



A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England (Science and Its Conceptual Foundations series)

By Steven Shapin

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How do we come to trust our knowledge of the world? What are the means by which we distinguish true from false accounts? Why do we credit one observational statement over another?

In *A Social History of Truth*, Shapin engages these universal questions through an elegant recreation of a crucial period in the history of early modern science: the social world of gentlemen-philosophers in seventeenth-century England. Steven Shapin paints a vivid picture of the relations between gentlemanly culture and scientific practice. He argues that problems of credibility in science were practically solved through the codes and conventions of genteel conduct: trust, civility, honor, and integrity. These codes formed, and arguably still form, an important basis for securing reliable knowledge about the natural world.

Shapin uses detailed historical narrative to argue about the establishment of factual knowledge both in science and in everyday practice. Accounts of the mores and manners of gentlemen-philosophers are used to illustrate Shapin's broad claim that trust is imperative for constituting every kind of knowledge. Knowledge-making is always a collective enterprise: people have to know whom to trust in order to know something about the natural world.

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A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England (Science and Its Conceptual Foundations series) By Steven Shapin Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #632188 in Books
- Brand: University of Chicago Press
- Published on: 1995-11-15
- Released on: 1995-11-15
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.00" h x 1.30" w x 6.00" l, 1.49 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 512 pages

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Shapin argues that the validity and trust we place in today's scientific endeavors evolved to a large extent out of the gentlemen's codes of civility in 17th-century England. Science was a gentleman's pastime, and when an idea was disputed gentlemen appropriated the civil codes of their time to solve the dispute. Shapin, best known for *Leviathan and the Air-Pump: Hobbes, Boyle and the Experimental Life* (Princeton Univ. Pr., 1985), opens this book with a very complete and sometimes difficult-to-read introduction to the questions of what civility, truth, trust, and moral order are. The rest can be read separately as a history of gentlemanly conduct and gentlemanly science as a means of finding truth. Shapin also discusses Robert Boyle as an example of a gentleman scientist. Offering a new way to look at early modern science, Shapin presents an intellectual history of a formative period of English science to illustrate a source of the collective trust we place in scientific truth. Recommended for history and philosophy collections.

Eric D. Albright, Galter Health Sciences Lib., Northwestern Univ., Chicago

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Users Review

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