What Is Feminist Epistemology?

Attempts to develop distinctively feminist theories of knowledge have arisen from a number of sources since 1970. As noted in Chapter 2, one important source has been the frustration experienced by social scientists and biologists as they have tried to add women and gender to the existing bodies of knowledge in their fields. The conceptual schemes in these fields and the dominant notions of objectivity, rationality, and scientific method were too weak, or too distorted in some way or another, to be competent even for identifying—let alone eliminating—sexist and androcentric assumptions and beliefs. How could one describe and explain female biology or women's lives within conceptual schemes and research models that so systematically distorted such realities? Studies of Male biology and men's lives also appeared distorted in significant respects by sexist and androcentric assumptions. Moreover, the feminist perspective from which the identification and criticism of sexism and androcentrism arose was regarded by most scientists as politics (as opposed to reason and observation) and therefore a threat to their purported attempts to produce "pure" descriptions and explanations of the regularities and underlying causal tendencies in nature and relations.

Since it was the sciences that originated the models of objectivity, rationality, and scientific method that are dominant in biology and the social sciences, the suspicion arose that the prevalence of sexism and androcentrism in biology and the social sciences might taint the natural sciences also. In Chapter 4 I pointed to popular but false

Beliefs about the natural sciences which make it difficult to understand the relevance of feminist criticisms to these fields.

Thus, from a variety of perspectives one could easily come to the conclusion that the concepts of women and of knowledge—socially legitimated knowledge—had been constructed in opposition to each other in modern Western societies. Never had women been given a voice of authority in stating their own condition or anyone else's or in asserting how such conditions should be changed. Never was what counts as general social knowledge generated by asking questions from the perspective of women's lives. In attempting to account for and remedy this situation, several central feminist epistemologies have been articulated. These theories of knowledge both borrow from and are in tension with "mainstream" epistemologies, so it requires some careful work to sort out just what feminist epistemologies are claiming and not claiming.[1]

Three main feminist tendencies toward generating new theories of knowledge have emerged: feminist empiricism, feminist standpoint theory, and feminist postmodernism (the last sometimes referred to as anti-foundationalism, or antifoundationalism from a feminist thought). This chapter focuses explicitly on the first two, though here and in later chapters I develop the logic of the standpoint theory in ways that more vigorously pull it away from the mainstream empiricist and more clearly enable it to advance some postmodernist goals.[2]

For many readers, the very idea of a feminist epistemology may appear to be a contradiction in terms. Can the same term—epistemology—really be applied to feminist thought and to the standard way of thinking about epistemology that has dominated U.S. and British philosophy departments in recent decades? Here are excerpts from a representative expression of that Anglo-American view in the 1967 *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

> Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, is that branch of philosophy which is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its presup-

1. The term epistemologist between standpoint and postmodernist tendencies is a major consonant of the rest of the book, esp. Chapters 7, 11, and 12.

positions and basis, and the general reliability of claims to knowledge. . . .

Epistemology differs from psychology in that it is not concerned with why men hold the beliefs that they do or with the ways in which they come to hold them. Psychologists can, in principle, give explanations of why people hold the beliefs they do, but they are not necessarily competent, nor is it their province, to say whether the beliefs in question are good grounds on which to hold them. The answer to these questions must be sought from those who are experts within the branches of knowledge from which the beliefs in question arise. The mathematician can give the grounds for believing in the validity of Pythagoras' theorem, the physicist can give the grounds for believing, say, the astronomical physicist can give the grounds for believing in the existence of Neptune, and so on. Ordinary but reliable witnesses can provide the grounds for believing in the occurrence of an accident. Where such reliable beliefs are and the grounds sufficient, it is permissible to claim knowledge, and whether a particular truth can be said to be known may be determined by reference to the grounds which are appropriate to the field from which the truth is drawn. The epistemologist, however, is concerned not with whether we are justified in claiming knowledge—particular truths do sometimes, of course, be discussed, whether knowledge is possible at all. The questions which he asks are therefore general in a way that questions asked within some one branch of knowledge are not.[3]

This account goes on to point out that the history of Western epistemology has been largely a series of responses to various formulations of the problem of skepticism. The canon reviewed—Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Ockham, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Locke, Berkeley, Hume, Kant, Hegel, Bradley, Schopenhauer, Husserl, Mill, Pierce, Dewey, Moore, Russell, logical positivism, Wittgenstein, and "ordinary-language" philosophy—is the canon for the dominant tendency in Western philosophy in general, not just for epistemology. This canon, as noteworthy for what it excludes as for what it includes, is fashioned out of the supposedly fundamental human concern with the problem of whether it is possible for humans to know anything at all.

Can a distinctive feminist epistemology find a home within this particular traditional definition of the field of epistemology?

2. D. W. Hamlyn, "History of Epistemology," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 3, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 8–9.

phrases; one would say no. Feminists who reflect on the social and natural sciences do not appear to be concerned with whether it is possible for humans to know anything at all, consequently, why should there be a distinctively feminine branch of epistemology in support of this position, one could argue that even though feminist research in biology and the social sciences claims to have discovered some new facts—some new "truths" or, at least, some good candidates for less false beliefs—about females, males, gender, and social relations between the sexes, this research provides just the kind of good old empirical evidence that has been regarded as sufficient for claims to count as plausible, well-supported, less false, better confirmed than their rivals, and so on. In short, one could argue that the results of feminist research can be, and are, justified in familiar and traditional ways. Moreover, although feminists might well explain why sexists or sexist scientists hold certain beliefs, these explanations (according to conventional epistemology) would be only psychological or, perhaps, sociological and historical ones. (Anglo-American epistemology has been studiously uninterested in the relevance to philosophy of sociological and historical explanations of belief. It tends to reduce these accounts of "why men hold the beliefs they do or . . . the ways in which they come to hold them" to psychological accounts—as in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry.) So such a thing as "feminist epistemology"—a specifically feminist theory of knowledge—should be unnecessary. Or has something gone wrong with this line of thought?

One problem is that when evidence that has been found uncontroversial when presented in support of nonfeminist claims is presented to support feminist claims, the uncontroversial becomes controversial. Critics say: "But are these really facts? And are the grounds put forward for their status as facts really reasonable ones? Before rushing prematurely to such a conclusion, shouldn't we at least wait until more rigorous investigation has been conducted, and by more objective observers—or at least by the kinds of researchers conventionally regarded as objective?" Women are inferior at rigorous observation and reasoning, such critics are probably thinking, and—worse yet—feminism is a politics. How could women and politics be production facts that anyone should regard as serious challenges to the impersonal, objective, dispassionate, value-free facts that the natural and social sciences have produced?

Here one can begin to see a place for a distinctively feminist epistemology. It is true that these questions are not doubting the possibility of any knowledge at all. But neither are they only posing the kind of request for further displays of evidence, grounds for belief, that are characteristic of the social critical models for neither biology and social science disciplines. Their questions express not just doubts about some particular belief—"Is there reasonable evidence for claiming that Woman the Gatherer made important contributions to the dawn of distinctively human history?" or "Is the evidence plausible that women's patterns of language use are very different from men's and equally valuable?"—but general skepticism about the possibility of the results of disinterested inquiry ever even being able to achieve the kind of scientific status that the results of nonfeminist research can achieve. Are claims produced by women, or by people whose interests are determined by feminist concerns, actually observing of the term "knowledge" rather than "opinion" or perhaps even "ideology"? Isn't bias the major consequence of taking one research question rather than a few of a particular social group—especially when that group is women? Since feminism is fundamentally a political movement, aren't its claims biased by its politics? If men disagree with women's claims, why should women's claims ever be considered preferable to men's?

These more general skeptical questions are particular forms of just the kinds of questions conventional epistemology has asked. Who can be subjects, agents, of socially legitimate knowledge? Only men in the dominant races and classes? What kinds of tests must beliefs pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge? (Only tests against the dominant group's interests and values? Only tests against what women and men in the ruling groups tend to think of as reliable experience and observation? What kinds of things can be known? Can "historical truths," socially situated truths, count as knowledge? Should all such situated knowledges be regarded as equally plausible or valid? What is the nature of objectivity? Does it require "point-of-viewlessness"? How can we distinguish between how we want the world to be and how it is if objectivity does not require value-neutrality? What is the appropriate relationship between the researcher and her or his research subjects? Must the researcher be disinterested, dispassionate, and socially invisible to the subject? What should be the purpose of the pursuit of knowledge? Can there be "disinterested knowledge" in a society that is

Description

A second response to the question "Why should we bother to notice the sexism in feminist research as provided by the feminist standpoint theories?" Here argue that not just opinions but also a culture's best beliefs about reality are knowledge—are socially situated. The dominant features of women's situation in a gender-stratified society are being used as a source in the new conceptual models for the feminist distinctive research, which are not used by conventional researchers, that enable feminists to produce empirically more accurate claims than the conventionally richer explanations that does conventional research. Thus, the standpoint theories offer an explanation of why feminist research has produced empirical evidence that conventional research in social values and political agendas can sometimes produce empirically and theoretically preferable results.

Here are two ways of "standpoint theories"? These in particular have made important contributions: Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, and Hilary Rose.[1] In Smith's early work developed stand-point themes; Alison Jaggar used standpoint theories in her *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, and I developed briefly one version of the theory and later discussed the emergence of a number of them in *The Science Question in Feminism*.[2] Standpoint arguments are also implicit and, increasingly, explicit in the work of many other feminist

Before turning to this theory, I must note a transitional position. More radical than the feminist criticisms of "bad science" are those that take as their target Western generalizations from masculine to human in the case of ideal reason. For standpoint theorists (discussed below), such a critique would be a necessary part of the development of a specifically feminist theory of knowledge. Other thinkers who participate in this critique stop short of standpoint theory, and some they specifically do not intend to develop such a program or because they have serious doubts about their minds.[1] Philosophers such as Genevieve Lloyd, Sara Ruddick, and Susan Bordo and historians of science such as Evelyn Fox Keller criticize what has come to be called "abstract masculinity." Their point not about the sexism in Western rationality, including scientific thought, distort and leave partial our understandings of nature and social relations by devaluing contextual knowledge, thought and emotional components of reason.

Empirical support for their criticisms is provided by psychologists. Bert Inwem is Carol Gilligan's study of women's moral reasoning.[2] Since western reason includes normative judgments (which is the most interesting or potentially fruitful hypothesis or research program to pursue), "the ideal of objective knowledge as disinterested is not so strictly true. More recently, Mary Belenky and her colleagues, in investigating developmental patterns in women's thinking about reason and knowledge, have pointed to gender bias in philosophic and scientific ideals and suggested its origins in gendered experience.[3] These critical tendencies provide additional grounds for questioning empiricist assumptions.

Description

Generated by feminist research in biology and the social sciences, feminist empiricism is see epistemological strategy for justifying the challenges to traditional assumptions in research reports (we generally feels the argument that the sexist and androcentric claims to which the researcher objects are not the result of "bad science." They are caused by social biases, by prejudice. These prejudices are created by hostile attitudes and by false beliefs that are due to superstition, ignorance, or misdiagnosis but have often become entrenched in custom (and sometimes even in law). Such biases enter the inquiry process particularly at the stage when scientific problems are being identified and defined, but they can also appear in the design of research and in the interpretation of research results or data. Feminist politics argues that sexist and androcentric biases can be eliminated by stricter adherence to existing methodological canons of scientific inquiry, only "bad science" or "bad sociology" is responsible for their retention in the results of research.

But how can the scientific (biological, sociological, psychological) community come to see that its work has been shaped by androcentric prejudices? This is where one can see the importance of women in social liberation. As Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter have pointed out, the women's movement and other "voice" movements allow people to see the world in an enlarged perspective because they remove the covers and blinders that obscure knowledge and observation.[4] Furthermore, feminist empiricists offer point out, the women's movement creates the opportunity for more women and feminists (male and female) to become researchers, and they are more likely than sexist men to notice androcentric biases.

Through Lyal this epistemological strategy "feminist empiricism," (or empiricism) is not usually label it at all, they are customarily in conventional research practice, and they are the principles of the scientific. They do not see anything particularly noteworthy in their research methods or epistemological approach. Indeed, this talk of

4. Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, Editors' Introduction to *Sociological Inquiry*. *Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), 98.

perspicuous arrangement is defined the best kind to have? The point of a theory of knowledge is not that it be correct by some unfamiliar standard that most people don't accept but that it be persuasive to reasonable, thoughtful, and informed humans. When conventional natural scientists, social scientists, and philosophers of science put up a defense, feminist empiricists frequently in the justificatory strategy that best meets their criteria.

Such audiences are not the only ones to which feminist researchers present the results of their research. Some others—such as Marxists, and critics groups within the sociology of knowledge and political theory—are already skeptical of the way scientists understand their own activities and find the claims of feminist empiricists entirely convincing. But other justificatory strategies can be used for these audiences. What would be more fun than our strategies to rally one white plurality, not a mutually transcendental epistemology, is the goal? In this respect, feminists are like the rest of the scientific community and find ways to appeal to scientific explanations themselves. When we find ways to increase our understanding of women, then to point to using a metaphor that few people understand, "Nature is a mother." Science is traditionally masculine and only when people begin to talk familiarity with mechanical devices. Similarly, if one wants to explain why feminists can provide better explanations for familiar materials, or why the women's movement is a valuable scientific resource (in addition to its moral and political virtues), there is little point in invoking a conventional strategy for justifying one's claim. Instead, a Fanon recommends: "Let us try to find a solution to this feminist empirical theory of knowledge, even though, as I shall shortly argue, it is not the dominant theory and so, are its understanding feminist research. I am proposing, instead, that many of its central assumptions and claims are far fetc and that it is effective at explaining the successes of feminist-inspired research in certain important audiences for knowledge.

Third, the conservatism of feminist empiricism has a related advantage. The social structure of the sciences remains hostile to women scientists, especially to researchers engaged in learning more about women and gender issues directed by androcentric assumptions. A conservative justificatory strategy is the most robust one that many such scientists can manage and maintain the disciplinary respect necessary for their continuing access to funding and to teaching and laboratory appointments. As the historians of science remind us, it has taken more than a century of struggle to produce for women these "prize-

terms of traditional empiricism is these terms feminism empiricism has a radical feminist." In the last place, it seems to suggest strongly that the "content of discovery" is just as important as the "context of justification" for eliminating sexist biases that contaminate the results of traditional explanations and understandings. The social context of "better to" the "context of discovery" remains a difference to the "goodness" of the results of research. After a women's movement, everyone can see things that could not be seen before (and some people can see them more clearly than others). Thus, the individualism of empiricism and its partial theory of knowledge are fundamental to feminist epistemology. When we can see in the world around us is a function not just of what we bring to the perceptual situation and skills but of how our society designs the cultural filters through which we observe the world around us and which we use in our interpretations, those filters in ways that have been invisible to individuals. Individual biases and deficiencies in perception are not the only problems created by routine scientific methods, but the colossuwhole ones require different methods to eliminate. A feminist research on behalf of the less advantaged groups is one such different and valuable "methodological method."

Second, feminist empiricism makes the related claim that scientific method is insufficient to eliminate some kinds of social biases, such as androcentrism, especially when the institution serves to perpetuate process through the identified error and elimination of research problems.

Three feminist empiricism holds that scientific method will always see social biases as a hypothesis goes through to rigorous test. But feminist empiricism argues that androcentrism, gender, and other social biases frame science that do not take feminist concerns seriously. This issue, like the preceding one, tends to be put in terms of differences between women and men researchers: androcentric explanations emerge from the sexing, by men only, of hypotheses generated by what some find problematic in the world around them. But the issue is clearer if it is put in terms of the relationship of feminist politics to scientific research. The problem is not only that those hypotheses which would most deeply challenge androcentric beliefs are missing from the set of alternative hypotheses available to be considered in the

social sciences, and women and gender issues are not the only ones. Feminist empiricism argues that androcentric biases in research are not the only ones. Feminist empiricism argues that androcentric biases in research are not the only ones. Feminist empiricism argues that androcentric biases in research