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IS THE SEX OF THE KNOWER EPISTEMOLOGICALLY SIGNIFICANT?

LORRAINE B. CODE

The purpose of this paper is primarily exploratory. I shall designate a number of ways in which the sex of the knower might be a significant factor in the knowledge-seeking process, and shall consider, briefly, the implications for theory of knowledge if this is so. The investigation arises out of a conviction that constraints upon the process will lead to constraints in the product: if the sex of the knower is a constraint in the process, the ensuing knowledge must be differently structured by, and differently accessible to, male and female knowers. I shall suggest directions in which answers might be sought to the problems I raise. But I do not, at this point, have fully elaborated solutions. These will be the subject of future writings on this question.

Knowledge is the product of the efforts of individual human knowers. At any point in history it has the form and content that it does because of the ways in which particular cognitive enterprises have yielded results which are accommodated within a growing body of knowledge. Human individuality is an important factor in the growth of knowledge: this is recognized in references, for example, to Pythagoras' theorem, to Copernicus' revolution, and to Newtonian and Einsteinian physics. The names commemorate the individuality of scientists who stand at the culmination of a particular knowledge-seeking process. By their efforts they have made possible a quantum-leap of progress in a particular field of investigation. In less spectacular ways other individuals contribute to the growth of knowledge.

One must ask, then, what aspects of human individuality can reasonably be declared epistemologically significant in the sense that they constitute conditions for the existence of knowledge, or in some way determine the kind of knowledge that can be achieved. Presumably individuals do not succeed in contributing to human knowledge because of such accidental physical attributes as height, weight, or hair colour. We do not, for example, consider how much Archimedes weighed when we accept the general applicability of his famous discovery. Nor do we doubt that a thinner or a fatter man could have reached the same conclusions. But it is not clear that maleness or femaleness, too, can be classified as accidental physical attributes similar to height, weight and hair colour. These may well be subjective factors which are influential in determining the form and content of knowledge. The fact of being male or being female seems to be fundamental to one's way of being a person in such a way that it could have a strong influence upon one's way of

knowing. The question is, then, whether there is knowledge which is, quite simply, beyond the range of the cognitive capacity of one or other half of the human race; whether there are kinds of knowledge which only men, or only women, can acquire.

Many kinds of knowledge and many skills have, historically speaking, been inaccessible for women from a purely practical point of view. Women were simply not permitted to learn. The problem for epistemology is to determine whether these practical impossibilities are also logical impossibilities. If they are, the answer to the question this paper poses must be an unqualified "yes". Here I do not take "logical possibility" in the extreme sense, as when one asks, for example, "If there were only one person in the world would it be logically possible to act morally?" I do not mean to ask whether, if women were *different*, it would be logically possible for them to know what men know; nor do I ask whether it would be logically possible for them to become different to the extent that . . . and so on. My purpose is, given the biological nature of the female human being, to ask whether it is logically possible for her to have certain kinds of knowledge hitherto designated strictly male. It is necessary to establish the limits of the process of socialization and to distinguish them from the limits of cognitive capacity.

In such discussion as there is of this matter in the history of philosophy the consensus seems to be that there is a basic qualitative difference between the kinds of knowledge which women can acquire and that which is accessible to men. Women's knowledge seems to be of an inferior sort, less controlled by reason, more determined by emotion, than that which men possess. For Aristotle it is man who is rational. Woman may be rational, but she cannot use her rationality with authority. Kierkegaard sees the attainment of the ethical and religious levels of existence to be open to men only; women are aesthetic beings. And for Nietzsche, the Apollonian is the male preserve; women are Dionysian creatures. The nineteenth century philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt, who has written at some length about female knowledge, remarks:

A sense of truth exists in (women) quite literally as a sense: their nature also contains a lack or a failing of analytic capacity which draws a strict line of demarcation between ego and world; therefore, they will not come as close to the ultimate investigation of truth as man.¹

The view which emerges is that female knowledge is more subjective, less objective, than male knowledge. If this can be established, it is clearly an epistemologically significant point.

¹ From *Humanist Without Portfolio*, An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Translated from the German with an Introduction by Marianne Cowan. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1963, p. 349.

These preliminary considerations make of the sex of the knower a special instance of a central problem which, I believe, runs through all epistemological enquiry. It is the problem of reconciling the necessarily subjective factors in all human knowledge with the need for objectivity in anything that is to count as knowledge. Human knowledge is knowledge of an independently existing reality whose nature sets limits upon what can be known. Yet the knowledge itself is the product of a combination of objective and subjective factors. The objective side, which serves as the foundation of knowledge at all other levels, consists in (1) a framework of constant expectations, of common-sense knowledge about the everyday behaviour of material objects and one's ability to deal with them on a practical level; (2) the biologically-determined nature of human cognitive equipment, which is reasonably constant from knower to knower, regardless of sex, and which dictates the kind and scope of knowledge human beings can acquire.

On the subjective side, firmly grounded within this objectivity, yet leading to a considerable degree of diversity within the unity of knowledge are (1) the individual creativity of the human knower, (2) the location of every knower within a period of history, (3) the location of every knower within a linguistic and cultural setting, and (4) the affective side of human nature (contrasted with its purely intellectual side). All of these factors contribute necessarily to the end product of the knowing process: the ensuing knowledge. I call them "subjective" because of their reference to the circumstances of the knowing subject.

In the domain I have designated objective, most differences between male and female knowledge can be attributed to socialization rather than to differences in cognitive capacity. At the level of basic knowledge it is men, generally speaking, who know how to start stalled cars; women who know how to mend torn garments. But this is a result of the kinds of skill men and women have been schooled to acquire. The fact that women, or men, do not habitually possess or exercise certain skills does not mean that they cannot, except where individual, trans-sexual explanations in terms of physical strength, coordination, or mental capacity can be found. In the changing climate of modern Western society many men and women are becoming skilled in those activities traditionally seen to belong to the opposite sex. This makes it plausible to suggest that knowledge of the fundamental, common-sense kind, is sexually differentiated more by virtue of practical expectations than of logical necessity. As more women become able to build bookcases and more men to make cakes, it becomes less feasible to suggest that these are simply statistically unusual members of their sex; more feasible to attribute such differences in practical knowledge to cultural imposition.

This claim is strengthened by investigations of the nature and development of human cognitive equipment such, for example, as Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology. Throughout his research Piaget uses male and female subjects interchangeably. His assumption is, clearly, that the

manner in which cognitive structuring takes place is identical in male and female human beings. This may well be a tacit assumption which Piaget himself has never questioned. I think, however, that it would be clear in the results of the research if the structuring of knowledge were necessarily differentiated according to the sex of the knower. But there is no evidence of such differentiation.²

Recent psychological research, however, seems to suggest that the brains of men and women are not identical, but specialized and designed to perform in somewhat different ways.³ Women, the research suggests, are, on the average, better at verbal skills and fine coordination than men; and they have a greater ability to make rapid choices. They are not as good as men at so-called spatial skills such as mathematics, and the organization and mental rotation of subjects. Researchers suggest that this is because the areas that control language-function are in the left hemisphere of the male brain; those that control spatial functions are more on the right. Thus language and spatial functions do not interfere significantly with one another. But in women the functions of the brain appear to be distributed equally between the two hemispheres with the result that language and spatial functions are more likely to conflict with one another and to inhibit certain talents. Here we seem to have evidence that the sex of the knower is epistemologically significant, and is significant in an aspect of the knowledge-seeking situation which I have designated objective: the nature of human cognitive equipment. Such a conclusion should lead to a fundamental difference between male and female knowledge at all levels. Indeed it suggests that it may well be logically impossible for women, or men, to acquire certain kinds of knowledge.

However, I am not convinced that such conclusions are unequivocally warranted. It is plausible to suggest that even these seemingly fundamental differences can be attributed to cultural causes. In the first

² For a basic account of Piaget's position see Jean Piaget, *Genetic Epistemology*, translated by Eleanor Duckworth. New York, W.W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1971. This position is elaborated throughout Piaget's other works. In her study, "In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and Morality" (*Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 1977), Carol Gilligan points out that Piaget's studies of the rules of children's games reveal girls to be 1) less explicit about agreement, less concerned with legal elaboration than boys; 2) more pragmatic in their attitude to rules than boys, willing to accept a rule if the rewards are clear; 3) more tolerant of innovation than boys. (cf. J. Piaget, *The Moral Judgement of the Child*, New York: The Free Press, 1968.) Since the question of whether moral knowledge is possible is beyond the scope of the paper, I shall not proceed to assess the significance of these findings for theory of knowledge. I mention them to indicate Piaget's awareness of sex differences as potentially significant in his research.

³ See, for example, "Brains and Sex" by Robert Sheppard in *The Globe and Mail*, Science Section, Toronto, Ontario, March 6, 1979. This is a report of research in progress on this topic in hospitals and universities in Montreal, Toronto, Hamilton, and London, Ontario.

place, scientists allow that these differences in the brain itself are not observable; that it is more a matter of brains controlling certain processes in sexually-differentiated areas and ways. Secondly, there is persuasive evidence to indicate that the brain develops its powers by practice.⁴ The brain of an animal presented with a wide variety of tasks and of stimuli develops strikingly greater performance capacity than one in a more impoverished environment. Thirdly, it has been demonstrated that musical ability, for example, which was believed to be a right-hemisphere characteristic, can become a right-*and* left-hemisphere function, with increased sophistication in performance, understanding and sensitivity, if musical education is begun at an early age.⁵ It is thus possible that differences in male and female brains can be attributed to cultural causes such as the sex-stereotyping of children's activities, and the likelihood that parental attitudes differ to children of different sexes, even from earliest infancy. One can argue plausibly that the nature of human cognitive equipment remains an objective factor in all human knowledge. But it may well become a sexually-differentiated factor as a result of socialization and thus, from a practical point of view, make the sex of the knower epistemologically significant in the sense I have indicated. But it is not irrevocably so.

On the subjective side, the individual creativity of the human knower is a centrally determining factor in all human knowledge. Kant's concept of the creative synthesis of the imagination is a revolutionary concept in the history of epistemology in its placing of the epistemological subject at the centre of the cognitive process. It is possible, without losing sight of its original sense, to extend the scope of the Kantian creative synthesis to a full recognition of the knowing subject as person, rather than merely as knower in a more anonymous sense. This points to the further contention that each individual's knowledge has its particular shape as much as a result of what he or she is as because of what the world is. Knowledge comes into existence as a result of a cooperative interaction of the will, feeling, thought, and perception of individual knowing subjects. This is not to deny that the objective nature of reality and of human cognitive structures determine and delimit the ways of knowing which can have validity and stand fast. Nor is it to deny that knowledge must develop according to logical principles, where contradiction and inconsistency can be recognized and eradicated. Nevertheless, within these limits there is a wide spectrum of diversity.

The person with strongly fundamentalist religious convictions, for

⁴ In this connection see "A New View of the Brain" by Gordon Rattray Taylor, in *Encounter*, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2, 1971. Taylor points out: "If the eyelids of an animal are sewn up at birth, and freed at maturity, it cannot see and will never learn to do so. The brain has failed to develop the necessary connections at the period when it was able to do so". (p. 30)

⁵ Donal Henahan makes these points in his article "Harmony in a Mind Divided?" *The Globe and Mail*, Science Section, Toronto, Ontario, January 29, 1979.

example, may well see and understand Darwinian theory in a manner quite different from that of the person who is not committed to any form of religious belief. (Edmund Gosse, in his work *Father and Son*, depicts his biologist father's conflict between his scientific and his religious knowledge.) The nature of an individual's contribution to knowledge on a broader level is influenced by such conflicts in knowledge acquisition. Thomas Kuhn makes this point for science in general when he writes:

Observation and experience can and must drastically restrict the range of admissible scientific belief, else there would be no science. But they cannot alone determine a particular body of such belief. An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given scientific community at a given time.⁶

Kuhn acknowledges that science has seemed to provide an illustration of the generalization, so important for epistemology, that truth and falsity are determined by the confrontation of statement with fact. Yet the act of judgment which leads scientists to reject a previously accepted theory, or to accept one which had seemed unacceptable, is always based upon more than a simple comparison of that theory with the world.

These considerations are relevant to the question of epistemological significance of the sex of the knower in the following way. A woman who is strongly aware of her femininity, a member of a feminist organization, for example, and a man who is self-consciously masculine, a so-called "male chauvinist", will very likely show that their possibilities of structuring experience are constrained by these facts. But a female Christian and a female atheist would be equally far apart in their ways of knowing certain kinds of things, just as would a male Marxist and a female capitalist. In an important sense, one's attitude to one's sexuality is similar to an ideological stance. Just as some people are fervently ideological and others less so, and this is significant in the acquisition of knowledge, so some people are keenly aware of sexuality and others less so, and this is a constraint upon the acquisition of knowledge. At this general level then, it is reasonable to suggest that the sex of the knower is a subjective factor similar to emotional, professional and religious orientations. It does influence the form and content of knowledge in a manner similar to these factors. But the degree of influence is by no means constant for members of one sex as opposed to members of the other sex.

The historical circumstances of the knower are closely linked with the kind and amount of knowledge which can be acquired. A fifteenth-century man could no more know about the DNA molecule or about nuclear physics than he could know about the Nazi regime in Germany.

⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition. Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1970, p. 4.

This is not because certain biological and physical information would not have been true in his time, but because it would constitute novelty of a degree which he could not accommodate within the body of his knowledge. The level of existing knowledge dictates what kind of knowledge it is possible (i.e. logically and practically possible) to acquire at any time in history.⁷

In periods of history when the academies are closed to women, it is difficult to the point of impossibility for women to acquire knowledge of the "academic" variety. This is not to suggest that the closed doors of the institutions of learning produce feminine stupidity. But the evidence about the adaptability of the human brain, and the need for certain skills to be acquired at an early developmental stage if they are to be acquired at all, is pertinent here. If one branch of the species is prevented, in practical terms, from developing in certain ways, higher levels of knowledge will simply be inaccessible, at least to most of these people. The rare individual will achieve the desired results by independent efforts: one might argue that any Renaissance woman *could*, by her own efforts and with great difficulty have achieved the intellectual status of the Renaissance man. Nonetheless, I think one must take seriously Christine Pierce's observation that

. . . . certain abilities of persons can be manifested only in circumstances of cooperativeness. One cannot, for instance, manifest intelligence in an interpersonal situation with someone priorly convinced of one's stupidity.⁸

The word "cannot" is well chosen. Most women, in eras prior to the rise of feminist movements, *can* know much less than men.

Location within a particular language is a further subjective constraint upon the possibility of complete objectivity for knowledge in general. Because language is so powerful a formative force in determining the structure of knowledge, the recognition of a measure of linguistic relativism, which I urge, is equivalent to a measure of epistemological relativism. This is true not only from one natural language to another, but of various sub-languages within a particular natural language. The language of physics, for example construes reality in one way; the language of sociology in another. Apart from mathematics and the mathematically formalized branches of the natural sciences, with their precise symbolism, problems of interpretation, understanding, and evaluation attend all human speech situations. Any act of communication between human beings is, at the same time, an act of translation. The creative synthesis which leads to knowledge is shaped, to some extent, by the language in which it takes place.

⁷ This is an application of Piaget's principle of equilibration at a phylogenetic level.

⁸ Christine Pierce, "Philosophy", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1975, p. 493.

The question arises, then, whether there are distinct male and female languages which point to a sexual relativism in knowledge. Differences of pitch and intonation, for example, which linguistic studies detect in men's and women's speech⁹ are epistemologically equivocal: one might make a case for their epistemological significance by arguing that the image of self reflected in speech is indicative of the knower's way of approaching the world, and thence of knowing it. This suggestion is supported in Robin Lakoff's study of *Language and Woman's Place*¹⁰, and in Miller and Swift's *Words and Women*.¹¹ Here there is persuasive evidence for woman's place in the world being linguistically defined and maintained in innumerable subtle ways: ways which determine her approach to the world and hence must have an effect upon her knowledge of it.

Furthermore, the suggestion that "in general men have been in control of determining what is labeled . . ." ¹² points to a crucial epistemological difference related to the sex of the knower. If this suggestion is in any way plausible, it leads to the conclusion that men establish the limits of the conceptual structuring which is central to the growth of knowledge. Women, then, find the limits of their creativity (i.e. the limits of their knowledge) dictated by men. The kinds of knowledge available to the entire species are dictated by half of its members.¹³ These conclusions, however, are extremely tentative. They are relevant more to the psychology of individual knowers than to conditions for the growth of knowledge in general. Like poets and scientists, women can make a creative leap beyond the dominant communal language. Galileo and Kepler, for example, were successful in creating new forms of scientific discourse. One can acknowledge that

there is a problem (for women) both of concept formation within an existing male constructed framework and a problem of language use in developing and articulating an authentic understanding of the world and one's relationship to it.¹⁴

But one must at the same time recognize that this does not hold equally

⁹ See "Intonation in a Man's World" by Sally McConnell-Ginet, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1978, pp. 541-559.

¹⁰ Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place*. New York, Harper and Row, 1975.

¹¹ Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *Words and Women*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1977.

¹² Kramer, Thorne and Henley, "Perspectives on Language and Communication", in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 3, No. 3, 1978, p. 644.

¹³ The same authors suggest that "language renders females invisible" (*loc. cit.*), citing the generic "he" as evidence, e.g. "everyone take *his* seat". This may be a valid condemnation of the English language but it cannot apply to languages where the gender of the noun determines the gender of the possessive pronoun. Consider the French equivalent: "Tout le monde à *sa* place".

¹⁴ Kramer, Thorne and Henley, *op. cit.*, p. 646.

for all women, and that feminist movements are slowly altering the epistemological significance of woman's place in language.

Finally, the affective side of human nature, the fact that human beings are as much feeling creatures as they are thinking creatures, constitutes a subjective constraint upon objectivity for knowledge in general. Susanne Langer points out that epistemology finds the entire area of feeling unmanageable because it eludes propositional formulation, yet she designates it "The generic basis of all mental experience — sensation, emotion, recollection, and reasoning, to mention only the main categories."¹⁵ The interests, inclinations and enthusiasms of the knower have a central effect upon how and what he or she can know. This is true of the scientist and of the artist, and of the everyday knowledge of human beings in general. It is in this sense that Thomas Kuhn, in the remarks cited above, might amplify the notions of "personal and historical accident".

It is in this subjective constraint in particular that male and female knowledge differ. There is an entire range of affective experience bound up specifically with being male or being female: experiences of sexuality and of parenthood, of general self-awareness as a physical and emotional being, and some aspects of interpersonal relations, which must of necessity be different for men and for women. The experience of what it is to be male or what it is to be female (in those aspects not connected with roles imposed by society) must constitute an area where it is logically impossible for one group of human beings to know what another does.

The greater proportion of human knowledge could roughly be designated "knowledge by description".¹⁶ But the acceptance of a knowledge claim involves the tacit assumption that what is known could be, or could have been, experienced at first hand. Such a condition does not hold for this kind of experience. In the same way that a blind person cannot really know colour, that a deaf person cannot really know sound, so it is reasonable to argue that a person who is male cannot really know what it is to be female, and vice versa.

Even here, however, the boundaries are not as clear as they may seem to be. This is knowledge which belongs to the realm where the affective side of the knower is most active, just as mathematics belongs to that area which is most purely intellectual. And I think one possible solution to the lack of vocabulary for dealing with the problem of feelings is to be found in the "vocabulary" of art. Knowledge which has its source in the

¹⁵ Susanne Langer, *Philosophical Sketches*. Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962, p. 11.

¹⁶ Here I am adopting the spirit of Bertrand Russell's terminology as he spells it out, for example, in *The Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford, O.U.P. Paperback edition, 1970, pps. 26-28. I am using the acquaintance/description distinction in a very broad derivative sense. In this broad sense the distinction is useful for my purposes here, at least where its epistemological, as opposed to its ontological, implications are concerned.

experience of works of art falls between Russell's acquaintance/description distinction, very broadly used. It can be designated "knowledge-by-second-hand-acquaintance". Just as a photograph displays a person's appearance more adequately than any verbal description can evoke it, so an artist's creation shows what a situation is like. The artist provides a means of letting one "see" for oneself, experience it for oneself in such a way that one is able to enter into an entire and immediate experience of "what it is like to be *x*"; either to be in an *x* kind of situation, or to be an *x* kind of person. As one enters into the experience in this way it becomes very close to knowledge by acquaintance. It is true that a woman can never know at first hand just what it is like to be a man. But it is possible that the reading of a novel or a poem, or the viewing of a painting or a sculpture will allow her to know some aspect of "maleness" almost as though she were experiencing it for herself. And the same can be said of a male apprehension of aspects of "femaleness". Even in this apparently clear-cut area, then, the logical impossibility is not as absolute as it might seem.

The historical accounts to which I have referred suggest that female knowledge cannot achieve the degree of objectivity male knowledge can achieve. Female knowledge is characterized as more subjective than male knowledge. And the assumption is that it is therefore inferior to male knowledge, the more objective being necessarily the "better" knowledge. But this assumption must not go unquestioned. Perhaps total objectivity in knowledge is both impossible and undesirable. One might argue that women bring a richness of feeling and a depth of understanding to cognitive activity such that the final known *Gestalt* is richer, more multi-faceted, and better. Perhaps the admission of women to the kingdom of knowers, on an equal footing, will effect a shift in the standard evaluation of knowledge claims, granting greater respectability to the contribution made by the affective side of human nature.

In any case, most of these comments refer to socially acquired characteristics rather than to cognitive capacity. As male and female roles become less rigidly specified by society, so it will become more common for men to acknowledge the affective side of their nature and for women to acknowledge their intellectual side. The differences between male and female knowledge, language, and experience will no longer be equivalent to differences between "forms of life". And the epistemological significance of being male or being female will not be so great.

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