

What is Feminist Epistemology?

PAUL K. MOSER & J.D. TROUT *Loyola University of Chicago*

Code, Lorraine. *What Can She Know?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. xiv, 349pp. ISBN 0-8014-9720-5 (paper).

Harding, Sandra. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991. Pp. xii, 319pp. ISBN 0-8014-9746-9 (paper).

Antony, Louise and Witt, Charlotte, eds. *A Mind of One's Own*. Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993. Pp. xvii, 302pp. ISBN 0-8133-7937-7 (cloth).

When exactly is a theory of knowledge feminist rather than nonfeminist? For that matter, when exactly is *any* discipline feminist rather than nonfeminist? Such questions resist easy answers, even among staunch advocates of contemporary feminism. This review article will devote attention to such questions while examining some recent works bearing on feminist epistemology. We hold that although feminist epistemologists have properly identified some troublesome social-political preconditions and consequences of knowledge as standardly understood, it is not obvious that feminist epistemological categories are philosophically as significant as various other socially significant categories: categories regarding class, race, education, occupation, and financial status, among other things. In other words, we hold that feminist epistemologists have failed to show that their familiar gender categories should, owing to indispensable explanatory value, be taxonomic in epistemology. With feminists, however, we hold that facts of politics and culture are relevant to the formulation of principles in epistemology. For example, it is arguable that specific concepts of epistemic justification can and sometimes do vary across certain cultures and political groups. In addition, we are both feminists, even though we reject wayward species of feminism entailing biological antirealism.

1. Politics in Epistemology?

In *What Can She Know?*, Lorraine Code's "principal conclusion is that the question whether a feminist epistemology is possible or desirable must be left unanswered," owing to the following considerations:

As long as 'epistemology' bears the stamp of the postpositivist, empiricist project of determining necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge and devising strategies to refute skepticism, there can be no feminist epistemology. I have shown that the conceptions of knowledge and subjective agency that inform this project are inimical to feminist concerns on many levels: ontological, epistemological, moral, political. Ideals central to the project—ideals of objectivity, impartiality, and universality—are androcentrically derived. Their articulation maps onto typical middle-class white male experiences to suppress the very possibility that the sex of the knower could be epistemologically significant. . . . It would not be possible to develop a feminist epistemology that retained allegiance to the pivotal ideas around which epistemology—for all its variations—has defined itself. Hence there can be no feminist epistemology in any of the traditional senses of the term. (p. 314)

These remarks are puzzling and unconvincing for at least two reasons. First, even if standard epistemology were "androcentric," this consideration by itself would not entail, or otherwise support, the view that we must leave unanswered the question whether a feminist epistemology is possible or desirable. In fact, one could strenuously argue that *because* standard epistemology is androcentric, a feminist epistemology is desirable. In addition, one could then proceed to show how a feminist epistemology is to be developed. The fact that Lorraine Code has not accomplished these two tasks fails to establish that we must now leave unanswered the question whether a feminist epistemology is possible or desirable. Code's "principal conclusion," then, is quite puzzling and unconvincing.

Second, we have no reason whatever to think that "the postpositivist, empiricist project of determining necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge and devising strategies to refute skepticism" works to "suppress the very possibility that the sex of the knower could be epistemologically significant." On the contrary, the familiar project of determining necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge is open to a very wide range of conceptions of knowledge and subjective agency—even various conceptions agreeable to some feminists. Nothing intrinsic to this project blocks conceptions favorable to feminists. Of course, a feminist might object that the appropriate conception of knowledge does not admit of characterization in terms of logically necessary and sufficient conditions, though this would not automatically be a distinctively feminist point. Some followers of the later Wittgenstein, for example, hold that our ordinary concept of knowledge resists analysis by necessary and sufficient conditions. What Code must show, but has not shown, is that her feminist conceptions of knowledge and subjective agency preclude analysis by necessary and sufficient conditions. The familiar requirement that analysis be given in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions is (at least as typically understood) a formal, not a substantive, demand. Feminist epistemologists should take issue with formal matters only insofar as those matters bear unfavorably on feminist concerns. It is not clear, nor has Code shown, that such formal matters bear, negatively or positively, on feminist concerns.

Thus far we lack an answer to our opening question: When exactly is a theory of knowledge feminist? Code seems confident that "mainstream epistemology" is not feminist:

. . . I engage critically with the *epistemology* made by professional philosophers of the mainstream, one of the more arcane and esoteric artifacts of men. It is an artifact, in the main, of white men, articulated, as it turns out, from their point of view, yet upheld as a source of 'absolute truth' about how the world should be known and represented. . . . I contend that mainstream epistemology, in its very neutrality, masks the fact of its derivation from and embeddedness in a specific set of interests: the interests of a privileged group of white men. One focus of my critique . . . is the 'particular and distinct' kinds of subordination that mainstream epistemology produces—often invisibly—for *women's* positions on the philosophical-epistemological terrain. (pp. ix, x)

Code owes readers, at a minimum, clarification and defense of the previous talk of the singular "point of view" of "white men." As noted previously, we acknowledge and lament that men in virtually every area of the globe have oppressed women. This holds not only for "white men" but also for men in general; male domination is not restricted to men of a particular color. (Notice, for example, the oppressive treatment of women in many nonwhite Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist communities.) We are not convinced that there is any such thing as the singular "point of view" of "white men" with respect to either the standing of women or the status of epistemological principles. Consider, for instance, such influential white males as Marx, Sartre, Freud, Einstein, Russell, Chomsky, and Reagan. It is not easy to identify a singular "point of view", relevant to either ethics or epistemology, shared by these white males. Many white men actually share a "point of view" that is very close to the point of view of many women—certainly closer than the point of view of some women compared to certain other women. At least, Code has not given us any evidence to think otherwise. In the absence of such evidence, we find it difficult to confirm Code's allegations. Perhaps some highly qualified analogues of Code's allegations merit acceptance, but that is another matter. We are not denying that there are truths about white men as a group; we rather are claiming that nothing unites white men as such, with respect to women and epistemology, in the way that economic or class interests unite certain ideological movements.

Code insists that "feminists cannot participate in the construction of a monolithic, comprehensive epistemological *theory* removed from the practical-political issues a theory of knowledge has to address." This seems undeniable; indeed, it may be analytically true. In any case, Code questions whether a feminist epistemology would actually be desirable, on the following grounds:

A feminist epistemology would seem to require a basis in assumptions about the essence of women and of knowledge. Hence it would risk replicating the exclusionary, hegemonic structures of the masculinist epistemology, in its various manifestations, that has claimed absolute sovereignty over the epistemic terrain. (p. 315)

Why exactly must assumptions about the essence of women and knowledge “risk replicating the exclusionary, hegemonic structures of the masculinist epistemology”? Code is less than clear on this important matter, and it is not obvious to us that the risk is automatic. It looks as if an account of gender-specific knowledge could consistently and readily disclaim “absolute sovereignty over the epistemic terrain.” Code has offered no reason to suppose otherwise.

If we are not to give privilege to a certain perspective in knowing, Code affirms, epistemic evaluation must proceed by asking “Whose knowledge are we talking about?” This seems plausible enough, if the demand is for sensitivity to various kinds of knowers. Even so, Code finds that “the diversity of situations and circumstances in which people need to be in a position to know makes it difficult to see how a theory of knowledge, an epistemology, could respond to their questions” (p. 315). The worry here needs elaboration. Perhaps the worry is that a single theory of knowledge will always exclude some real situations of knowing, will always imply, with regard to certain genuine situations of knowing, that they are not genuine. Why, however, should we accept the latter assumption? A single theory of knowledge can, after all, be highly complex, acknowledging a wide variety of circumstances for knowing. Recent contextualist accounts of knowledge and justification have clearly illustrated this point. Code needs to show that a single theory of knowledge will always exclude some real situations of knowing. She has not actually shown this. Until she does, however, her meta-epistemological pessimism is unwarranted at best.

Let us grant, if only for the sake of argument, that many women have distinctive recognitional capacities (such as special sensitivity to distress), perhaps owing in part to unique developmental circumstances not shared by males. If this is so, gender differences could figure significantly in human knowing. Some women, in this case, may exemplify a distinctive mode of knowing. How distinctive? On the *moderate* view, female knowing is a species of knowing, where knowing can be exemplified by males too, if only in terms of a different species thereof. On this view, both males and females can be knowers (of one and the same general kind), but gender differences call for different species of knowing. On the *extreme* view, the previous moderate view is false, because females are not knowers in any sense that males are knowers. Talk of knowing is thus equivocal relative to males and females. This extreme view calls for distinctive epistemological language for female cognition.

We know of no compelling evidence for the extreme view, but we are open to the moderate view. If, however, only the moderate view is correct, we can preserve a central goal of traditional epistemology: explaining knowledge in general. The moderate view implies that there is a natural kind called ‘knowledge’ and that it admits of different species. Our understanding the species depends on our understanding the general kind ‘knowledge’. If so, we should not frown on standard attempts to characterize knowledge generally understood. Female knowing is, after all, a species of *knowing* (generally understood). By the same token, we should be open to distinctive species of

knowing, and female knowing may be one such species. An adequate feminist epistemology should attend to these fundamental considerations. The result would be explanatory light that goes beyond rhetorical heat. Code treats morally important issues surrounding epistemology, but we see no reason, even from a feminist viewpoint, for her pessimistic attitude toward contemporary theory of knowledge.

2. Scientific Knowledge in Context

According to many feminists, traditional epistemologists give familiar practices of justification, objectification, and abstraction, as well as the values of objectivity and rationality, a peculiarly masculine twist. Traditionally, for instance, many epistemologists have assumed that conditions of justification can be stated independently of cultural and political circumstances. Some feminists hold that the male-generated epistemological canon has so distorted our concepts involving knowledge that none of the canon’s issues can be trusted. Others hold that the canonical values of objectivity and rationality can be sustained if they are properly reconstructed in a gender-sensitive manner.

In *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, Sandra Harding addresses questions concerning the form that a distinctively feminist epistemology of science should take. As there are already many contrasting positions in feminist epistemology, Harding surveys a number of the chief positions. At the same time, she places some distance between her current position and the “standpoint epistemology” familiar from her earlier *The Science Question in Feminism*.

Attention to science is quite appropriate in discussions of feminist epistemology, as science and feminism form what looks to be an uneasy alliance. The natural sciences, by any plausible standard, constitute an impressive body of knowledge, or at least evidence. Still, because the institution of science arguably discriminates against women, it is an interesting question how so esteemed and epistemically successful an institution as science can be responsible for perpetuating truth-distorting social forces. In treating issues such as this, Harding’s book tends—for example, in Chapter 4—to rehearse familiar themes at length, such as themes long received about the theory dependence of observation and method. These themes are no longer the subject of serious dispute in the philosophy of science. Rather, dispute has shifted to the *consequences* of these doctrines. Social constructivists have long extracted relativistic conclusions from the fact of theory dependence, while realists have accepted the doctrine of theory dependence but denied the claimed relativism.

The undiagnosed tendency toward relativism comes out most clearly in Harding’s treatment of social influences on physics. Taking as her object of criticism the view that physics is a “pure” science, which “cannot be influenced by gender,” Harding claims that “we can understand physics without ‘physics’.” (p.78) She disallows significance to unreconstructed metaphysical talk about the sciences, saying that “physics is to ‘physics’ as a satellite photo of the earth is to a

picture of the earth balanced on top of a column of elephants." (p.78) On this view, we can do the epistemology of science at one remove from metaphysical commitment, from commitment to how things really are. Harding's view may, however, deny feminists the resources to identify the harmful forces they hope to expose. After all, the social structures of science must themselves be *real*, if they are the sorts of things against whose hegemony we must protest.

Harding claims that scientists, *qua* scientists, are not the best chroniclers of the causal powers at work in science:

[N]atural scientists have the wrong set of professional skills for the project of providing causal accounts of science. What is needed are people trained in critical social theory: that is, in locating the social contexts—psychological, historical, sociological, political, economic—that give meaning and power to historical actors, their ideas, and their audiences. Natural scientists are trained in context-stripping; the science of science, like other social sciences, requires training in context-seeking. (pp. 95-96)

Harding overlooks the following consideration: The idea that natural scientists are concerned with "context stripping," while the study of social and psychological phenomena involves context-seeking, is arguably part of the old epistemological canon against which feminist and other intellectual movements have been fighting. Natural scientists are steeped in a tradition—a context, if you will. They typically take themselves to lay bare the causal structures of physics, chemistry and biology, just as naturalistic philosophers of science and social scientists (including critical social theorists) ordinarily take themselves to lay bare the causal structures in social activity qualifying as scientific practice. Despite the previous quotation, Harding cannot readily assign special significance to the consideration that natural scientists are not formally trained to locate contexts, for it is no part of her epistemology that knowledge requires access to (or that justified beliefs emerge from) strategies dependent on formal training. Moreover, many theorists presenting "causal accounts of science" are not critical social theorists, but mainstream historians and philosophers of science. Naturalistic case studies of scientific episodes include the following: the acceptance of plate tectonics, discussed by Giere (1988); the historical and social context of high energy physics, treated by Galison (1987); the role of evidential constraints in a wide range of archaeological contexts, treated by Wylie (1994); the relation between social/educational policy and licensing psychotherapists, examined in Dawes (1994); and 18th-century French science and the colonization of Haiti, discussed by McClellan (1992). These are all highly contextualized studies of the social/political and psychological influences on science narrowly construed. None of the aforementioned theorists is, strictly speaking, a critical social theorist. Properly formulated, the sciences—whether natural, behavioral or social—study causally significant phenomena proper to a domain, stripping and seeking context wherever necessary to illuminate, to contribute to explanation.

If Harding's epistemology is to avoid relativism—as Harding desires (see p. 156), it must hold that the offending social structures studied are real, or at least that there is a fact of the matter concerning what those structures are.

independent of our conceptions of them. Such minimal realism will enable that both science and critical social theory involve context-stripping as well as context-locating.

Focusing on the distinctive experiences of women, feminist research has identified a body of data that provides the basis for distinctively feminist contributions to epistemology. These contributions begin with the insight that, among traditional intellectual currents, the perspectives of women (including any arguably distinctive female modes of knowing, natural or social) have only been partially represented at best, and so traditionally impartial and ungendered conceptions of intellectual life have been misguided and misleading. Much like the virtues of diverse testing in science, diverse perspectives can combine in salutary ways. This does *not* imply, however, that we should not give privilege to some perspectives, thus discouraging others. The value of diverse perspectives does not recommend a benign tolerance of all views—an "anything goes" attitude; nor should it beget fear that a Western white male's criticism of a non-Western view automatically fosters the very kind of hegemony opposed by feminist movements. In fact, our giving privilege to some views over others seems required to avoid a treacherous form of relativism implying that we are without resources to condemn with consistency the heinous practices of many cultures (such as female circumcision), no matter what the history or origin of those practices. Of course, feminism *per se* does not hamstring us in this way, but the treatments of tolerance by many feminists make honest and earnest moral inquiry into the foundations of other cultures uncomfortable and unwelcome. What is at stake here, in connection with treacherous relativism, is the plausibility of an epistemology generally, not a feminist epistemology specifically. While treating the aforementioned interesting issues, Harding's book seems less concerned to challenge the traditional epistemological canon than to articulate a vision for a feminist epistemology. Accordingly, the book more or less presupposes answers to prior questions about the viability of traditional approaches in epistemology.

3. Feminism and the Tools of Analysis

A Mind of One's Own may be not just the best anthology in the last ten years on feminism, but one of the best collections on any topic in that time. It is a well-integrated collection of novel and insightful essays that engage questions about the relation between feminism, rationality, and objectivity. There is general agreement among the contributors that the varied experiences of women are central to intellectual and political life, and that relevant social and political structures, such as patriarchy, have had an impact on the formulation of traditional epistemological principles. Each chapter focuses tightly on a main theme. Limitations of space prevent us from doing justice to the subtlety of the chapters, but a number of key themes are especially noteworthy. Wherever there is a "Copernican Revolution," as is often claimed for feminist epistemology, one

should ask how much of the prior theory can or should endure. The contributors are indeed attentive to this issue.

In Barbara Herman's essay, Kant shows up in a surprising role, as a kind of philosophical ally of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon on the issue of objectification. Naomi Scheman's essay is an erudite discussion of the individualism that the Cartesian tradition has fostered, illustrated in application to Freud's theory of paranoia and autobiographical work by a late 19th-century judge—oft hospitalized for nervous disorder—Daniel Paul Schreber. This kind of narrative evidence is increasingly prominent in feminist research; it is illuminating here to the extent that its stories represent relevant movements and contributions in epistemology.

Sally Haslanger's "On Being Objective and Being Objectified" is an informative, sustained inquiry into the common feminist claim that reason is "gendered." Distinguishing between sex and gender, Haslanger offers a socially-based exemplar account of gender norms: "[M]asculinity and femininity are norms or standards by which individuals are judged to be exemplars of their gender and which enable us to function excellently in our allotted role in the system of social relations that constitute gender." (p. 89) This essay is representative of others in the collection in that it does not shrink from the complexity of an issue; nor does its appreciation of complexity collapse into vague and idle generalization.

Haslanger remarks:

We should be wary of postulating a single gender-norm for women across cultures or even within a cultural group. . . . [G]ender norms vary markedly with race, class, and ethnicity. . . . [T]here are studies that suggest that although developed capacities for abstract thought and intellectual activity are part of a masculine gender-norm for some privileged groups of men in Western communities, these elements of the masculine norm do not persist across class. (p. 90)

This quotation illustrates a central feature of the collection: its careful, even-handed treatment of its topics. The quotation harks back to our opening remark that it is not obvious that feminist epistemological categories are philosophically as significant as various other socially significant categories: categories regarding class, race, education, occupation, and financial status, among other things. Feminist epistemologists have not yet shown that their familiar gender categories should, owing to explanatory value, be taxonomic in epistemology. The balance of Haslanger's essay develops an account of "assumed objectivity" that makes room for epistemic improvement, and it provides a rationale for a critical stance toward damaging versions of objectivity.

The anthology carefully presents a wide range of metaphysical and epistemological views reflected in feminist research. Regarding the pronounced tendency in some feminist literature to draw anti-metaphysical lessons from the excesses of patriarchy, Charlotte Witt states that anti-metaphysical versions of feminism "lack the theoretical resources required for an adequate feminist

criticism of patriarchy's ideology and institutions." (p. 275) We ourselves find this sober observation undeniable. If our metaphysics disallows the objective existence of a particular source of evil, we shall be hard put to build a critical attack on that source of evil.

In the collection's most striking essay, Louise Antony contends that the goals of feminist epistemology are best accommodated by a naturalized epistemology. Against the versions of feminism depicting analytic epistemology as a pretender to value neutrality and theory neutrality, Antony argues that analytic epistemology is responsible for the *replacement* of this empiricist pretense by an epistemology that is theory dependent and, in that respect, biased. A substantive rather than merely procedural epistemology would rule out certain perspectives, in much the way that theory-dependent judgments in science rule out some hypotheses as implausible or unworthy of serious consideration. On this view, biases that correctly distinguish between worthy and unworthy hypotheses are good biases. If, moreover, objectivity is a property of a theoretical perspective that is truth-conducive, then bias may be not just *compatible* with objectivity, but required for it.

Antony remarks:

Naturalistic epistemology has the great advantage over epistemological frameworks outside the analytic tradition (I have in mind specifically standpoint and postmodern epistemologies) in that it permits an appropriately realist conception of truth, viz., one that allows a conceptual gap between epistemology and metaphysics, between the world as we see it and the world as it is. Without appealing to at least this minimally realist notion of truth, I see no way to even state the distinction we ultimately must articulate and defend. Quite simply, an adequate solution to the paradox must enable us to say the following: What makes the *good* bias good is that it facilitates the search for truth, and what makes the *bad* bias bad is that it impedes it. . . . I have *never* understood why people concerned with justice have given it such a bad rap. Surely one of the goals of feminism is to *tell the truth* about women's experience. Is institutionally supported discrimination not a *fact*? Is misogynist violence not a *fact*? And isn't the existence of ideological denial of the first two facts *itself* a fact? What in the world else could we be doing when we talk about these things, *other* than asserting that the world actually *is* a certain way? (p. 190)

We fully agree with these remarks, and recommend them to all other feminists for serious consideration. They will free some feminists from the kind of treacherous relativism that, however popular these days, undercuts their ethical and political causes.

We, like others, have no easy answer to the opening question of what feminist epistemology is. As a sociological phenomenon, feminist epistemology comes in different forms, and that is not necessarily a bad thing. We do not share Code's pessimism about the prospects for feminist epistemology; nor do we welcome the treacherous relativism, implicit or explicit, that grips some friends of feminism. No matter what one's favored epistemology, we find it difficult to

improve on Antony's sentiment about the proper intellectual route to a feminist epistemology:

A good *feminist* epistemology must be, in the first place, a good epistemology, and that means being a theory that is likely to be *true*. But of course I would not think that naturalized epistemology was likely to be true unless I also thought it explained the facts. Among the facts I take to be central are the long-ignored experiences and wisdom of women. (pp. 190-91)

Some kind of realism about truth, then, must accompany feminist epistemology, if only to set a mind-independent cognitive goal. Lacking such an objective constraint, feminist epistemology will be afloat on the dangerous sea of mere opinion. (For one approach favoring a kind of objectivity "realized more or less imperfectly in different scientific communities," see Helen Longino's essay in Antony and Witt 1993, pp. 257-72; quoted phrase is from p. 268. See also Longino 1990.)

We highly recommend the collection by Antony and Witt as a healthy corrective to some of the unhealthy trends in recent feminist epistemology. Feminism does have a major contribution to make to epistemology and to philosophy in general, and the essays in *A Mind of One's Own* pave the way for this contribution. Epistemologists, whether male or female, should not miss the opportunity to follow this important lead.¹

Note

¹ We thank Jonathan Adler, Suzanne Cunningham, Janice Nadler, Julie Ward, and David Yandell for helpful comments.

References

- Antony, L., and C. Witt, eds. 1993. *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Code, L. 1991. *What Can She Know?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Dawes, R. 1994. *House of Cards: Psychology and Psychotherapy Built on Myth*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Galison, P. 1987. *How Experiments End*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Giere, R. 1988. *Explaining Science*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Harding, S. 1986. *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Harding, S. 1991. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Longino, Helen. 1990. *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- McClellan, James E. 1992. *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

- Wylie, A. 1994. "Evidential Constraints: Pragmatic Objectivism in Archaeology." In M. Martin and L. McIntyre, eds., *Readings in the Philosophy of Social Science*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

PAUL K. MOSER & J.D. TROUT
DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY
LOYOLA UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO
6525 NORTH SHERIDAN ROAD
CHICAGO, IL 60626-5385

