH – with the concept of cumulative cultural knowledge in epistemology.

With these additional conceptual nuances in mind, at this point it thus would seem reasonable to assume that folkloric objects, those considered and those not considered through ICH, can ontologically speaking, be conceptualised as epistemic phenomena to which corresponding artefacts are related through traditional practices/behaviour. This seems to be an intuitive answer to the ontological question. However, the ontological question concerning the nature of folkloric objects arguably is much trickier and also not fully answered, neither in view of ICH concepts nor in view of contemporary approaches in folkloristics that take into account epistemic objects (such as Bronner 2016).

For if one looks at such approaches from the perspective of cultural epistemology, which, as we have seen, focuses on non-testimonial, know-how-based knowledge transmission channels, then two very fundamental possible *accounts of knowledge* come into question as their tacit foundation:

The currently dominant position, First Person Epistemology (FPE), which, as we will show below, may have some disadvantages when it comes to the project of cultural epistemology and the study of folklore. And a minority position, Epistemological Behaviourism (EB), which possibly allows us to deal particularly well with some aspects of folkloric knowledge transmission.

According to proponents of FPE, an epistemic agent knows P if the agent has introspective access to a doxastic mental state that correctly represents a section of the world: a dog, let us call him Criceto, knows that his bone is behind the hedge if Criceto has a mental state that represents the scenario, Criceto has introspective access to the mental state, and the bone is *de facto* behind the hedge (Kitchener 2018). In addition, Criceto's doxastic mental state must have been acquired in a knowledge-guaranteeing way.[11] As intellectualists regarding knowledge claim that all knowing-how can be interpreted as propositional knowledge (see Chapter 2), FPE-intellectualists consequently would claim that knowing-how can be explained through propositional knowledge in terms of mental states.

In contrast, proponents of EB, such as arguably Richard Rorty, Gilbert Ryle, John Dewey, Bertrand Russell, Willard Quine, and Wilfrid Sellars, forwarded the view that Criceto's *behaviour* is the decisive criterion for the attribution of knowledge-how and knowledge-that to Criceto (cf. Kitchener 2018). Proponents of EB have been traditionally more attracted to naturalism and empirical inquiry (cf. Kitchener 2018), as they are not concerned with mental states in the minds of individuals. They attribute knowledge about the whereabouts of the bone to Criceto if Criceto behaves (or would behave) in an appropriate way, for example, if Criceto goes behind the hedge to reach for the bone (cf. Kitchener 2018).

Although we do not intend to defend EB or FPE here, in what follows we want to argue that both positions have advantages and disadvantages if they are to serve as a foundation for analysing the material problem concerning traditional know-how and knowing-that (i.e. folklore):

If the naturalistic method of EB were chosen as a foundation, the findings of empirical studies on cultural learning (and perhaps many studies on folkloric behaviour), which are widely neglected in current epistemology (see Chapter 1), could arguably be incorporated into the project of cultural epistemology more easily. For if a certain behaviour were the criterion for the attribution of knowledge, then the traditional, folkloric behaviour of people over time would be the criterion for the ascription of cultural, folkloric knowledge. Phylogenetic and ontogenetic, empirical studies of traditional human behaviour would *be* studies of human traditional knowledge in this sense. This kind of implementation of empirical fieldwork within cultural epistemology may not be so easy to justify from the perspective of FPE approaches.

EB would possibly solve some further problems, for example, it would at times be easy to explain what exactly is being protected when a folkloric object is declared worthy of protection by organisations like UNESCO. Because one would consequently have to protect the conditions of possibility for the *behaviour* of groups, and this may be easier than 'protecting doxastic mental

states', which are primarily accessible through introspection and ascribed to groups via generalisation.[12]

Finally, another advantage of EB would probably be that it allows to give an alternative solution to challenges posed by the so-called *lost European explorer experiment* (McMyler 2022b):

The thought experiment asks how it can be explained that a cognitive agent entering a completely unknown environment, both epistemically and culturally, as it sometimes happened to highly educated and well-equipped explorers, is unable to survive also given the extensive help and support of natives: the explorer poisons himself by eating plants that the locals recommended to him with good intentions.

In such cases, EB offers the option of not only referring to a lack of propositional knowledge on the level of individuals (such as a lack of knowledge about poisonous plants on the part of the explorer), as proponents of FPE would likely do: EB also offers the opportunity to refer to the lack of reciprocal 'fit' between the behaviour of the explorer and the behaviour of the local indigenous groups as an alternative explanation. For the cumulative cultural knowledge of the indigenous population (as well as, by the way, that 'brought along' by the explorer) is not reduced to doxa on the level of individual minds in EB-frameworks but to behavioural patterns: proponents of EB can argue that, although neither the explorer nor every member of the welcoming group may possess the knowledge that a certain plant slowly releases toxins if unwashed, there is still something that sets apart the explorer and individuals of the welcoming group. There may be, say, a traditionally handed down division of labour when it comes to washing the plant the explorer is unaware of. Adopting McMyler's and Müller's wording (cf. Chapter 1), proponents of EB could thus argue that the explorer may not yet have had the opportunity to come into contact with the relevant (traditional, behavioural) knowledge transmission channels. He might not have had yet the opportunity for non-testimonial, high-bandwidth contact.

However, there are also numerous advantages that speak in favour of understanding the folkloric objects in question as mental objects in the sense of the dominant FPE approach:

One obvious advantage is that FPE-intellectualists amongst FPE proponents could argue that knowledge-how can be translated into knowledge-that and thus preserved at least in principle fully non-behaviourally – and possibly vice versa (cf. also section 3.2 here).

The possibility of a clear conceptual distinction between mental states and behaviour achievable through FPE-approaches would probably also have an advantage when it comes to distinguishing between different *reasons* for traditional practices: Proponents of FPE can argue that folkloric practice over time can stay the same from a behavioural perspective, but that within the respective time frame the epistemic attitude of individuals in groups towards their own behaviour may change. EB-representatives arguably do not have this opportunity to explain shifts in attitudes towards folkloric/non-folkloric behaviour (this is particularly relevant in the context of determining so-called *fake*lore, see section 3.3).

Finally, through FPE approaches, it may also be easier to explain why folkloric objects at times might survive 'temporal and spatial gaps': for example, FPE folklorists might suggest merging related tales from different regions, cultures and times into a folkloristic, abstracted tale-type relying on conventions like the *Tale-Type-Index* or by introducing new scholarly conventions where necessary. Their abstract idea of a tale-type would then represent the kind of folkloric object we are looking for. Proponents of EB, in order to justify such abstracted tale-types, would have to refer to continuities in behaviour or to analogies in behavioural patterns related to the tales.

Although the rather recent introduction of concepts such as ICH aimed at solving some ontological problems surrounding folkloric objects, this section hopefully helped to understand a little better why folklorists (and cultural representatives) still seem to have difficulties in determining their objects or in even agreeing on a loose notion of object.

For one can explain their persisting methodological conflict[13] concerning the definition of folkloric objects through the fact that folklorists may (often) be implicitly or explicitly aware of what has emerged concerning the relationship between EB and FPE: Not only do the two accounts of

knowledge each offer different advantages/disadvantages when it comes to the analysis of folkloric objects. Also, the compatibility of the two corresponding approaches, as well as therewith the question about the relation between knowing-how and knowing-that, is philosophically controversial (cf. Chapter 2). A solution to these epistemological challenges therefore arguably would have a direct impact on folklore research and heritage studies. Also, the legitimacy of the implementation of empirical investigations on cultural learning into the project of a cultural epistemology likely depends on how one addresses these 'rock-bottom' challenges.

3.2. The Puzzle of Cage-Death in Folklore Studies

How to avoid a loss of immaterial folkloric goods and how, thus, to safeguard them? We have already discussed some of the concerns about the threats to folklore posed by its 'objectification' *en passant*. As we have seen, from an epistemological perspective, the scholarly work of folklorists can be seen in part as working out the forms of knowledge (discussed in Chapter 2) that are connected to folkloric objects in one way or another, and in part translating them into one another and thus preserving the lore. Relying on what we have just worked out concerning the two perspectives on knowledge (EB and FPE) and their implications for how we view folklore, we will now endeavour to make two really brief remarks that systematically belong to the field of cultural heritage ethics (Matthes 2024): The first set of considerations concerns the repatriation and restitution of folkloric objects (3.2.1). Then, we conclude with reflections on the legitimacy of controlling the 'flow' of knowledge in the context of the safeguarding of folkloric objects (3.2.2).

3.2.1. Safeguarding, Restitution and Repatriation of Folklore

At a time of major debates about the restitution of cultural goods, the debate about the restitution of folklore subsumable under ICH has so far taken a back seat. In the context of the UN-Assembly, official considerations concerning the topic were explicitly made for the first time in 2020 (A/HRC/45/35, 2020). It seems that here too, proponents of EB and of FPE would have to recur to different argumentation in explaining how restitution and repatriation of ICH might be achieved:

EB representatives could strive to achieve a restitution and repatriation of the folklore in question by advocating primarily the meticulous preservation of spaces and livelihoods, since in their eyes these likely are the conditions of the possibility of folkloric behaviour – which in turn would correspond to the folkloric goods. FPE proponents would probably object at this point, however, that if a loss of folkloric practice has already occurred, it is precisely the regaining of propositional knowledge *about* one's own folklore that is relevant as a first step in order to then possibly 'reactivate' the folklore. The FPE intellectualists amongst FPE proponents would then likely further argue in favour of a didactic kind of restitution, which, they would argue, must be based at least initially on top-down epistemic expertise (since folkloric practice, when absent, according to FPE-intellectualists might be regained through testimonial knowledge; by translating still available folkloristic knowledge-that back to knowledge-how).

In any case, the results of both lines of argument can be found in the examples discussed in the UN-assembly: both the preservation of cultural and geographical spaces was cited as a possible strategy for the repatriation of ICH, as well as projects such as a folkloristic educational institution aiming to be self-managed at some point by the respective community (A/HRC/45/35, 2020). Further investigation is needed here in social epistemology, as envisaged also by the UN.

3.2.2. Handling Knowledge Flow When Safeguarding Folklore

A further difference between EB and FPE-based approaches that we (briefly) want to discuss arguably concerns the different *valuations* of the consequences of interventions in epistemic environments the respective proponents would likely carry out:

One example of this is the conflict that can arise when there is a debate about whether isolated communities whose folklore and belief systems are considered to be under threat should be

contacted for the sake of medical information – for example, about the usefulness of vaccinations (Gaines 2000). In view of this conflict, EB representatives might argue that the associated risk of a change in group behaviour, which could possibly be accompanied by a loss of folkloric knowledge *as* behaviour, might be disproportionate to the moral value of the intervention. Proponents of approaches relying on FPE might have a little more room for manoeuvre here, and they might argue for at least a monodirectional legitimacy of the envisaged knowledge flow: They might argue that while measures aimed at physical integrity could permanently alter the behaviour of the group, the corresponding change in behaviour must not necessarily directly threaten epistemic goods, as, again, FPE-positions allow for a clear distinction between epistemic states and behaviour.

In view of the different, already existing approaches to ICH-safeguarding, it may well be the case that neither of the two discussed justification strategies (the one based on EB and the one based on FPE) are negligible. There is, of course, much more to say concerning this matter, but this is not the place to discuss this further.

3.3. The Puzzle of Fakelore in Folklore Studies

Given the observed diversity of ways in which beliefs and knowledge can be related to folklore and given the generalizability of these doxastic phenomena to epistemic groups, it is not surprising that folklore is often ascribed to cultural relevance. It is certainly 'part of our social and cultural DNA' (Bastet and Houlbrook 2023, 188). However, the practice of folklore research also shows how objects that are actually considered folklore can lose their status as a communally representative good as soon as one takes a closer look.

The scholar Richard M. Dorson introduced the word *fakelore* to describe, roughly speaking, objects that are *labelled* folkloric but are not actually folklore (Dundes 1985, 5–7). In the following, we are not interested in the rather obvious cases of fakelore, such as simplistic misrepresentations of folklore on cruise ships for the amusement of only apparently interested guests. – Rather, in the reasons for the fact that there are objects where folklorists disagree about whether they are to be considered folklore or fakelore. In *A Mirror of Man? Traditional Music as a Reflection of Society,* Elbourne describes one such case of a fakelore paradigmatically, in which it was all too easy to classify songs as folkloristic that were assumed to have been passed on voluntarily by the respective members of the groups one generalized over (Elbourne 1976).

According to Elbourne, it is too often overlooked that objects considered folkloric can be handed down for completely different reasons than by the collective choice of the members of epistemically homogeneous groups. Folkloric objects can be passed on, for example, by chance or due to the financial possibilities of the parties who market them. He concludes that often there is not at all a 'maximum accord' (Elbourne 1976, 465) when it comes to the – *alleged* – doxastic states of – *allegedly* – homogeneous epistemic groups that – *are said to* – share, create, perform or hand down folklore (Elbourne 1976, 465 ff.).

We are consequently likely often dealing with cases of *fake*lore even in contemporary folklore studies, as it is often unclear whether one can legitimately assume belief- or knowledge-states and then generalize them to groups; what about objects of folklore studies such as internet memes or fake news, for example? In the case of fake news, social epistemology tells us that a number of reasons can be responsible for reaching large numbers of recipients. In many cases, a large group may become familiar with the content in question even if there is nothing to be found amongst the beliefs of the individual agents which could be held responsible for a certain behaviour, which in turn could be held responsible for the fact that this one piece of information becomes disinformation and yet not another. For it is often difficult to even determine an intention to deceive when creating fake news, or, better said, information often only becomes fake news when it finds its way into a foreign context because someone, say, had fun generating content online (Harris 2022, 81–82). No individual acts of

willingly passing on information could therefore be held responsible for the – alleged – folkloricity that was grounded in legitimate generalizations in such cases.

The point I want to make through this is that generalizing the individual beliefs to a group of epistemic agents in folkloristic matters often might turn out to be wrong, as it is often hard to tell apart the individual reasons for the observed dynamic of information transmission, even though not impossible in principle.

It thus seems as if folklore (often) can only be thought of as epistemically underdetermined. For the more of the things outlined above we know about *seemingly* folkloric objects, the less likely it becomes that we can legitimately generalize in doxastic matters and thereby assure the group criterion of folklore (cf. Chapter 2).

Here, then, a further relationship between social epistemology and folklore studies emerges since folklore studies justifiably loses its objects of investigation in cases such as the ones outlined above – given the importance of the *folk* aspect. Some cases of *fakelore*, in turn, seem to be of particular interest to social epistemology, specifically in that they are associated with epistemic processes that likely exclude *folklore*. – Just think of fake news that reaches many people, although no actual group dynamics can be held responsible for it. Social epistemology, one could thus say pointedly, sometimes suggests to folklore studies what it can safely neglect (provided, again, that it is assumed that some kind of handed-down nature is necessary for folklore to be given).

However, it must also be said that where social epistemology seems to be primarily interested in a corrective of dysfunctional belief formations,[14] folklore research continues to show an interest in the objects in question beyond their epistemically problematic role. This is because folklorists sometimes take beliefs seriously *as false beliefs* in order to provide anthropological explanatory models for a wide range of phenomena of human life in which social epistemology is not primarily interested. Nevertheless, if one understands folklore as a meaningful class of knowledge-transmission channel, there are, as we have seen, many reasons to engage with folklore in the context of social epistemology.

Mikkel Gerken has written about the relationship between social epistemology and general epistemology that 'Epistemology without folk epistemology is empty. Folk epistemology without epistemology is biased' (Gerken 2017, 292). This puts him roughly in line with Goldman, who wrote that

> [. . .] *one* proper task of epistemology is to elucidate our epistemic folkways. Whatever else epistemology might proceed to do, it should at least have its roots in the concepts and practices of the folk. If these roots are utterly rejected and abandoned, by what rights would the new discipline call itself 'epistemology' at all? It may well be desirable to reform or transcend epistemic folkways [. . .]. (Goldman 1993, 272)

If there is something to these positions, then there is no reason not to take the findings of folklore research more seriously than it has been the case in social epistemology, *if only to have something to overcome as bad practice*. A by-product of this process from the perspective of folklore research would likely be the discrimination of *fakelore*.

What we have previously called the puzzle of fakelore, i.e. the apparent loss of folklore as common knowledge, belief and memory with increasing knowledge about folkloric objects, can thus be reinterpreted in a positive way: The task of folklore research is in part to individuate as many cases of *fakelore* as possible in order to arrive at the *lore*, which could still be understood in epistemic terms as common knowledge, belief and memory – although perhaps be rarer than we usually assume. One could thus think of folklore studies as follows: folklore studies are the conservation, description and study of the lore of a group after, and as a consequence, of the discrimination of any fake lore.

In folklore studies, the opinion seems to prevail in some places that many of the unjustified generalizations of beliefs/knowledge states to groups are based on an implicit premise of the discipline that has already found its way into the field during its very origins (Elbourne 1976, 463–464): It is assumed that Romanticism has left its mark insofar as it has taken the concept of

a 'soul' in the context of cultural studies, and so in the context of folklore research, as an opportunity to question artifacts with regard to their general significance for a cultural identity.

Elbourne calls the corresponding hidden premise the *reflection theory* (Elbourne 1976, 465), which, in a conceptually stripped-down form, roughly states that, particularly in the Romantic period of the discipline, it was assumed that one had to find out what lay hidden in folklore; something that allegedly reflected the general convictions and state of mind of groups of people or humanity in general. In this respect, folklore mirrored people's 'souls', their convictions, their knowledge, their wishes and fears.

It is easy to see how such a dogmatic premise (which asks for group beliefs before the possibility of a corresponding generalization has even been explored) can have morally problematic consequences:

For a generalization that proceeds without any real consideration for the fulfilment of the necessary criteria for generalizability is not only flawed but may also *construct* an apparent unity in epistemic matters that does not reflect reality. This opens the door for targeted misuse of the corresponding fakelore; it is no coincidence that a proximity of fakelore and nationalism can be observed, as well as a correlation between fakelore and totalitarian ambitions of feigning cultural unity for the purpose of system consolidation. These correlations have been relatively well researched in folklore studies (Abrahams 1993; Cowdell 2013; Dundes 1985). In social epistemology, too, there are analogous voices that consider an investigation of epistemic folkways to be helpful in avoiding epistemic injustice (Gerken 2017, 294 ff.).

To conclude, we would like to take one last look at the distinction of folklore and fakelore through the lenses of EB and FPE. One advantage of FPE-accounts of knowledge when it comes to the distinction of fakelore and folklore is arguably the following one: whereas proponents of EB only have the option of considering the behaviour of individuals in groups as a criterion for the representativeness of folklore, FPE approaches have the advantage of additionally clearly distinguishing the epistemic states from the behaviour of individuals. In this way, different epistemic phenomena can be held responsible for the same behaviour of an individual in a group. And this helps to explain how (allegedly) folkloric behaviour can be motivated by, say, mental states that are a consequence of political indoctrination, or maybe simply express pure habit to a convention. This would therefore also better explain the possibility of a transition from folklore to fakelore and vice versa. Although EB perspectives may have a weakness here, they could nevertheless help in showing what general behavioural patterns correspond to fakelore. The methods of social epistemology may thus offer a way to make the essential and only at first glance simple distinction between *fakelore* and *folklore*. On the other hand, the reappraisal of the romantic ballast in folklore studies that has already begun may provide a model for a general reflection on the further ideological and moral connotations of the project of folk epistemology, which, to our knowledge, is still pending.

4. Conclusion

With a focus on folkloric objects that can be subjected to an epistemic evaluation, we have shown that the concept of folklore may offer added value to the project of a cultural epistemology. Folklore is possibly well suited to outline a subset of the knowledge transmission channels primarily investigated – and arguably much better suited than the concept of *Intangible Cultural Heritage*.

We have proposed an understanding of the corresponding folklore as follows: If *a* is a folkloric object according to some definition of folklore, *a* can encode propositional knowledge, practical knowledge or knowledge about falsehoods that is (or was) *shared* throughout many members of a specific community over time. Moreover, *common* basic knowledge about *a* might be/have been given as well with regard to the same group. Additionally, *a* is generally not the product of highly institutionalised, top-down social practices.

This understanding of folklore is heavily dependent on the concept of an initially indeterminate object. We therefore first attempted to demystify the nature of folkloric objects. In doing so,

we have not attempted to provide sufficient conditions for folklore, but rather proposed an open working-definition of folkloric objects. It has been shown that an explanation of the persistent difficulties in determining the ontological status of folkloric objects most probably requires a rock-bottom discussion of the underlying concept of knowledge: *First Person Epistemology*-approaches and *Epistemological Behaviourism* each, respectively, offer advantages and disadvantages in the analysis of folkloric objects. Introducing the two accounts of knowledge helped to elucidate the different, at times implicit, argumentation strategies arguably present in the folkloristic discourse. The compatibility of the two corresponding folkloristic strategies when it comes to the understanding of folkloric objects is linked to the question of the correctness of intellectualist/anti-intellectualist positions concerning knowledge. Here we can only hope for future philosophical progress, which would have a direct impact on folklore research, as we have tried to show.

Both approaches (FPE and EB) are also more helpful in some places and less helpful in others when it comes to discussing questions about the preservation of folklore. In view of new fields of research, such as the restitution of folklore that qualifies as *Intangible Cultural Heritage*, this may open up a new field of research for social epistemology.

It became clear that the discrimination of fakelore is necessary to avoid potentially morally problematic consequences that may arise from a blurred distinction between *fakelore* and *folklore* in a romantic 'spirit'. In these matters, too, a recourse to possibly often implicit, different conceptions of knowledge proved to be helpful. The study of folklore, in this sense, consists in the conservation, description and interpretation of the lore of a group after, and, importantly, as a consequence, of the discrimination of any *fake* lore.

Notes

1. Müller uses the expression *cumulative cultural knowledge* to describe roughly the same phenomena (Müller 2024).
2. Cf. 'Folk' & 'Lore' In: *Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary*, Black Dog & Leventhal (1993).
3. For an example of an investigation of folklore that spans millennia, cf.: Graça da Silva and Tehrani (2016).
4. We used a description of different folkloristic objects by Lomax here to build an example (Cohen 2003, 183 ff).
5. Concerning the knowing-how/knowing-that distinction cf. Fantl (2008).
6. Regarding the concept of information encoded by folklore, consider the ideas in Kittilä (2020).
7. Gregory Schrempp distinguished three ways in which folklore and science can be thought of as non-mutually exclusive epistemic phenomena, at least from the perspective of cognitive research: '[1]. As a complementarity model [. . .] "Folk" and "scientific" designate two distinct kinds of knowledge, founded on different cognitive principles, both of which are legitimate and necessary for human life. [2]. As a continuum model [. . .] "Folk" and "scientific" knowledge differ significantly; but in terms of ultimate properties and procedures, the relationship of "Folk" and "scientific" knowledge is one of continuity, not of "great divide". [3]. As a reflexive model [. . .] "Folk" and "scientific" exist in a mutually constitutive relationship; each serves as a vantage for assessment and critique of the other' (Schrempp 1996, 192).
8. Concerning a contemporary attempt to discuss sufficient conditions of folklore cf.: Bronner (2016).
9. It might be useful to adopt a concept of family resemblance of the corresponding folkloristic objects for further investigation of what folkloristic objects might have in common with each other and with their versions; one could conceive of the concept of folkloristic object as a cluster concept (cf.: Gasking 1960) and thus investigate a coherence without necessarily specifying the respective sufficient conditions.
10. Lenzerini (2011) argues that the concept of folklore is more restrictive than ICH, but this is not always the case; see below in the text.
11. The usual alternatives are up for debate here: safety, closure, etc.
12. It might be interesting to compare the diachronic development of the UNESCO Guidelines here: Lenzerini (2011).
13. Edward D. Ives (1978), for example, wrote what follows about the approach to folklore he believed to be the correct one, thereby proposing something like a relativist stance in folkloristics: 'No song, no performance, no act of creation can be properly understood apart from the culture or subculture in which it is found and of which it is a part; nor should any "work of art" be looked on as a thing in itself apart from the continuum of creation-consumption' (Ives 1978, 434).
14. Cf. Gerken (2017), 292–296.

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