

FEMINISM AND THE SEARCH FOR AN EPISTEMIC SELF- PORTRAIT

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INTRODUCTION

By an epistemic self-portrait it shall be understood on account of the capacities and processes in virtue of which we are able to acquire an adequate understanding of reality, and reality becomes intelligible to us¹. It refers to the very framework of skills and traditions, or instrument of intellectual life and imaginations, through which human knowledge may be achieved or expressed². And, from a manifest perspective an enduring feature of speculative thought since Antiquity – a permanent preoccupation of thinkers since the history of discourse- has been the preoccupation of thinkers since the history of discourse –has been the problem of human understanding. This has to do with how we must discover, establish, and systematically represent human knowledge, or a reliable cognitive scheme by which alone we are to meaningfully engage our reality. This has been the task of traditional epistemology. And so, it is usual to see epistemology as the branch of philosophy that studies knowledge. It attempts to answer the basic question: What distinguishes true (adequate) knowledge from false (inadequate) knowledge?³ This question translates into issues of scientific methodology and how to develop theories or methods that are better than competing ones. It also forms one of the pillars of the new sciences of cognition which developed from the information processing approach to psychology, and from artificial intelligence, as an attempt to develop

computer programmes that mimic a human's capacity to use knowledge in an intelligent way⁴. The aim of this paper is to attempt an insight into the considerations that inform the feminist orientation in epistemology. This is however carried out in the light of perceived opposition to traditional epistemology⁵.

Historical Considerations

A glance at the history of epistemology easily reveals a given trend or pattern in spite of the confusion of many seemingly contradictory positions. The first set of theories of knowledge stressed its absolute, permanent character, while later theories put the emphasis on its relativity or situation dependence, continuous development or evolution, and its active interference with the world and its subjects and objects- moving from a static, passive view of knowledge towards a more adaptive one⁶.

Beginning with the Greek philosophers, for instance, Plato views knowledge as merely an awareness of absolute, universal *Ideas or Forms*, existing independent of any subject trying to apprehend them. Though Aristotle puts more emphasis on logical and empirical methods for gathering knowledge, he still accepts the view that such knowledge is an apprehension of necessary and universal principles. Following the Renaissance, two main epistemological positions dominated philosophy: *empiricism*, which sees knowledge as the product of sensory perception, and *rationalism* which sees it as the product of rational reflection⁷.

The implementation of empiricism in the newly developed experimental sciences led to a view of knowledge which is still explicitly or implicitly held by many people nowadays: the *reflection-correspondence theory*. According to this view, knowledge

which is still explicitly or implicitly held by many people nowadays: the *reflection-correspondence theory*. According to this view, knowledge results from a kind of mapping or reflection of external objects, through our sensory organs, possibly aided by different observation instruments, to our brain or mind. Though knowledge has no a *priori* existence, like in Plato's conception, but has to be developed by observation, it is still absolute, in the sense that any piece of proposed knowledge is supposed to either truly correspond to a part of external reality, or not. In that view, we may, in practice, never reach complete or absolute knowledge, but such knowledge is somehow conveyable as a limit of ever more precise reflections or reality⁸.

The following important theory developed in that period as the *Kantian synthesis* of rationalism and empiricism. According to Kant, knowledge results from the organizing of perceptual data based on inborn cognitive structure, which he calls "categories". Categories include space, time, objects and causality. This epistemology does accept the subjectivity of basic concepts, like space and time and the impossibility to reach purely objective representations of things-in-themselves. Yet the a *priori* categories are still static or given⁹.

Dominant epistemologies since modern history of discourse had defined themselves around ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality, with the task of traditional epistemology considered to be that of the analysis of the concepts of knowledge and justification. And, since conceptual analysis is essentially an a *priori* enterprise which seeks analytic truth (necessary and sufficient conditions) and above all, considering the results of conceptual analysis to be necessarily true, any conceptual analysis of knowledge (if accomplished) should be true of any kind of epistemic subject

in any given circumstance, and no set of empirical facts about particular beliefs or particular situations could count as evidence against the understanding of knowledge so discovered¹⁰.

Yet, by the 1980s, initial statements of the feminist approaches to epistemology had begun to emerge, offering a prime-example of an opposition to the very ideals that inform traditional epistemology. The new orientation was informed by social considerations as it focuses on how social relations of gender influence our knowing practices, and strives to develop adequate social models of knowing that allows for normative distinctions between better and worse knowledge-seeking practice¹¹. Such normative distinctions are understood by feminists both in epistemic terms (providing genuine knowledge) and in terms of justice (working towards more just social situations). And, in many cases series of arguments are made connecting these two forms of normative¹².

In its opposition to traditional epistemology, feminist epistemology represents a discourse that provides some critical reading of such important epistemological concepts as reason, justification, and objectivity. It also attends to previously represented topics such as the role of emotion and communities in knowing¹³. Nevertheless, although feminist epistemology began by focusing on gender, much of the works today attend to the epistemic ramifications of various forms of social stratifications such as based on race, class, social orientations, and able-bodiedness¹⁴. Essentially, however, feminist epistemology examines the ways in which gender does and ought to influence our conceptions of knowledge, the knowing subject and practices of inquiry and justification. It identifies ways in which dominant conceptions and practices of knowledge attribution,

acquisition, and justification systematically disadvantage women and other practices so that they serve the interests of these groups¹⁵.

Various practitioners of feminist epistemology argue that dominant knowledge practices disadvantage women by (1) excluding them from inquiry (2) denying them epistemic authority (3) denigrating their feminine cognitive styles and modes of knowing (4) producing knowledge that reinforces gender and other social hierarchies¹⁶. These failures are traced to flawed conceptions of knowledge, knowers and objectivity. In the light of the foregoing, the central concept of feminist epistemology is that of situated knower, and hence a situated knowledge or knowledge that reflects the particular perspective of the subject. Thus, feminist philosophers are interested in how gender situates the knowing subject. Feminist epistemology conceives of knowers as situated in particular relations to what is known and to other knowers. What is known and the way it is known, thereby reflect the situation or perspective of the knower¹⁷.

Classification of Feminist Epistemology¹⁸

Sandra Harding classified the different female authors dealing with epistemology into three basic trends: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory and feminist post modernity.

- a) Feminist empiricism originated from the feminist research focused on biology and life sciences. The first thinkers interpreted the andocentric bias of science as a lack of accuracy and precision in the implementation of the scientific method; the authors presented their works as intending to denounce “bad science”. They saw sexism and androcentrism as social bias that can be corrected by implementing the scientific method accurately. This first period is known as *spontaneous*

empiricism, and served to lay the foundations of a second period, the *philosophical feminist empiricism*. In this second period, given the assumption that science could never involve neutral assessments-not even the so-called “good science” – both the conceptual framework and the key concepts of empiricism were revised. Helen Longino and Lynn H. Nelson stand out as the main representatives of the philosophical feminist empiricism.

- b) The feminist standpoint theory is not exclusively focused on the issue of knowledge and its implications. It actually involved a real methodological revolution in feminism, and gave rise to a precise way of directing feminist research, which could be exported to many different disciplines. This approach was originally developed in the context of the Marxist tradition. The authors supporting this approach claim that, in any historical period, the prevailing world view is a clear reflection of the interests and values of the dominant group. Women, as a group traditionally excluded from power circuits, occupy a special social position that gives them a privileged epistemological standpoint, a less distorted world view than the one imposed by middle-class knowledge is located, since it is a practical and social construction: b) one special location, that of women, is more reliable as it provides as privilege standpoint to unveil some types of truth. This trend has also evolved since Nancy Hartsock first formulated it in the early eighties. From the theory that supported the existence of privilege knowledge and a real truth, new positions were adopted under the influence of postmodern theories, where knowledge is described as being located in the different lives of the social agents. A considerate number of theoreticians have

- devoted their efforts to develop this new perspective, even if they do not use the same terminology. Among them we can include Nancy Hartsock, Dorothy Smith, Sandra Harding, Patricia Hill Collins and Evelyn Fox Keller.
- c) Harding called the third group of this classification feminist postmodernism. This approach would have as a common element the denial of the two previous trend, and the inclusion of other variables apart from that of gender in the analysis of knowledge, in an attempt to give account of the fragmented identities of the present culture, it is necessary to make clear that the level of debate and the variables involved in this third trend, some of them with political elements, make it difficult to exactly determine what is actually comprised under this notion of postmodernism- which includes post structuralism, new Nietzschean theories and subjective theories. We can mention Donn Haraway and Susan Hekman as the main representatives of the trend.

Basic Issues of Feminist Epistemology¹⁹

Among the wide range of perspectives and analyses offered by feminist epistemologists, one could bring together three elements that are common to all their developments. First, there is their common rejection of the dichotomy science/politics. The feminist view claims that it is necessary to get the past the dichotomy fact / values, the positivist ideology of science that isolates it (science) from values, ethics and politics is seen as something abandoned. Feminist theoreticians reject therefore the use of the notion of “bad” theories to name those theories that are clearly slanted to favour the interests of a given group, since they

think that every single theory, even the “good” ones, is determined by the prevailing values of a given society.

This recognition of the role developed by social values in the scientific practice involves the necessity of questioning the traditional model of epistemic agent-knower-seen as dispassionate, disinterested, autonomous and disembodied. This questioning of the knowing subject directs the research towards two main points. On the one hand, and this is the second common element of the female epistemologists, the relation between observer and observed objects is valuable elements in the cognitive process. Feminists see the elimination of the emotive dimension of the human being as a consequence of the ideological attempt of the western culture to subjugate all those persons whose ways of approaching knowledge differ from that of the male abstract rationality. One of the most frequently quoted works in this context is the one developed by Evelyn Fox Keller on the scientific life of the geneticist Barbara McClintock. Keller introduces quite an alternative research approach based on watching and listening, which tries to get rid of the rigid borders between object and subject. Some of the ecofeminists’ proposals are also based on this idea of establishing a new relationship with the known object, which is more relational and less powerful.

Finally, the third common elements are the second direction adopted by feminist theoreticians when dealing with the knowing subject. The objective here is to gain insight into the Who knows²⁰ that is to discover who this knowing subject really is, that has been object of so many theoretical works in the scope of epistemology.

A Shared Notion: Situation²¹

Despite the differences between the feminist empiricists, the standpoint theory and the postmodern perspectives, it has been proved that the theoreticians share two important ideas concerning their conception of subjectivity. They all think classic epistemological individualism has to be rejected and the importance of community revalued. They also emphasize the role situation plays in the shaping of the knowing subject. The notion of situation plays in the shaping of the knowing subject. The notion of situation seems to be a central element in the feminist thought as a whole, and especially in that focused on subjectivity. For instance, it is held that trying to explain who women are involves a revision of the situation in which they develop their lives and the way this affects their experience.

One of the most enlightening works in this respect has been Linda Alcoff's work²². This author claims that subjectivity, or the subjective experience of being a woman, is made up by the position women hold. This concept of "positionality" does not mean that the external characteristics of the context determine women just as if they were empty and passive containers. On the contrary, positionality means that identity is in relation to a changing context, to a situation that includes the networks of elements concerning other subjects, economic situations, cultural and political ideologies and institutions, etc. Women are seen as part of a fluid and historicized movement and therefore as contributing actively to that context. Alcoff thinks all external situation determines the relative situation of women, in the same way that a

piece's position on the chessboard can be seen as safe or risky, powerful or weak depending on its relation to the other pieces on the board. If women can be identified by means of the position they hold within this relationships' network, a feminist vindication movement can be founded not on the assertion of their innate capacities, but on their position within the network, that of lack of power and mobility, which requires a radical change.

Therefore, Alcoff sees the concept of positionality as involving two basic elements. First, the notion of women is a relational term that can only be identified within a given (constantly changing) context; second, the position held by women can be actively used as localization for the construction of meaning, a place out of which meaning is constructed instead of a place where meaning can just be discovered. The concept of woman as positionality shows how women make use of their positional view as a place where values are interpreted and constructed and as a *locus* determined by a given act of values.

ENDNOTES

¹ Toulmin, Understanding Volume 1 , "Princeton University Press, 1972), p.25

² Ibid, p.11

³ <http://pespme1.vub.ac.be/EPISTEM.html>

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Feminist Epistemology Stands out as a clear opposition to Traditional discourse.

⁶ Op.Cit

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ [Edu/ -bmdell/soc-epistemology/Bibliographies/Feminist-Soc-Epis/intro.htm](http://bmdell/soc-epistemology/Bibliographies/Feminist-Soc-Epis/intro.htm)

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Ibid

¹³ [Http://Plato.Stanford.Edu/entries/feminism-epistemology](http://Plato.Stanford.Edu/entries/feminism-epistemology)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ <http://www.Women.it/Cyberarchive/Files./adam.htm>

¹⁹ Ibid

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

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