

Feminist Epistemology

Antony Eagle

antonyeagle.org
antony.eagle@adelaide.edu.au

University of Adelaide
University of Adelaide Philosophy Club

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- **Epistemology** is the theory of **knowledge**:
 - of what knowledge is (as well as what other attitudes like **belief** and **opinion**);
 - of whether we have any knowledge (or whether some sort of **scepticism** is correct);
 - of what it takes to **acquire** knowledge (certainly **evidence**; but what else).
- Some standard principles: if someone **knows** that p , then p is **true** (but not conversely); if someone is **lucky** in truly believing p , their belief is not knowledge; if someone truly believes that p , but cannot **justify** their belief with evidence, it is not knowledge; and so on.

- Traditional epistemology is supposed to be **objective**: what it takes to know something is the same for everyone; and the same standards of evidence and justification apply to everyone alike, regardless of class, race, gender, disability, etc.
- Some (postmodernists, particularly) deny that knowledge is objective—because of scepticism about truth:

Those who, for instance, regard 'true' as an 'empty compliment' that we pay to propositions we want to endorse, ... will regard 'knowledge' too as a metaphysically empty stamp of approval. ... once their view of knowledge is in place, it is only a small step to the suggestion that the propositions approved as knowledge are likely to reflect the perspectives and even serve the interests of those whose social power shapes the practices of approval. [1, 146]

The Challenge from Feminism

- Postmodernists unfortunately offer **no good arguments** for the subjectivity of truth [2].
- What arguments there are often involve the mistaken conflation of **the things that prompt us to accept various claims** with **the things that make those claims true**. Having made this distinction, little is left to support the radical thesis that *what is true is made and not found*.
- A more interesting challenge to the Ideal of Objectivity comes from **feminist** thought, and it is this I want to address here.
- This is a challenge both to standard conceptions of knowledge, and standard views about the **production** of knowledge in **scientific enquiry**, and I will address both.

The Social and Institutional Structures of Science and Philosophy

- One area to which feminist concern has been directed is in the **unrepresentativeness** of the population of **enquirers**:
gender inequalities in the training, representation, and recognition of women in the sciences. ... The resulting under-representation of women in the sciences is reflected in and reinforced by representations of science that define it as a stereotypically masculine enterprise [3, 168].
- This is a pervasive problem: it cannot be changed by merely offering equality of opportunity, because of things like **implicit bias** and **stereotype threat** [4, §3].
- To say nothing of the prevalence of **sexual harassment**.
- Note: these are bad for women (and other minorities); and **bad for enquiry**—the best people and the best work is not being produced.

When Theories Are About Women But Neglect Them

- Other cases arise when women's experience is **systematically neglected** in the evidence base for the theory:

recent studies which suggest that women may be routinely misdiagnosed when it is assumed that they suffer from the same (well-studied) forms of heart disease as afflict men. [3, 168–9].

The **epistemic** problem seems to be that doctors are using a theory about the distribution of heart conditions in the whole population which is at best partially correct for a subpopulation.

- This is a routine epistemic problem, since it is a case of treating a **non-random** sample as if it were **representative**.
- Just because it is routine, doesn't mean feminism isn't important: since it is only once people are attuned to the systematic neglect of women's interests that it becomes obvious. (The fallacy of the **distinctive contribution**.)

Orgasm and the Political Consequences of Neglect

- Lloyd [5] discusses the **female orgasm**: despite attention being paid to differences between men's and women's biology and experience of orgasm, a certain assumption about the adaptiveness of orgasmic response, which does more or less hold true for male orgasm, held back the field by closing off candidate hypotheses from investigation. (The rival: female orgasm as a byproduct of adaptiveness of male orgasm and relatively late sexual differentiation in development.)
- Neglect of theoretical options means that women are harmed by incorrect theorising, and also deprived of **knowledge of themselves**. Their experiences are diminished and dismissed; they are taken to lack **credibility** [6, 130–3]. Spurious universality excludes them:

What women know about the world fails to enter this official story about life, the universe, and everything, and the incompleteness and partiality of the story goes unnoticed. [6, 133]

When Stereotypes Aren't Satisfactorily Controlled For I

- Sometimes 'gender differences are taken seriously but are conceptualised in terms of stereotypes' [3, 169].
- For example: theories of the underrepresentation of women in science which **purport to explain** the relative lack of women in science in terms of stereotypes about women being less suited than men to rigour or objectivity.
- A lot of this is of course just **bad science**—displaying **confirmation bias**, for example, when the mere fact about frequencies of women leaving the field is interpreted as strong evidence for their unsuitedness *by nature* to the field, rather than for myriad other hypotheses which explain the data as well or better, but which are not supported by stereotypes.

When Stereotypes Aren't Satisfactorily Controlled For II

- Some cases are more insidious, because even in **attending** to stereotypes, one is sometimes **tempted** by them.
- Consider feminist theories that push back against masculinist views of the historical record by proposing **feminist interpretations** that involve the **same stereotypes**:
in refocusing attention of the activities and experiences distinctive of women, they had simply inverted dominant assumptions about gender difference. [3, 169].
- And some cases involve the **projective** attribution of traits stereotypical of women to biological sex differences—e.g., the views that read stereotypes about the passivity of women (a stereotype that while false as a claim about nature, might be in part behaviourally true because self-fulfilling through the intentions of people to conform to what society judges 'normal') into views about the passivity of eggs in fertilisation [3, 170].

A Moderate Conclusion?

- This is not radical: the epistemic recommendation to **avoid bias** in collection of evidence and proposing of hypotheses doesn't require a **new epistemology** to justify it.
- Even trenchant **critics** of feminist epistemology accept this:

In the social sciences and biology, theories which are not well-supported by the evidence do seem sometimes to have come to be accepted by scientists, most often male scientists, who have taken stereotypical ideas of masculine and feminine behavior uncritically for granted. Those who think that criticisms of sexism in scientific theorizing require a new, feminist epistemology insist that we are obliged, in the light of these criticisms, to acknowledge political considerations as legitimate ways to decide between theories. But on the face of it these criticisms suggest exactly the opposite conclusion—that politics should be kept out of science. [7, 34]

Spontaneous Feminist Empiricism

- Wylie defines ‘**spontaneous**’ **feminist empiricism** like this [3, 174]: we should keep our ‘entrenched epistemic values’ and argue for a ‘more systematic, rigorous application of the existing methods of science’.
- The idea might be: once we sort out the political and institutional cultures of science to **eliminate** pervasive sexism (racism, classism, ...), and pay attention to **biases** and **cognitive blindspots** that we unfortunately fall prey to (and are **systematically prone to**, when it comes to the topics of sex and gender; error on these subjects is not experimental noise but needs to be explicitly countered in good experimental design), then we can use **traditional epistemology** to reliably generate true (or empirically successful) scientific theories. We should, that is, be *feminists* and *epistemologists*; but there is no such thing as feminist epistemology.

Is Something More Radical Viable?

- Everyone I hope will agree with what I've said so far.
- Three more radical proposals I wish to discuss:
 - ① Standpoint theory
 - ② 'Sophisticated feminist empiricism'
 - ③ Objectivity and Objectification

- Some knowers are in a **better position** to know than others, and that this doesn't necessarily track **social privilege**.
- Feminist standpoint theory argues that women occupy a privileged position with respect to various subject matters:

Feminists have taken from Marxism the ... idea that life led at the sharp end of any given set of power relations provides for critical understanding (of the social world, in the first instance), where a life cushioned by the possession of power does not. [1, 147]

- This is radical, since here social status **constitutively determines** access to knowledge, rather than merely acting as a **structural barrier** to equal access.
- Problem 1: **high stakes** usually leads to less knowledge [8].
- Problem 2: Knowledge is valuable; and it would be problematic to assume that what is known from a less powerful standpoint is less valuable: so is inequality worth keeping?

Sophisticated Feminist Empiricism

Traits like simplicity and explanatory power have traditionally been treated as values internal to the sciences, constitutive rather than contextual. As such they are cognitive virtues. This essay contrasts a traditional set of such virtues with a set of alternative virtues drawn from feminist writings about the sciences. In certain theoretical contexts, the only reasons for preferring a traditional or an alternative virtue are socio-political. This undermines the notion that the traditional virtues can be considered purely cognitive. (Longino [9]: 383)

- **Feminist empiricism** argues that not only are such virtues pragmatic, the assumption that there is single objectively best list of such virtues is problematic from the empiricist point of view.

The Aim of Science: Empirical Adequacy

- There are many possible non-empirical virtues (**novelty, complexity and respect for variety, anti-reductionism**, etc.: [9, §IV]), some drawn from the feminist literature, and these perhaps especially important for feminist projects, though they are not themselves constitutively ‘female’ virtues.
 - Hence Longino distances herself from thinking these virtues encode ‘female ways of knowing’.
- The idea: Theories of all sorts can be **scientifically acceptable** provided they meet the ultimate scientific aim of **empirical adequacy** [10]. Beyond that, the **acceptance of hypotheses** is governed by non-empirical virtues. If one has political or other projects alongside one’s scientific interests, that might be a reason to choose an empirically adequate theory on the basis of particular **politically useful** theoretical norms, and using it to further those political goals. Yet since the theory chosen is empirically successful, its political value need not **undermine** its scientific value.

The stance of the 'knower' ... is ... the neutral posture, which I will be calling objectivity — that is, the nonsituated distanced standpoint.... [This] is the male standpoint socially... [The] relationship between objectivity as the stance from which the world is known and the world that is apprehended in this way is the relationship of objectification. Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it. [11, 50]

- Objectification is bad; so objectivity is bad, seems to be the argument. But why? Let's try to reconstruct the argument (following Langton [6] and Haslanger [12]).

Things in the world are independent of us, and their behaviour is constrained and determined by their natures. We can best discover those natures by looking for the regularities that reveal them in normal circumstances. In abnormal circumstances things may be distorted, and the regularities we see may not reveal their natures. But the usual circumstances are the normal circumstances, so we should infer the nature of things from how things usually are. [6, 135]

- But this default assumption of objectivity ‘is a bad one: it hurts women, and it gets in the way of knowledge’ [6, 142].
- How does it do this?

[Anscombe's example:] Imagine a shopper, filling his trolley with the things on his shopping list, and a detective following him, writing a list of things in the trolley. The shopper's list and the detective's list both match the things exactly, but there is a difference in direction of fit.

- Beliefs aim to fit the world. But what if—sometimes—we are **more like the shopper than the detective, but we don't know it?**
- And that is the case, argues Langton, when it comes to some objectifying beliefs.

Objectification is a process in which the social world comes to be shaped by perception, desire and belief: a process in which, for example, women are made objects because of men's perceptions and desires and beliefs.... The world 'arranges itself' — at least in part—to fit what the powerful believe. Believing women to be subordinate can make women subordinate: thinking so can make it so, when it is backed up by power. Such beliefs have an anomalous direction of fit... [6, 138–9]

men objectify women if they view and treat them as objects of male sexual desire; they desire them to be submissive, and force them to submit; they believe that women are in fact submissive.... Under conditions of oppression, that [last] belief ... will be a true belief, an accurate descriptive belief.... It is not, though, a belief that conforms to the world: it is a belief to which the world has conformed. [6, 140]

How does Assuming Objectivity Favour Objectification?

- In short: assuming objectivity makes one **neglect the possibility of anomalous direction of fit**.
- Then objectification is **masked** by this assumption; and even if one rejects objectification, it is harder to uncover.
- And objectification is easier to justify for the objectifier, even without appealing to naked self-interest:

to the extent that an objectifier's belief is self-fulfillingly true, he need turn no blind eye: since the evidence will, for the most part, confirm the belief, the belief can aim to fit the world. [6, 139]

- This feature makes objectification hard to spot and hard to eliminate even once spotted, since those who are subject to it will claim that the evidence favours their position, and even those most harmed by it may argue for its retention.

Assumed Objectivity and Real Objectivity

Assumed Objectivity is not just bad for women, it is simply bad. Applied in conditions of gender hierarchy, although it leads some objectifiers to self-fulfillingly true beliefs, it also reliably leads them to false beliefs.... Some of their ordinary beliefs about women are false. Guided by Assumed Objectivity, objectifiers believe falsely that women possess by nature the properties they acquire through objectification.

what has hurt women is not objectivity after all, but pretended objectivity. The hurt is in the complacent assumption, and not, surely, in the ambition. [6, 142–3]

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- [2] Paul Boghossian (2006), *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*, Oxford: OUP.
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- [12] Sally Haslanger (1993), 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified', pp. 85–125 in Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, Boulder CO: Westview.