

Feminist Epistemology



Helen Longino

A feminine cognitive style?

“Some early versions of standpoint theory ... explain the development of gender identity in male and female children raised by female caregivers. Males acquire a masculine identity by distinguishing themselves from their mothers, through controlling and denigrating the feminine. Females acquire their gender identity through identification with their mothers, blurring boundaries between self and other. Males and females thereby acquire distinct cognitive styles. **The masculine cognitive style is abstract, theoretical, emotionally detached, atomistic, and oriented toward control or domination. The feminine cognitive style is concrete, practical, emotionally engaged, relational, and oriented toward care.**”

- “Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science”, *SEP*

- Longino seems to say *no*.

“Feminist work in psychology and in sociology has been read as making such suggestions of gender-determined epistemic access. But does it really do so? The title of the book, *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, certainly suggests a kind of cognitive separatism.² ...the kind of inquiry the authors conduct could well inform philosophical inquiry into the nature and possibility of knowledge. But it is not yet epistemology.”

“There isn’t enough uniformity in women’s experience or among women to extract the sort of description that might generate a new account of knowledge ... Thus, even if such an account were to be proposed it would immediately be shown to be wanting by including too narrow a range.”

Which women? (They don't all agree)

- The view that science is a social product is at least as old as Marxism. Marxists argued that the knowledge and culture of a society were ultimately determined by the relations of production. ...
- Feminist theorists have given this view a new form.¹⁰ Knowledge in a male dominant society reflects the experience and interests of men. A more objective and transformative knowledge is therefore to be found in the perspective of women.
- Both forms of standpoint theory share the same weakness. Since neither wage laborers nor women share a common perspective, it becomes necessary to identify a subclass within each of those classes whose perspective does form an appropriate standpoint. However, the theory one is attempting to vindicate by a standpoint methodology is required to identify this subclass, thus making the procedure circular.
- (Helen Longino)

Helen Longino,
“In Search of Feminist Epistemology”

- I suggested we think not about a feminist science, but about doing science as a feminist.⁶ ... This is a recommendation I would like to extend to epistemology as well.
- This means eschewing any search for feminist first principles and instead approaching the many activities that constitute science practice with a feminist sensibility
- C.f. Doing “cyclist science”, vs. doing science as a cyclist?
- C.f. Doing philosophy as a Christian?



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ADVICE TO CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHERS

Alvin Plantinga

“One philosopher I know, embarking on just such a project, suggested that Christians should think of God as a set (Quine is prepared to countenance sets): the set of all true propositions, perhaps ...

This is ... profoundly misdirected. Quine is a marvelously gifted philosopher ... But his fundamental commitments ... are wholly different from those of the Christian community ... and, indeed, antithetical to them.

So the Christian philosopher has his own topics and projects to think about ... he may have to reject widely accepted assumptions ...”

Feminist criteria for theory choice?

- The under-determination of theories by data requires that we add non-empirical criteria for theory choice.
 - E.g. Thomas Kuhn in “Objectivity, Values and Theory Choice”:
 - accuracy
 - consistency with existing beliefs
 - breadth of scope
 - simplicity
 - Fruitfulness
- “Most of these are accepted as features of a theory enhancing the likelihood of its truth” (Longino)

- “I find it instructive to contrast this with a list of theoretical virtues drawn from the writing of feminists. Here one finds empirical adequacy (a.k.a. accuracy), but also:
 - novelty
 - ontological heterogeneity
 - complexity of interaction
 - applicability to human needs
 - diffusion or decentralization of power.
- Are these truth-indicative features as well?

2. Novelty

- “an epistemology that justifies knowledge claims only insofar as they arise from enthusiastic violation of the founding taboos of Western humanism.”
- Treating novelty as a virtue reflects a doubt that mainstream theoretical frameworks are adequate to the problems confronting us, as well as a suspicion of any frameworks developed in the exclusionary context of modern European and American science.

3. Ontological heterogeneity

- Feminists writing about biology have urged that we take account of individual difference among the individuals and samples that constitute the objects of study.
- Theories of inferiority are supported in part by an intolerance of heterogeneity. Difference must be ordered, one type chosen as the standard, and all others seen as failed or incomplete versions. ... Ontological heterogeneity permits equal standing for different types

4. Complexity of relationship

- Many feminist scientists have taken complex interaction as a fundamental principle of explanation. Evelyn Keller's account of the work of Barbara McClintock¹⁵ and her defense of an interactionist perspective in *Reflections on Gender and Science*¹⁶ may provide the best known example ...
- ... scientists from icons like Ruth Bleier and Anne Fausto Sterling to much less well known practitioners have eschewed single-factor causal models for models that incorporate dynamic interaction, models in which no factor can be described as dominant or controlling and that describe processes in which all active factors influence the others.

5. Applicability to current human needs

- Scientific inquiry directed at reducing hunger (by improving techniques of sustainable agriculture, soil preservation, etc.), promoting health, assisting the infirm, protecting or reversing the destruction of the environment, is valued over knowledge pursued either for political domination, i.e., science for “defense,” or for knowledge’s sake.

6. Diffusion of power

- This one gives preference to research programs that do not require arcane expertise, expensive equipment, or that otherwise limit access to utilization and participation.
- Feminists in engineering and in economics have condemned requirements of mathematical achievement far beyond what is required for successfully engaging in these fields.
- Other feminists, such as Hilary Rose and Ruth Ginzburg, have urged a revamping of traditional distinctions to include widely distributed practices such as midwifery as scientific practices.¹⁷

S C I E N C E A S

S O C I A L K N O W L E D G E

Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry

HELEN E. LONGINO

Male bias in research

- Critics noted early on the tendency of researchers to rely on male informants, to ask questions reflecting male preoccupations, and to pick as models societies that supported their conclusions—to use perceived aggressiveness in male baboons, for example, as a model for aggressiveness in male humans

Androcentric and Gynecentric theories

“In recent years stories of human descent have congregated around two central images: ‘man-the-hunter’ and ‘woman-the-gatherer’ ”

- Which perspective is primarily used to explain human evolution?
- “Each perspective assumes the centrality of one sex’s changing behavior (or “adaptive strategies”) to the evolution of the entire species. Neither assumption is apparent from the fossil record or dictated by principles of evolutionary theory. Each is an example of a contextually driven background assumption facilitating inferences from data to hypotheses.”
- E.g. the development of tools can be examined from the (male) hunter perspective, or the (female) gatherer perspective.

“In this story females are seen as the innovators and thus as greater contributors to the development of such allegedly human characteristics as increasing intelligence and flexibility. As for the change in male dentition? The gynecentric view sees female sexual choice as an effective selection mechanism: males with less prominent canines, less prone to aggressive displays and behavior, and more sociable, were more desirable partners for females than their more dentally endowed fellows.”

“Man-the-hunter theorists will describe the role of the chipped stones in the killing and preparation of other animals, using as their model the behavior of contemporary hunting peoples. Woman-the-gatherer theorists will describe their role in the preparation of edible vegetation obtained while gathering ...”

How are data interpreted?

- On their own the data are dumb, **requiring such assumptions** in order to function as evidence. The frameworks belong to ways of seeing and being in the world that assign different degrees of reality and value to male and female activities.
- In time, a less gender-centric account of human evolution may eventually supersede both of these current contending stories. Such an account would focus on elements common to both sexes, perhaps communication. At this point, however, a great value of the female-centered framework is that, in addition to telling a compelling story, it showed how dependent upon culturally embedded sexist assumptions the man-the-hunter story is.

Innate sex differences in behaviour and cognition?

- Longino discusses evidence that some sex differences in human behaviour and cognition are innate. (E.g. CAH girls display “tomboy” behaviour.)
- She’s generally sceptical. E.g.

“Like the work in biological bases of gender difference this work on mathematical ability/performance floats on a sea of assumptions. While the researchers have controlled for variation in courses taken by males and females, they assume that this is the only significant social factor to be considered.”

- Evolutionary studies undertaken within the man-the-hunter framework have been taken to show that the sexual division of labor observable in some contemporary human societies **has deep roots** in the evolution of the species. ... men engage in public affairs, management of production and governance, and women in domestic affairs, childrearing, housekeeping, and husband maintenance. ...
- ... a picture of **biologically determined human universals** emerges. Evolutionary studies provide the universals: genders and sex roles that remain fundamentally constant throughout the history of the species; neuroendocrinology provides the biological determination: the dependence of these particular behaviors or behavioral dispositions on (prenatal) hormone distribution, itself genetically controlled.

Patriarchal values

- After defining “androcentrism” and “sexism”,
- Neither of these terms quite captures a third expression of patriarchal values, **the assumption of thoroughgoing dimorphism or sexual essentialism**. In part it is the idea that “they” are made for and hence complementary to “us.” As such it is a form not only of sexism but of heterosexism. The latter is generally identified as homophobia. Certainly opposition to, or denial of, homosexuality is part of heterosexism, but I see the tendency toward heterosexism as a more far-reaching imposition of complementary duality, which denies a whole range of possible human variety.

Heterosexism, sexual essentialism

- ...both description and selection are influenced by heterosexism, or sexual essentialism, that is, by the idea that there are sex-appropriate and sex-inappropriate behaviors. The assignment of lively activity to one sex and the relegation of the other to quiet, domestically oriented play is cultural mythology, although admittedly mythology acted out in many lives. The language used to describe the CAH girls' behavior—for example, “tomboyism”—reflects uncritical acceptance of this mythology from the start.⁵³ This description implies the inappropriateness of the behavior.

What is “anti-foundationalism”?

- “The new fallibilism and anti-foundationalism ...” (Longino)
- “The term “anti-foundationalism” is ... used to refer to any epistemology that rejects appeals to a basic ground or foundation of knowledge in either pure experience or pure reason.” (Mark Bevir)
- E.g.
 - Postmodernists
 - Poststructuralists
 - W. V. O. Quine
 - Ludwig Wittgenstein
- Mark Bevir, “ANTI-FOUNDATIONALISM”, in: M. Flinders, ed, *The Oxford Handbook of British Politics*, 2009, pp. 115- 137

What is “anti-foundationalism”?

- The most obvious implications of anti-foundationalism are perhaps **meaning holism** and **anti-representationalism**.
- Although anti-foundationalists have defended many different epistemologies, from pragmatism to radical scepticism, many of them conclude that we cannot justify isolated propositions; rather, any justification of a knowledge-claim must be one that applies to a web of beliefs or research programme.
- ... anti-foundationalists typically uphold **social constructivism**: they argue that we make the beliefs and concepts on which we act and thus the social world in which we live.

Stanley Fish on “foundationalism”

- “By foundationalism I mean any attempt to ground inquiry and communication in something more firm and stable than mere belief or unexamined practice. The foundationalist strategy is first to identify that ground and then so to order our activities that they become anchored to it and are thereby rendered objective and principled”
- In contrast, he maintains, “anti-foundationalism teaches that questions of fact, truth, correctness, validity, and clarity can neither be posed nor answered in reference to some extracontextual, ahistorical, nonsituational reality, or rule, or law”

Anti-representationalism?

- Anti-representationalism is the hallmark of Richard Rorty's critique of the epistemological tradition. According to it, knowledge does not "mirror" reality and the human mind is not a representational device.
- In Pedro G. Moreira (ed.), *Revisiting Richard Rorty*. Wilmington: Vernon Press. pp. 115-134 (2020)

Epistemology and Politics

- Linda Alcoff notes that feminist epistemology has been criticized for being “inappropriately political in setting its philosophical goals”
- E.g. Psychologist Steven Pinker accuses feminists of putting politics ahead of objective research.
 - *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, 2002
 - “... many feminists vehemently attack research on sexuality and sex differences. The politics of gender is a major reason that the application of evolution, genetics, and neuroscience to the human mind is bitterly resisted in modern intellectual life.”

- But (referring to the work Mary and Jim Tiles) Alcoff replies that reputable philosophers like Locke, Kant, Russell, and members of the Vienna Circle “unashamedly declared and defended the political motivations of their work”.
- Locke’s attack on innate ideas in the seventeenth century was motivated by the concern to stem a religious development known as Enthusiasm, which actually gave women a voice in public spaces on the basis of their claim to spiritual insight.

Standpoint epistemology



Ashraf Roslim

Cyclist should try driving bus. Then maybe they also understand the limited space to overtake.

2y Like Reply



Intersectionality

- “intersectionality” was an intuitively plausible concept. It was also somewhat familiar: social scientists had long thought about the ways in which the presence of two causal factors could have effects that went far beyond a mere addition of each individual effect.”
- Yascha Mounk, *The Identity Trap*

Situated knowledge and incommensurability

- “It is obviously plausible that members of marginalized groups are more likely to have direct experience with certain forms of injustice, such as police brutality. But in the work of some scholars, the idea of “situated knowledge” went much further. To them, the fact that each person exists at the intersection of different identities came to imply that outsiders could, even if they carefully listened to their stories, never truly come to understand, say, a homosexual Latino or a Black woman. In some of its uses, **intersectionality thus came to stand for a belief in the profound incommensurability of human experience.**”
- Mounk, p. 60.