

---

## CAN KNOWLEDGE BE OBJECTIVE? Feminist Criticism of the Traditional Ideal of the Objectivity of Knowledge<sup>1</sup>

NATALIA MICHNA

### Introduction

The question of the potential objectivity of knowledge is an important philosophical problem which, from the 1960s onward, has been a topic of lively discussion in the field of feminist philosophy. It can be stated at once that at present the application of the feminist perspective in philosophy has led to a significant transformation of traditional philosophical concepts. One area of concern studied and elaborated within feminist philosophy is epistemology; it is within this framework that questions related to the issue of the production and development of knowledge are addressed. Feminist epistemology is not a monolithic theory; rather, it encompasses various currents and theories linked by the demand for the transformation of traditional theoretical solutions so as to account for feminist objectives,<sup>2</sup> the most important of which are the introduction of gender perspective to epistemology and the bestowal of an inclusive and more egalitarian nature on this discipline. However, in order for these goals to be achieved, it was necessary to first identify, characterize, and take a critical approach to hidden exclusive research practices within traditional epistemology.

For these reasons, in historical terms, feminist epistemology developed in accordance with the trends characterizing feminist theory as a whole. In the first stage, feminist reflection on issues of knowledge was of a critical nature (the stage of revisionist criticism). The central issue of feminist criticism was the question of whether gender affected the course and results of the cognitive process. This question was expressed explicitly for the first time by Lorraine

---

1. The work was supported by National Science Centre (Poland), grant number 2016/21/N/HS1/03516. It was presented at the Conference «L'épistémologie et son histoire / Epistemology and Its History» held at the Dominican University College, Ottawa, October 19-21, 2017.

2. Elizabeth ANDERSON, "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, [<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-epistemology/#object>] (accessed July 12, 2018).

B. Code in the title of the essay "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?"<sup>3</sup> Code's article initiated a series of studies and reflections regarding this problem; representatives of feminist epistemology, irrespective of the specific positions being represented, agree that gender is one of the significant (if not the most significant!) factors affecting understanding and knowledge of reality.

The second stage of development of feminist epistemology was positive, signalling the formulation of various proposals for a new approach to epistemological problems and issues. Feminist researchers proposed the transformation of existing concepts and theories sensitized to feminist goals, or the creation of new ones (gynocritical stage). These theories are still being creatively elaborated and verified. Based on the work of Sandra Harding, it is possible to distinguish among them certain trends, such as feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theories, and feminist postmodernism.<sup>4</sup>

In the present article, I take this historical perspective into account and present sequentially selected threads of feminist criticism of the traditional theory of knowledge, followed by selected positive aspects of feminist epistemology. Due to the wide range of issues undertaken in both stages, I limit my considerations to an examination of the traditional ideal of the objectivity of knowledge. The issue of objectivity (along with the ideals of rationality and universality) is one of the main themes in traditional epistemology, and, as such, it is, I believe, an extremely important and current question which, in the light of feminist research, bears significant cultural and social consequences. In Western European culture, from antiquity to modern times, the pursuit of objectivity has dominated all scientific and philosophical inquiries, while leading to the formation of a specific patriarchal and androcentric system of socio-political and cultural forces.<sup>5</sup>

Objectivity in science and philosophy, as traditionally understood, along with its extra-scientific implications, has become an important topic of criticism by feminist epistemologists. In a first part, I refer to feminist criticism of the androcentric research model – a model based on the doctrine of disembodied, detached scientific objectivity. I introduce an analysis of selected feminist allegations against androcentric ideals of objective knowledge – that is, the traditional understanding of the research subject, the object of knowledge, and its desired results. In the second part of the paper I refer to selected feminist approaches to knowledge, presenting critical views of traditionally

---

3. Lorraine B. CODE, "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?," *Meta-philosophy*, 12 (1981), p. 267-276.

4. Sandra G. HARDING, *The Science Question in Feminism*, London, Cornell University Press, 1986, p. 24-29.

5. Linda ALCOFF, "How is Epistemology Political?," in Roger S. GOTTLIEB (ed.), *Radical Philosophy: Tradition, Counter-Tradition, Politics*, Philadelphia PA, Temple University Press, 1993, p. 65-85.

understood objectivity, specifically *dynamic objectivity*, *constructed knowledge*, *knowledge as spinning*, *embodied knowledge*, and *situated knowledge*. All of these approaches combine demands for transformation or transcendence of objectivity of knowledge as traditionally understood, and for the creation of a theory of knowledge whose foundation is depreciated in traditional philosophy, i.e., women's experiences and standpoints.

I would like to clarify that conducting the argument from the inner perspective articulated by various positions of feminist philosophy is deliberate. My intention is to adopt a feminist perspective and present feminism as a critical theory, which refers to traditional philosophical concepts with distrust, pointing to their main weaknesses: exclusivity, gender-based characterization, and uniformization of phenomena and experiences. However, I have deliberately omitted "external," non-feminist polemics with the traditional theory of knowledge, as they constitute a separate research avenue, and – importantly, as Sondra Farganis points out – are conducted for the most part within an androcentric framework.<sup>6</sup> This means that, despite their critical nature, these positions do not represent values, ideas, and postulates essential to feminism.

### Feminism vis-à-vis traditional theory of knowledge

The starting point of feminist researchers in reflections concerning knowledge is criticism of the positivist (modern) ideal of conducting scientific and philosophical research.<sup>7</sup> Positivism, one of the traditional positions on the subject of the status of knowledge, assumes that there is a universal method of conducting research which should be followed in all research activity aimed at attaining the status of science. Within the framework of this position, it is accepted that two sources of (scientific) knowledge exist: the laws of logic, and beliefs that can be verified empirically. In the field of positivism, the veracity of formulated beliefs consists in the compatibility of a judgment with reality; the subject is characterized by a distanced, objective, and value-free attitude, or, as expressed by Lorraine Code, "the view from nowhere."<sup>8</sup>

6. Sondra FARGANIS, "Feminism and the Reconstruction of Social Science," in Alison M. JAGGAR and Susan R. BORDO (ed.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, London, Rutgers University Press, 1989, p. 209-211.

7. Alessandra TANESINI, *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, Malden MA, Blackwell, 1999, p. 4-30.

8. Code adopts the expression "the view from nowhere" from the title phrase of Thomas NAGEL, *The View From Nowhere*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986; see Lorraine B. CODE, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," in Ann GARRY and Marilyn PEARSALL (ed.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, New York NY, Routledge, 1996, p. 192.

Scientific positivism assumes the existence of permanent connections between variable pieces of data, whose discovery consists of establishing relationships that uniformly describe phenomena observed in repeated experiments. Through the setting of hypotheses and their empirical verification, positivist research aims at the universalization and generalization of results and the description of the operation of permanent laws of nature, which also determine the behaviour and nature of human beings. Positivism, as Alison M. Jaggar states, is therefore closely tied to the concept of objectivity, which is supposed to characterize the attitude of the researcher, the object being studied, and the results of the research alike.<sup>9</sup> In analyzing the positivist ideal of acquiring and developing knowledge, Code writes that “[k]nowers are detached, neutral spectators, and the objects of knowledge are separate from them [...]. The aim of knowledge-seeking is to achieve the capacity to predict, manipulate, and control the behaviour of the object known.”<sup>10</sup>

Code describes this ideal as mainstream, post-positivist, and empiricist epistemology, which constitutes a hermetic and easily distinguishable whole.<sup>11</sup> According to Aleksandra Derra, the characteristic feature of this model is “the idea of looking, watching, observing, checking, and thus validating knowledge and confirming its credibility,”<sup>12</sup> that is, a view of things that is free from valuation, as well as distanced, disembodied, and ultimately objective. What is more, this model is implicitly situated within the framework of the binary order of thought, characteristic of Western culture, defined as phallogocentric.<sup>13</sup> This order is universalistic; masculinity is linked with the representation of humanity and is based on a system of dualistic oppositions, such as nature-culture, rational-irrational, active-passive, and masculine-feminine. The cited combinations of concepts are not only corresponding, interdependent pairs, but concepts ranked in a defined order, to which a specific value is assigned. What is rational, active, and linked with culture is identified with what is masculine and simultaneously considered more valuable, while nature, irrationalism and passivity are attributed to what is feminine. Feminine means, therefore, less valuable, defective, deficient, different. Moreover, as Donna Wilshire points out, masculinity understood in this way means commonly

9. Alison M. JAGGAR, “Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology,” in Ann GARRY and Marylin PEARSALL (ed.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality...*, p. 167.

10. Lorraine B. CODE, “Taking Subjectivity into Account,” in Ann GARRY and Marylin PEARSALL (ed.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality...*, p. 193.

11. Lorraine B. CODE, “The Impact of Feminism on Epistemology,” *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, 88 (1989), p. 25.

12. Aleksandra DERRA, “Od skromnego świadka do wiedzy usytuowanej. O pożytkach z feministycznych badań nad nauką i technologią [From a humble witness to situated knowledge: on the benefits of feminist research in science and technology],” *Etyka [Ethics]*, 45 (2012), p. 119.

13. See “Phallogocentrism,” in Sarah GAMBLE (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, New York NY, Routledge, 2001, p. 294.

accepted and recognized knowledge, whereas femininity is located in the sphere of myth and what is hidden and subject to socio-cultural taboos.<sup>14</sup>

One of the most important ideals of universalistically oriented and dualistically ordered modern science and philosophy is the requirement of objectivity.<sup>15</sup> In epistemology, this generally means that the object exists externally and independently of the subject, who is characterized by impartiality and is free from all prejudices and biases. Only under these conditions is it possible to achieve certain, reliable, universal – and in this sense objective – knowledge. Objectivism, therefore, signifies the existence of subjective and objective norms, the fulfilment of which is necessary to achieve knowledge. Helen E. Longino presents it as “a characteristic ascribed variously to beliefs, individuals, theories, observations, and methods of inquiry. It is generally thought to involve the willingness to let our beliefs be determined by the facts or by some impartial and nonarbitrary criteria rather than by our wishes as to how things ought to be.”<sup>16</sup>

Longino's definition refers directly to an understanding of objectivism, long established in philosophical tradition, that assumes that all objects exist beyond and independently of the subjects that perceive them. As aptly expressed by Elizabeth Grosz, “objectivity implies a *single* monolithic world, which is posited as external to and autonomous from subjects.”<sup>17</sup> This statement has several important implications: 1) everything that exists outside a subject can be known by that subject; 2) the results of each inquiry, i.e., knowledge, should be characterized by objectivity; 3) only inquiry that leads to objective results possesses the qualities of credibility and reliability.

These implications have become the target of feminist criticism, and because they concern three aspects of the process of gaining knowledge – subject, object and knowledge itself – they will be discussed in the same sequence in the following paragraphs. It is worth noting that most feminist scholars agree with the view that objectivity, which is the basic determinant of androcentric scientific and philosophical research, is a requirement that significantly distorts the results of that research. At the same time, as will be shown later in this article, not all feminist researchers reject objectivity absolutely, but rather demand its transformation, which most often signifies an expansion of its meaning.<sup>18</sup>

14. Donna WILSHIRE, “The Uses of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Re-visioning Knowledge,” in Alison M. JAGGAR and Susan R. BORDO (ed.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, p. 95-96.

15. Alessandra TANESINI, *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, p. 160-166.

16. Helen E. LONGINO, *Science as Social Knowledge. Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 62.

17. Elizabeth GROSZ, “Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason,” in Linda ALCOFF and Elizabeth POTTER (ed.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York NY, Routledge, 1993, p. 192.

18. Sharlene N. HESSE-BIBER, “Feminist Research: Exploring, Interrogating, and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method,” in Sharlene N.

### The problem of disembodiment: feminist criticism of the objectified subject

The requirement of objectivity with reference to the subject means the adoption of a distanced attitude towards the object of the research and "turning off" all subjective elements in the process of gaining knowledge. This means that a credible researcher should "suspend" his or her personal experiences, convictions, and views. Feminist researchers, however, note that most scientific and philosophical disciplines which omit the personal experiences of the subject are strongly marked in terms of gender. In the light of feminist criticism, these disciplines represent the male point of view exclusively and tend to enclose themselves within narrow areas of specialization, thus excluding a general view of the object of study, which has been established as ideal and desirable in philosophy.

The dominance of the perspective of only one gender is, according to Susan Bordo, the result of the "supermasculine" model of knowledge, whose basic requirements include the absence of connections with materiality, the transcendence of the body and the demand of clarity in reasoning.<sup>19</sup> Kathleen Lennon notes that men, within the framework of research conducted according to traditional rules, implicitly assumed science and philosophy to be neutral in terms of gender and to represent a universally human point of view. The fact that the only subjects of this research were themselves, i.e., only half of the species, was justified by the conviction that only men "are capable of detaching themselves from the objects of their study and reaching judgements untinted with emotion, by the application of universal, rational principles."<sup>20</sup>

These requirements and convictions led to the constitution of the traditional subject of knowledge: disembodied, detached from matter, and divorced from his or her individuality; in other words, a subject subjected to a process of objectivization, or, as Alessandra Tanesini writes, transformed according to the socially and culturally established standards for a rational producer of certain and universal knowledge.<sup>21</sup> As noted by Shannon Sullivan, objectification of the subject in traditional philosophy meant first of all disembodiment, that is, the postulate of adoption of a purely intellectual research attitude, unmediated by experiences directly related to the human body.<sup>22</sup> Genevieve

HESSE-BIBER (ed.), *The Handbook of Feminist Research, Theory and Praxis*, London, Sage, 2012, p. 8-11.

19. Susan R. BORDO, "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11 (1986), p. 439-456.

20. Kathleen LENNON, "Natural Sciences," in Allison M. JAGGAR and Iris M. YOUNG (ed.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 188.

21. Alessandra TANESINI, *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, p. 166-171.

22. Shannon SULLIVAN, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*, Indianapolis IN, Indiana University Press, 2001, p. 133.

Lloyd describes the process of disembodiment of the subject by linking it with the ideal of non-emotional reasoning, which on the level of the imagination became culturally associated with masculinity.<sup>23</sup> Lloyd claims that the assumption that it was possible to exclude the subject's subjective connotations from the course of the process of gaining knowledge was made illegitimately and became the idealistic assumption of androcentrically practised scientific and philosophical research.

To sum up, the main argument of feminist criticism with regard to the postulate of objectification of the subject can be described as an accusation of mythologization and disembodiment. This charge is explicitly expressed by Catherine Villanueva Gardner, who writes that, "[b]oth postmodern philosophers and non-postmodern feminist philosophers agree that the neutrality, rationality, and objectivity of the traditional philosophical subject (the unsituated knower using reason alone), and the knowledge or truths acquired by that subject, are a mythology."<sup>24</sup>

The purpose of this mythology, which is preserved in Western European culture, is the creation of conditions for a particular kind of knowledge established beforehand as the desired cognitive ideal. The fundamental condition for realization of the postulate of the objectivity of knowledge is the disembodied subject, whose aim is to obtain results with the highest degree of objectivity. These results are supposed not only to be universally applicable, to refer to all particular cases, and to represent a universal point of view, but also, importantly, to contribute to obtaining power over investigated nature. In the traditional approach, the objectified subject pursues knowledge of a utilitarian character, which serves not only to identify and describe the object being studied, but first and foremost to control it and to use it for a specific purpose. In this sense, as pointed out by, *inter alia*, Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, the androcentric object of knowledge is also political in nature, that is, it reveals important connections with power relationships.<sup>25</sup>

23. Genevieve LLOYD, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 1993, p. 50.

24. Catherine V. GARDNER, *Historical Dictionary of Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford, Scarecrow, 2006, p. xxxvii.

25. The problem of the relationship between knowledge and power is an extremely broad and complex issue, which I have intentionally omitted from the considerations presented in this article. I would like to point out only that feminist criticism is dominated by the conviction that every thought, concept, theory, and discourse produced and developed in a given society has, in essence, political connotations. Epistemology as a theory of knowledge occupies a special place in this context, as its politicization has led to the exclusion of women as credible and active subjects of knowledge from activities commonly regarded as "scientific" and therefore, credible. Linda ALCOFF, "How is Epistemology Political?" in Roger S. GOTTLIEB (ed.), *Radical Philosophy...*, p. 71-72; Linda ALCOFF and Elizabeth POTTER, "Introduction: When Feminisms Intersect Epistemology," in Linda ALCOFF and Elizabeth POTTER (ed.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, p. 1-14.

### The problem of contextuality: feminist criticism of the objectified object

One of the important ideals of traditional science and philosophy is the postulate of isolation of an object of research from the subjective factors defining it, as well as from its context and circumstances. Donna Haraway identifies, as a characteristic feature of androcentric claims to objectify the object of research, the assumption that such an object is denied any effective role in the process of gaining and developing knowledge. The world studied by traditional science "must, in short, be objectified as a thing, not as an agent,"<sup>26</sup> because only its total objectification can guarantee the acquisition of objective knowledge. Establishment of this autonomous subject-object relationship is based on two fundamental assumptions: first, the subject and object are ontologically independent; second, the subject is capable of gaining knowledge of the object which is total, universal, and fully independent of subjective factors. This was pointed out Evelyn Fox-Keller, who writes that,

[h]aving divided the world into two parts—the knower (mind) and the knowable (nature)—scientific ideology goes on to prescribe very specific relations between the two. [...] The relations specified between knower and known are those of distance and separation. They are those existing between a subject and an object that are radically separated, which is to say, no worldly relations. Simply put, nature is objectified.<sup>27</sup>

Thus understood, however, the requirements of objectivity in reference to the object of research are characterized by an internal contradiction. Within the framework of feminist criticism, it has been pointed out that separating an object from its circumstances always indicates a selective choice of research material dictated by a logocentrically-shaped way of thinking. To deny the object of active research any influence on the cognitive process and its results is also considered a naive, androcentric inclination in the fields of science and philosophy, the aim of which is the acquisition of reliable and stable results, intersubjectively communicable between male researchers. Sally Haslanger notes, for example, that science and philosophy created and developed exclusively by men implies the choice of an object of research which men arbitrarily considered worthy of their interest, as well as its detachment from all circumstances, relationships, and conditions.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, women and women's concerns, most often find themselves outside the area of interest of the science and philosophy practised by men in a positivist spirit.

---

26. Donna HARAWAY, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1988), p. 592.

27. Evelyn F. KELLER, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1985, p. 79.

28. Sally HASLANGER, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," in Louise M. ANTONY and Charlotte WITT (ed.), *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, Oxford, Westview, 1993, p. 109.



Androcentric research has become the domain of facts separated from social and cultural reality; moreover, importantly, within its framework, human corporality and sexuality have been marginalized or completely ignored. Code notes that, within the male perspective, the facts have become "just facts' and worth pursuing for their own sake,"<sup>29</sup> constituting a strictly defined scope of research and, at the same time, signifying the ideal of autonomous and universal knowledge on the relevant topic. In this sense, every object acknowledged as a valuable object of research has been detached from its position in time and space, as well as from the attitude and subjective implications of the researcher. In characterizing the process of objectification of objects, Fox-Keller writes that,

[t]he scientific mind is set apart from what is to be known, that is, from nature, and its autonomy [...] is guaranteed (or so it had traditionally been assumed) by setting apart its modes of knowing from those in which that dichotomy is threatened. In this process, the characterization of both the scientific mind and its modes of access to knowledge as masculine is indeed significant. *Masculine* here connotes, as it so often does, autonomy, separation, and distance. It connotes a radical rejection of any commingling of subject and object [...].<sup>30</sup>

Objectivization of the subject constitutes, first and foremost, its detachment from subjective relationships, which is supposed to guarantee reliable and universal knowledge concerning that subject. Haslanger writes that objectivization also means that "an ideal objectifier [the subject] is in the epistemic position of (at least) having some true or accurate beliefs about what he has objectified."<sup>31</sup> What is more, and what constitutes one of the main allegations by feminist researchers, the subject objectifying the object considers these truths natural, that is, those which the object in question possesses independently and intrinsically and which are discovered by a distanced and rational researcher in a certain and reliable manner.<sup>32</sup>

To sum up, feminist criticism indicates the utopian nature of the requirements of objectivity with reference to the object of research. These researchers emphasize that the autonomy of the object postulated in traditional science and philosophy is a myth with important practical implications. The selection of the object of study from the entire research universe is always the individual decision of the researcher, dictated by unarticulated (and frequently unconscious) factors, or, on the contrary, caused by specific and practical

29. Lorraine B. CODE, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*, London, Cornell University Press, 1991, p. 35.

30. Evelyn F. KELLER, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, p. 79.

31. Sally HASLANGER, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," in Louise M. ANTONY and Charlotte WITT (ed.), *A Mind of One's Own...*, p. 103.

32. Catharine A. MACKINNON, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 59.

premises. From the feminist perspective, the position of an object of study has an equally significant impact on its cognizability and affects the researcher and his or her cognitive activity in a specific manner. The object determines the selection of research methods and tools, which are simultaneously limited to the capacities and level of development of the technology (in the case of the empirical sciences) or theory (in the case of the humanities) available in a specific historical situation. Therefore, feminist scholars agree that the object of knowledge, taken out of context and isolated from the circumstances of the complex and historically entangled process of cognition, is never fully autonomous and independent from the researcher.

### **The problem of political knowledge: feminist criticism of objective knowledge**

Knowledge, in the most general sense, constitutes organization of the results of human cognition of the world. The term *knowledge* refers to the so-called individual, personal knowledge of a particular human being, as well as to scientific knowledge, which belongs to the realm of intersubjective social consciousness. Within the framework of Western European tradition alone, many theories of knowledge have arisen; their common determinant may be the classification of objectivity, signifying the postulates of the generality, universality, credibility, and reliability of knowledge.<sup>33</sup> Objectivity, as traditionally understood, also means that knowledge is intersubjectively communicable, that is, understood by all participants via the process of communication through language, and also that, being empirically verifiable, it crosses the boundaries of practice, functioning as a theoretical result of the research process. Objective knowledge also presents a universally human point of view regarding the nature of things and applies to all cases concerning which specific assertions are expressed in a reliable manner. The ideal of objectivity also implies the fixation of knowledge within the rules of reason and its purification from any subjective elements, such as the emotions, individual experiences, or corporeality of the subject.

In the light of feminist criticism, the objectivity of knowledge is considered an idealistic thought construct created by men for the use of the traditional model of practising science and philosophy. Haslanger describes this construct as *assumed objectivity*, understanding it as the ideal of an absolute, perspective-

---

33. In epistemology, the analysis of knowledge is essentially connected to the issue of truth. The relationship between knowledge and truth has a decisive influence on both the comprehension of knowledge and truth itself. However, I will omit the vast issue of truth as the supreme cognitive value and related feminist criticism from the considerations presented here. See MATTHIAS Steup, "Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/epistemology/>] (accessed July 14, 2018).

free view of reality.<sup>34</sup> The result of this view is knowledge defined as general and universal, derived from empirical research, but in fact detached from the reality from which it emerged. This knowledge is the result of research in which the inalienable subjective features of the researcher are omitted, along with the links of the studied object with history, culture, and society. Within the framework of feminist criticism, such knowledge is defined as not only non-objective, but also, devoid of epistemic value.<sup>35</sup> From a feminist perspective, then, only those activities and theories are considered cognitively valuable whose direct impact on socio-political and cultural reality is not only possible but necessary and effective.

Objective knowledge, as traditionally understood, is also supposed to enable the subjects to assume control over what is cognized. Fox-Keller emphasizes that, from the point of view of feminist imagery, the control of nature on the principle of acquiring knowledge about it and power over it reveals a certain essential paradox. The conquest of nature with the use of rational, objectified tools, also assuming the objectivization and disembodiment of the subject, is initiated mainly through subjective interest in the object and requires the subject's engagement with a given research area. According to Fox-Keller, these are emotional and subjective motives, therefore decidedly non-objective, and thus, importantly, traditionally identified with the domain of femininity.<sup>36</sup> The purpose of knowledge motivated in this way is to control the object, which signifies its essential entanglement in power relationships. From a feminist perspective, wherever one sex dominates another, we are also dealing with power relationships, and thus, as Tanesini notes, "[k]nowledge is not politically innocent."<sup>37</sup>

In analyzing the problem of the politicization of the traditional model of scientific and philosophical research, Alcoff notes that the currently prevailing processes of shaping and transmitting knowledge are strictly political, and that the relationship between knowledge and power is essential and necessary.<sup>38</sup> Lloyd adds that because femininity was placed in opposition to rationality, it was deprived of positive value and effective power in the social and political as well as in the cultural and scientific arenas. At the same time, she is convinced that "[e]xclusion from reason has meant exclusion from power."<sup>39</sup>

34. Sally HASLANGER, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," in Louise M. ANTONY and Charlotte WITT (ed.), *A Mind of One's Own...*, p. 107-111.

35. Elizabeth POTTER, "Gender and Epistemic Negotiation," in Linda ALCOFF and Elizabeth POTTER (ed.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, p. 161-186.

36. Evelyn F. KELLER, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, p. 41-42.

37. Alessandra TANESINI, *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, p. 186.

38. Linda ALCOFF, "How is Epistemology Political?," in Roger S. GOTTLIEB (ed.), *Radical Philosophy...*, p. 65-85.

39. Genevieve LLOYD, "The Man of Reason," in Ann GARRY and Marilyn PEARSALL (ed.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality...*, p. 164.

Importantly, the relationship between knowledge and power transcends the theoretical dimension and is revealed in socio-cultural practice, at the level of division into private and public spheres. The identification of women with the private sphere was thus of a purely political character, meaning that it revealed the dominating nature of the androcentric perspective. As feminist criticism points out, men, thanks to access to education, obtained the privileges of knowledge producers, and thus became beneficiaries of the structure of forces shaped by this knowledge. The direct consequence of the establishment of the male sex as the subject of knowledge was its legitimacy as the dominant holder of power. Androcentric knowledge, at the same time, gained the status of general human knowledge, defined as a universal, rational, and objective view of reality.

Within the framework of feminist criticism it is acknowledged that the conditions of the production of knowledge, the identity of the researcher, and the political entanglement of discourses bear an essential significance for cognitive processes and the shape of the gained and developed knowledge. In her analysis of these conditions, Bordo writes about the "imagery of objectivity"<sup>40</sup> which has dominated traditional science and philosophy. Moreover, she notes that the objectivity sought at the bases of both these fields is the *de facto* political (that is, idealistic, imaginative, and implementative) objectivity of the specific goals of a given group of researchers.

#### Feminist methods of gaining "objective" knowledge

Feminist definitions of knowledge and objectivity constitute the positive results of feminist criticism of objective knowledge. One such definition was proposed by Fox-Keller and is based on a positive approach to the valuation of what is subjective and what is objective in the process of gaining knowledge. The author proposes an expanded understanding of objectivity, which she calls **dynamic objectivity** and describes as "... a pursuit of knowledge that makes use of subjective experience [...] in the interests of a more effective objectivity. Premised on continuity, it recognizes difference between self and other as an opportunity for a deeper and more articulated kinship."<sup>41</sup>

A researcher referring to the ideal of dynamic objectivity should demonstrate special and continuous mindfulness towards the world that surrounds him or her. In this case, an appropriate research attitude is also free from the desire to control the subject and refers to a holistic view of reality, in which all elements constitute a connected whole. According to Fox-Keller, cognition

40. Susan R. BORDO, *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought*, p. 440.

41. Evelyn F. KELLER, *Reflections on Gender and Science*, p. 117.

of parts of this whole should lead "only" to a better understanding of the subject's situation, not to control of the object of study.

Mary Field Belenky has presented the development of knowledge as a five-stage process culminating in **constructed knowledge**. Belenky's proposal represents a feminist search for knowledge which takes the feminist perspective into account, that is, knowledge which is inclusive, sensitive to context, and which transgresses traditional boundaries, but which at the same time does not completely reject standards of objectivity as traditionally understood. The first stage of the development of knowledge is *silence*, which means, above all, reliance on the acknowledged authorities which determine the scope of what is acknowledged as certain and reliable knowledge. The second stage is, according to Belenky, uncritical acceptance and reproduction of existing truths, or *received knowledge*, and thus thinking within the existing canons of objective and rational knowledge. In the next stage we have *subjective knowledge*, within the framework of which the rationalistic, androcentric rules of the creation of knowledge are still in force; however, at the same time, subjective elements, that is, reflections on the subjective character of knowledge resulting from individual experiences, come to the fore. *Procedural knowledge* is the stage in which emphasis is placed on the processual nature of knowledge, which is in a constant state of development and tension between what is objective and what is subjective. The point of arrival of the development of "feminine methods of cognition," as Belenky defines it, is *constructed knowledge*, which is contextual and which integrates subjective evaluation and objectivization strategies.<sup>42</sup> According to Belenky, this knowledge is the result of the liberation of women from androcentric ideals of knowledge and of a crisis of trust in institutional requirements for cognitive processes, through simultaneous acknowledgement of the experiences of the individual as an equally reliable source of truths about reality.<sup>43</sup>

Androcentrically understood objectivity of knowledge is rejected, however, by Mary Daly, who metaphorically describes the process of gaining knowledge by women as **spinning**.<sup>44</sup> According to her, the knowledge that women gain has a destructive-constructive character. This means that spinning is characterized by two stages: first, a critical grasp of the existing androcentric truths and their disassembly, second, construction of new theories based on gynocentric concepts. In this way, the knowledge that is "spun" is not a hermetic set of permanent and objective truths, but is in constant motion, intertwining itself with threads of reality which, in the context of logocentric male studies,

42. Mary F. BELENKY (et al.), *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, New York NY, Basic Books, 1986, p. 23-152.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

44. Mary DALY, *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston MA, Beacon, 1978, p. 245-246.

have never coexisted. It is worth noting that it is not only Daly who resorts to a metaphorical approach to women's methods of producing knowledge, using terms such as *spinning*, *weaving*, or *knitting*. These metaphors, initially developed by feminist researchers in the field of literary theory, are also applied in philosophical reflections, including those based on the feminist epistemology and theory of knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

Another proposal for feminist reformulation of the conditions for the objectivity of knowledge is the concept of **embodied knowledge**, presented by, *inter alia*, the aforementioned Bordo. Taking criticism of Cartesian dualistic philosophy as a point of departure, Bordo advanced the postulate of embodied knowledge, that is, a return to the body as the basis of all human experience; this postulate is intended to serve as an alternative to the traditional understanding of knowledge as rational, universal, and, most importantly, disembodied. Bordo observed that Cartesian dualism (*res extensa* and *res cogitans*) had a fundamental influence on the validation, in the Western European tradition, of the "masculinization of thought."<sup>46</sup> In her deliberations, Bordo goes on to point out that, while men have historically been associated with the intellect and the mind or spirit, women have long been associated with the body, the subordinated, negatively imbued term in the mind/body dichotomy. Bordo postulates not so much a reversal of this trend of thought but rather, an appreciation of the bodily dimension of a human being, which constitutes his or her ontological and, consequently, epistemological foundation. Bordo argues that knowledge is embodied, produced from a standpoint, by a body that is located as a material entity among other material entities. The concept of embodied knowledge which she proposes is therefore intended to replace the existing cultural definitions of the body and its materiality as they have been given to us. According to this philosopher, "real" bodies must be the focus of feminist analysis and serve as the basis of new embodied knowledge about human beings.

In addressing the issue of feminist approaches to knowledge and the conditions of its objectivity, the **situated knowledge** by Donna Haraway ought not be omitted. The thesis of situated knowledge boils down to the assertion that knowledge is achieved by a research community including members of marginalized social groups, because only they, on account of their situation, possess epistemic privilege and a more rigorous critical awareness of research problems. In this sense, as noted by, e.g., Longino, situated knowledge is *social*

45. See Małgorzata SOKALSKA, "Pieśniowe portrety kobiety-przędki [Portraits of a woman/spinner in song]," *Wielogłos* [Polyphony], 1-2 (2010), p. 147-165; Elizabeth A. FLYNN, "Composing as a Woman," *College Composition and Communication*, 39 (1988), p. 423-435; Nancy K. MILLER, *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*, New York NY, Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 77-101.

46. Susan R. BORDO, *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought*, p. 455.

*knowledge*, since all the factors of the cognitive process of which it is the result are of a social nature.<sup>47</sup> Haraway, like Bordo, states that traditional science and philosophy practised by men was based on the doctrine of disembodied scientific objectivity. The disembodied discourse created in this way is nothing more than "rhetoric, a series of efforts to persuade relevant social actors that one's manufactured knowledge is a route to a desired form of very objective power."<sup>48</sup> In noting as well that the object of the cognitive process thus understood becomes disembodied, Haraway emphasizes that knowledge formulated from the point of view of a subject which is completely detached from his or her properties, isolated from individual experiences, underdefined, and deprived of any situation or position is "truly fantastic, distorted, and irrational."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Haraway claims, the embodiment of traditional science and philosophy led to theoretical world domination by an anonymous, ahistorical, distanced subject, torn away from his or her circumstances, making use of universalistic tools whose application guaranteed gaining knowledge characterized by a high degree of objectivity.

According to Haraway, an alternative proposal for the traditional ideal of research entails knowledge that takes into account a number of world conditions in which both the object and subject find themselves. She emphasizes that a human being is capable of studying the world or a segment thereof only from a particular point of view and by means of specific methods and research tools.<sup>50</sup> Hence, this is neither a bird's-eye view (a metaphor applied to androcentric methods of practising science and philosophy) nor a guarantor of certain and objective knowledge, but a conglomerate of partial views, embodied and positioned perspectives. For to look/acquire/know is always to look/acquire/know from a particular point of view, oriented in terms of deconstruction, contestation, creation, changes in the form of knowledge, and methods of seeing.

To sum up, the feminist approach asserts that it is possible to transform traditional epistemic ideals so as to significantly expand the limits of what is commonly considered to be objective knowledge. In the field of feminist theory, this objectivity is defined as *strong objectivity*, which, according to Sandra Harding, signifies the inclusion in scientific and philosophical discourse of embodied, situated experiences, which are treated as equally valid, credible, and cognitively valuable sources of knowledge.<sup>51</sup> A distinguishing factor of strong objectivity, which in this sense constitutes its innovative value, is its critical character, which means that all elements of the process of gaining

47. Helen E. LONGINO, *Science as Social Knowledge...*, p. 215-225.

48. Donna HARAWAY, "Situated Knowledges..." p. 577.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 587.

50. *Ibid.*

51. Sandra G. HARDING, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology..." p. 57.

knowledge are subject to critical reflection.<sup>52</sup> In turn, this reflection is possible because the individual experiences of researchers taken into account in the cognitive process verify one another. In the feminist approach, knowledge is always collective in nature and results from the processes of social interaction among researchers from various environments, presenting a variety of standpoints and incorporating different stories and experiences.

### Conclusion

It can be legitimately asserted that all feminist reflections begin with criticism of the androcentric conditions governing the concepts and theories which describe and clarify reality. This criticism undermines the reasonableness of the so-called Enlightenment Project, the result of which was the fixation within the philosophy of ideals of the objectivity of scientific knowledge and the rationality of the scientific method. Accordingly, the structure of the reflections adopted in the present article was subordinated, in an undoubtedly feminist spirit, to this pattern. First, feminist criticism of the objectivity of knowledge was presented; within this framework, the research strategies, cognitive goals, and methods of conducting research functioning in traditional philosophy and science were undermined. Then, selected proposals for fundamental feminist reformulation of the postulate of the objectivity of knowledge in science and philosophy were discussed.

Feminist researchers, such as Fox-Keller, Belenky, Daly, Bordo, Haraway, and Harding, emphasize above all the specificity of women's view of the world, in particular the cognitive attitude of women. Therefore, in all concepts of knowledge cited in the present article, a special role is played by individual experience, in association with the corporality, standpoint and socio-cultural position of the subject. From the feminist perspective, the inclusion in the processes of research and philosophical analysis of subjective elements, bodily experiences, and the specific standpoint of the researcher is considered a cognitively valuable strategy for the transformation of existing theories and creation of new meanings, so that acquired and developed knowledge may become inclusive and egalitarian, and in this sense "more objective."

Importantly, this goal can be achieved within the framework of traditional scientific and philosophical discourses, transformed with respect to the evaluative and transformative feminist perspective. The evaluative quality of this perspective is first of all expressed in a critical attitude towards traditional theories, and, second, it is linked to the postulated appreciation of women and of the phenomenon of femininity in philosophical reflection and scientific research. Its transformative quality signifies that one important aspect of this

---

52. *Ibid.*, p. 69.



perspective is the postulate of the transformation of socio-political practice and theory that takes women's ways of experiencing reality into account. Both of these aspects have been presented in this article.

*Department of Philosophy  
Jagiellonian University in Cracow*

### References

- ALCOFF L., "How is Epistemology Political?" in R. GOTTLIEB (ed.), *Radical Philosophy: Tradition, Counter-Tradition, Politics*, Philadelphia PA, Temple University Press, 1993, p. 65-85.
- ALCOFF L., POTTER E., "Introduction: When Feminisms Intersect Epistemology," in L. ALCOFF, E. POTTER (eds.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York NY, Routledge, 1993, p. 1-14.
- ANDERSON E., "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-epistemology/#object> [accessed July 12, 2018].
- BELENKY M.F. (et al.), *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind*, New York NY, Basic Books, 1986.
- BORDO S., "The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 11 (1986), p. 439-456.
- CODE L.B., "Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant?" *Metaphilosophy*, 12 (1981), p. 267-276.
- CODE L.B., "Taking Subjectivity into Account," in A. GARRY, M. PEARSALL (eds.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality. Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, London-New York NY, Routledge, 1996, p. 191-221.
- CODE L.B., "The Impact of Feminism on Epistemology," *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy*, 88 (1989), p. 25-29.
- CODE L.B., *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*, London- Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1991.
- DALY M., *Gyn/Ecology. The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, Boston MA, Beacon Press, 1978.
- DERRA A., "Od skromnego świadka do wiedzy usytuowanej. O korzyściach z feministycznych badań nad nauką i technologią [From a modest witness to situated knowledge: On the benefits of feminist research for science and technology]," *Etyka [Ethics]*, 45 (2012), p. 119-132.
- FARGANIS S., "Feminism and the Reconstruction of Social Science," in A.M. JAGGAR, S.R. BORDO (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge. Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, London, New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1989, p. 209-211.
- FLYNN E. A., "Composing as a Woman," *College Composition and Communication*, 39 (1988), p. 423-435.

- FOX-KELLER E., *Reflections on Gender and Science*, New Haven CT, Yale University Press, 1985.
- FREUD S., *New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, London-New York NY, W.W. Norton & Company, 1990.
- GROSZ E.A., "Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason," in L. ALCOFF, E. POTTER (eds.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York NY, Routledge, 1993.
- HARAWAY D., "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1988), p. 575-599.
- HARDING S., *The Science Question in Feminism*, London-Ithaca NY, Cornell University Press, 1986.
- HASLANGER S., "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," in L.M. ANTONY, C. WITT (eds.), *A Mind of One's Own. Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, Oxford-San Francisco CA, Westview Press, 1993, p. 85-125.
- HARDING S., "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: 'What Is Strong Objectivity?'" in L. ALCOFF, E. POTTER (eds.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York NY, Routledge, 1993, p. 49-82.
- HESSE-BIBER S.N., "Feminist Research: Exploring, Interrogating, and Transforming the Interconnections of Epistemology, Methodology, and Method," in S.N. HESSE-BIBER (ed.), *The Handbook of Feminist Research, Theory and Praxis*, London, Sage, 2012, p. 8-11.
- JAGGAR A.M., "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in A. GARRY, M. PEARSALL (eds.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality. Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, London-New York NY, Routledge, 1996, p. 166-190.
- LENNON K., "Natural Sciences," in A.M. JAGGAR, I. M. YOUNG (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 185-193.
- LLOYD G., "The Man of Reason," in A. GARRY, M. PEARSALL (eds.), *Women, Knowledge, and Reality. Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, London-New York NY, 1996, p. 149-165.
- LLOYD G., *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 1993.
- LONGINO H.E., *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*, Princeton NJ, Princeton University Press, 1990.
- MACKINNON C.A., *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1987.
- MILLER N.K., *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing*, New York NY, Columbia University Press, 1988.
- POTTER E., "Gender and Epistemic Negotiation," in L. ALCOFF, E. POTTER (eds.), *Feminist Epistemologies*, New York NY, Routledge, 1993, p. 161-186.
- SOKALSKA M., "Pieśniowe portrety kobiety-przędki [Portraits of a woman/spinner in song]." *Wielogłos [Polyphony]*, 1-2 (2010), p. 147-165.
- STEUP M., "Epistemology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition)*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/epistemology/> [accessed July 14, 2018].

- SULLIVAN S., *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism, and Feminism*, Bloomington-Indianapolis IN, Indiana University Press, 2001.
- TANESINI A., *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemologies*, Malden MA, Blackwell, 1999.
- The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*, ed. S. GAMBLE, London-New York NY, Routledge, 2001.
- VILLANUEVA GARDNER C., *Historical Dictionary of Feminist Philosophy*, Lanham MD-Toronto- Oxford, The Scarecrow Press Inc., 2006.
- WILSHIRE D., "The Uses of Myth, Image, and the Female Body in Re-visioning Knowledge," in A.M. JAGGAR, S.R. BORDO (eds.), *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, London-New Brunswick NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1989, p. 92-114.

## SUMMARY

The article deals with the philosophical problem of the objectivity of knowledge in relation to the ideas and postulates advanced by feminist critics from the 1960s on. To this end, I take the historical perspective into account and present successively selected threads of feminist criticism of the traditional theory of knowledge, followed by selected positive aspects of feminist epistemology. First of all, I discuss feminist criticism of the androcentric research model, which is based on the doctrine of the disembodied, detached objectivity of the subject and object of research as well as of knowledge itself. Next, I present selected feminist approaches to knowledge which constitute cognitively valuable proposals for the transformation of the traditional theory of knowledge through the application in philosophical reflection and research of the feminist research perspective.

## SOMMAIRE

Cet article aborde le problème philosophique de l'objectivité du savoir par rapport aux idées et aux postulats présentés par la critique féministe à partir des années 60 du 20<sup>e</sup> siècle. À cette fin, j'adopte une perspective historique et je présente certains problèmes de la théorie cognitive traditionnelle soulevés par la critique féministe et je souligne ensuite quelques aspects positifs de l'épistémologie féministe. En premier lieu, je traite de la critique féministe du modèle androcentrique de recherches qui est basé sur la doctrine désincarnée, l'objectivité abstraite du chercheur, de l'objet de la recherche et du savoir lui-même. Ensuite je présente certaines conceptions féministes du savoir qui constituent une proposition valable de la transformation de la théorie cognitive traditionnelle grâce à l'application de la perspective féministe dans la réflexion philosophique et la recherche scientifique.