

Feminist Epistemology

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Part I

What is feminist epistemology?

In looking for an answer to the question of what feminist epistemology is, the first thing we need to address are the terms feminism and epistemology separately. Feminism is the struggle for women's rights in a very broad sense, while epistemology—again approaching it in a most general way—is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the phenomenon of knowledge; the field of research is the philosophical discipline that is knowledge.

Therefore, feminist epistemology is a philosophical direction that studies knowledge in the context of the struggle for women's rights. Here it is necessary to distinguish two approaches:

1. Feminist epistemology as a sociological and ethical approach
2. Feminist epistemology as an attempt to interpret genuine epistemological problems through a lens, feminism, which has not previously been applied to them.

Feminist epistemology as *a sociological and ethical approach* studies the phenomenon of discrimination against women in scientific institutions, academia, and in research as a whole. Feminist epistemology, on the one hand, presents itself as a body of descriptive studies, that is, it determines where and how women are discriminated against in the fields listed above; on the other hand, it develops theoretical bases and methods for eliminating this discrimination. In this sense, the issues that feminist epistemology descriptively addresses are the following:

1. Women's exclusion from research practices
2. Lack of recognition of women's epistemic authority
3. Devaluation of cognitive practices in the "feminine style"
4. How women are represented at a lower level of hierarchies in various theories, according to masculine interests
5. How women as a social group are invisibly represented in various theories
6. Knowledge production from which women—generally gender groups at the bottom of the social hierarchy—cannot benefit.

Activities emerging in the context of the social and ethical approach of feminist epistemology also lead to a reevaluation of *genuine epistemological problems*, questions, concepts, and methods. Here, the starting point is whether the gender of the knower (in epistemological terms, the subject of knowledge) has any significance from the epistemological aspect, and if so, what this significance is. In research on the subject, epistemology's basic concepts, such as rationality, objectivity, universality, truth, etc., are questioned and re-evaluated.

Feminist epistemology began to gain importance after the 1980s. Until then, the common foundational question of epistemology was Kant's "What can we know?" Feminist epistemology first seeks to determine the answer to this question by changing the "we" from a neutral, genderless, timeless abstract subject of knowledge to a knowledge-based agent having a specific side, gender, and historical reality. Feminist epistemology claims that this change should lead to a change in basic epistemological concepts, practices, and methods.

Situated knowledge

One of the central concepts of feminist epistemology is

situated knowledge. This concept is not only limited to feminism, but also is a product of the anti-positivist idea of science that was formed in the second half of the 20th century. The anti-positivist idea of science is a postmodernist traditional critique of science, and it encompasses many directions, from the history of science to the sociology of science and knowledge. In this context, the initiative to re-evaluate the phenomenon of knowledge presents knowledge as a historical phenomenon in acutely dependent on time and space. Knowledge depends on the physical existence of the subject of knowledge, the time in which he/she lives in, the geographical area, cultural factors, material conditions, the intellectual tradition in which he/she has been formed, his/her mental abilities and mental health, the political system he/she lives in, his/her status in the society he/she lives in, etc. If we summarize all these determining factors under the concept of "situation," knowledge is situated rather than universal. Knowledge can never be directly acquired; instead, it depends on the situation of the agent of knowledge (the person who seeks to know or knows).

Sandra Harding and Donna Haraway are two key authors who brought the concept of situated knowledge into feminist discourse. What happens when evaluating the situatedness of knowledge from a feminist perspective?

In the dominant scientific establishment and academia, the statuses of women and men are not the same. Women have historically been and continue to be discriminated against in power hierarchies in these areas (as in other areas of life). The primary and most obvious form of discrimination against women in science and academia is their exclusion from various fields. In many countries around the world, women still do not have access to education. Even in countries where science and academia are more developed, we still cannot speak of gender equality because women face more difficulties in advancing their careers in science and academia than men. Returning this background to the concept of situated knowledge, this means

that throughout the history of science and knowledge, women's *situation* has not been taken into account, or taken into account too little. Reflections on the *situation* of women (and other gender minorities) were (are) often or almost exclusively made from the perspective of masculine power. Therefore, the entire institution of science and academia, the knowledge it produces, has a limited perspective and represents the interests of those who hold power. The claim to objectivity of knowledge emerging under these conditions must necessarily be invalidated. Feminist epistemology (at least, feminist epistemology of the postmodern tradition) generally considers impossible the objectivity of knowledge.

There are three main approaches that explain the concept of situated knowledge, which is the basic starting point of feminist epistemology: namely feminist standpoint theory, feminist empiricism, and feminist postmodernism. Let's look at the key claims in these approaches below.

Feminist standpoint theory

Feminist standpoint theory is considered a classic approach among the main approaches listed above. Its starting point is general Marxist standpoint theory. According to general Marxist standpoint theory, those lower in the social power hierarchy have a more advantaged epistemic perspective. This is because these classes both represent the numerical majority of society and are direct participants in the processes that define society (for example, of the labor process), which allows them to have a direct and inside perspective on these processes. They are also the most knowledgeable about the social system because thanks to their work, they know directly and in detail the processes that sustain the system. They are the main force that can change society, so they are the ones who understand society. More specifically, their knowledge must be taken into account in order to change/improve society. Those in dominant positions in society cannot know what the working class knows about itself because they do not have

direct and internal access to the processes described above.

Nancy Hartsock imposes Marxist standpoint theory onto feminism. She thus argues that the class relations underlying general Marxist standpoint theory are the main factor determining the epistemology of class perspectives, just as the gendered division of labor is the main factor determining the epistemic perspective in patriarchal systems. In patriarchal systems, because women are the leading parties in the reproductive processes, there are jobs typically classified as "women's jobs" that are projected onto them. These could include social work, education and teaching work, nursing work (for example, patient care), etc., though such supposedly women's work varies across space and time. Because of the gender-based division of labor, women are the leading force of a field (the reproductive field), and that field often ensures the survival of the heterosexual traditional patriarchal social structure. Thus, women provide a direct, inside and detailed epistemic perspective on the processes of the patriarchal system that can only exist from their standpoint and perspective. While this standpoint, which is epistemically advantaged, is not always taken into account, science must consider it so that society can be changed to better reflect the interests and needs of all its members.

Feminist empiricism

Feminist empiricism is the approach closest to the empiricist-positivist tradition among feminist epistemological directions that accept the concept of situated knowledge as an epistemic foundation. However, the empiricism in the phrase "feminist empiricism" is only a conditional empiricism, and it should be distinguished from the traditional empiricist approach. More specifically, feminist empiricism is based on the denial of certain arguments of classical empiricist cognitive theories.

The basic view common in classical empiricist epistemology, mainly in the approaches formed by the influence of the Vienna

Circle and analytic philosophy at the turn of the 20th century, was that it is necessary to distinguish the context of the justification of knowledge from the context of the genesis and emergence of knowledge and keep them separate from one another. The justification of knowledge was seen as an internal matter of science, and the investigation of the causes of the genesis of knowledge was seen as an issue lying outside science. With this division, the event of knowledge creation, as well as its formation, conditions, and history, etc. remained outside the research field of epistemology.

Situated knowledge, which is the core concept of feminist epistemology, denies this division. However, feminist empiricism seeks to take into account both the criticisms of the division of *knowledge justification* and *knowledge genesis* described above, not losing sight of the condition of objectivity of knowledge. The result of the attempt at this combination is the idea of empirical *underdetermination of theories* and the idea of *theory-laden observation*. *Empirically underdetermined theories* imply that the data we collect through empirical observation cannot unambiguously determine theories. Thus, different theoretical approaches, even those that contradict each other, may emerge from the same observational material.

The theory-laden observation means that our empirical ability to observe itself is formed in certain theoretical contexts. Even when we observe empirically, we look at the world through certain *theoretical lenses*. Therefore, empirical observation cannot guarantee us access to unconditional, pure facts. In general, unconditional, pure facts cannot exist. *Contextual empiricism* and *naturalistic epistemology* can be cited as examples as the result of this compromise.

Both approaches see empirical reasoning as the foundation of scientific understanding. At the same time, both approaches agree that science is a social and thus a collective enterprise and cannot be limited to the work of individuals.

Scientific research is a social activity and should not be distinguished from other social activities by its fundamental nature. Thus, feminist empiricism sees the sociology of knowledge, which classical empiricism had declared outside science, within the epistemological interest and finds it necessary to address it in this context.

Feminist postmodernism

In order to explain feminist postmodernism, it is necessary to provide an appropriate general context. Epistemologically, the key concepts for understanding postmodernism are given in these expressions: *discursive construct* or *social construct*. Postmodernist epistemology denies basic epistemic concepts such as universality, necessity, objectivity, unambiguity, essence, etc., emphasizing instead the epistemological importance of definitions, including locality, instability, one-sidedness, uncertainty, ambiguity etc. As a result, the concept of *situated knowledge* is further radicalized and goes back to the claim of the impossibility of knowledge. Thus, the postmodernist epistemological approach denies the concept of the subject, and thus completely denies the concept of the subject of knowledge. The way we think about the world is a social construct, that is, a kind of fiction. The meaning of what we think about the world—which includes knowledge—is not referential, but reflexive. This means that there is no *external*, independent reality or reference point that will ensure the correctness of our language and knowledge system. The new meanings we create only arise from relation to the other meanings we are in.

In this context, the subject of knowledge disappears. According to the postmodernist approach, *I (the subject)* as well as the subject in return, is a concept created from signs. And signs are completely reflexive, that is, they arise from relation to other signs and are understood by them. Since the referentiality of signs is denied, the referentiality of the subject is also denied. The subject is reflexive, that is,

a social construct, without a foundation and reference in reality. To be more specific, reality itself is a social construct, that is, it is not *real*, but fiction.

On the one hand, this means that no theory, knowledge, or science is able to present reality completely and correctly. Thus, the claim that both reality and the subject are social constructs necessitates the acceptance of countless epistemic perspectives. All these perspectives (approaches, theories) will have the same epistemic legitimacy, so there is no criterion to verify them as true or false.

What postmodernist epistemology radically calls into question is the idea of the interconnectedness of science (cognition in the broadest sense) and progress that has prevailed since the Enlightenment. Postmodernism replaces the pair of *cognition* and *truth* presented by modernity (Enlightenment) with the pair of *knowledge* and *power*. In other words, according to postmodernism, scientific knowledge is related to power, not to truth. All knowledge, including science, are acts of power.

In this above context, the main critical target of feminist postmodernism is the unified category of *women*. Gender is a social construct and contains a certain social perspective, including a claim to power. The main critical point of feminist postmodernism in this direction are approaches that form a general concept of women (for example, feminist standpoint theory). The concept of "women" presented in these approaches actually represents white, middle-class heterosexual women, and this perspective is not representative of all women in general. The problematic point here is that such a general concept of women, which is itself a social construct, becomes the norm when it is presented as a theoretical perspective of all women. This, in turn, is discriminatory because it ignores the perspective of non-white, non-middle-class, and other non-heterosexual women and results in racial, class, and gender-based discrimination against them.

Conclusions

In the first part of this article, we summarized the general idea of feminist epistemology, its main concepts, and the problems it addresses in the context of general epistemology. In this sense, this paper is descriptive and presents the information in the standard academic literature in a concise and summarized manner. A bibliography is attached for further reading. In the second part of the article, we will present a more detailed analysis and critique of some of the epistemological problems that have been reevaluated as part of feminist epistemology.

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