

I Am Woman Embodied and I Know: A Look at Longino and Feminist Epistemology

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Is strictly objective knowledge impossible? Seeking objective knowledge of our world without the influence of individual feelings or opinions has been the aim of scientific inquiry across the Western world. The discipline of epistemology aims to understand the nature of objective knowledge (Crumley 16). This requires evaluating the sources of beliefs and ideas. The sources of beliefs and ideas influence how knowledge is interpreted (Brown). Meeting epistemic conditions and having valid sources make a justified, true belief differ from opinion (Crumley 16)—but opinion is exactly what results from many knowledge inquiry findings.

Until recently in the Western world, women were excluded in various ways from knowledge disciplines such as publishing, higher education, and scientific research. Feminist theorist Dorothy E. Smith notes the exclusion of women from the production of ideas restricted their experiences from being accounted (353). Women have only recently been recognized to have equal rational capabilities and rights as their male counterparts (Wotipka and Ramirez 306). In the Western philosophic tradition, White men have determined who (and what) qualifies for knowledge capabilities. This excluded the experiences and voices of those culturally deemed less-than or 'other.' Our theories on objective knowledge were established through a biased viewpoint. This androcentrism is what feminists have been challenging for the last century and a half, in all facets of political, cultural, and scientific life. Epistemology cannot

avoid the confrontation of accepted norms and values as they are reframed through a feminist lens.

By examining theories put forth by Helen E. Longino, I will demonstrate how science and philosophy have not stayed strictly objective. Moreover, this lack of objectivity is not always a negative. But first, we must understand the scientific method as merely a 'legend' to acknowledge the gendered worldview science and epistemology start from. Feminist-led theories are both different and similar to traditional epistemology. The well-known positions of traditional foundationalism are used to contrast feminist theory. Using the support of Pollock and Quine, through a naturalized epistemology framework, my reading of Longino's work shows seeking truth through a feminist lens leads to more inclusive (less subjective) knowledge. A starting point to less subjective knowledge is set through contextualism and standpoint theory, along with its connection to naturalized epistemology.

Feminist Epistemology

Feminist epistemology is a wide branch of the epistemology discipline. Feminist views are not unified as one voice; their authors are autonomous people who understand the world from varying positions. These positions are categorized as feminist because they start their inquiry by recognizing women and their differences to men. This recognition is both an acknowledgment of the equality in their intellectual value; of the awareness of historical and present biases; and exclusion of equity in all avenues of scientific and cultural work.

Epistemology is feminist when the inquiry of knowledge recognizes that female reality was ignored or patronized by the scientific and philosophical gate-keepers. Longino describes the female experience as obscured and misinterpreted in all scientific

disciplines (327). The gendered bias has been well documented (Hollingsworth; Burke and Mazzarella). For example, male-authored research on the same topic as female-led research is considered more legitimate (Knobloch-Westerwick, Glynn, and Huges). Gendered metaphors play a large role in describing experience and reality. Conceptual metaphor theory states symbolic devices are essential for understanding and thought, and metaphor is used to structure our knowledge of reality (Hollingsworth). They are used both colloquially in private conversation and with an authoritative voice, such as in news reports (Hollingsworth). Dominating male viewpoints are sustained through journalism through story-telling devices and knowledge is overwhelmingly reported through a male lens (Hollingsworth 30). Research by Burke and Mazzarella show election and war reporting rely on masculine trope metaphors, such as sports, hunting, and gambling, while females are reduced to a passive reproductive role (401). Male trope metaphors reinforce patriarchal views that uphold one gender above all others. In biological studies, male species have often been the sole object of study when seeking mating practices or evolutionary changes in animals and plants. Gendered metaphor is widely used to describe scientific phenomena (Longino 328). Longino and Lennon state in “Feminist Epistemology as a Local Epistemology” that feminized objects are often described passively, while masculine objects are *active* in their *driven* pursuit of mating/pollination (23). Plants’ and mammals’ ova are described as waiting to be *discovered* by the *dominating* object.

The female role and lens have been ignored in science. For example, the extraordinary mating rituals of Birds of Paradise have only now been studied from the female’s viewpoint, despite years of documentation of the male’s physical and behavioural evolution (Borgmann). Science cannot be objective if it only aims to know the truth about the world via the male lens. Feminist

challenges to established scientific practices has led to feminist readings of traditional epistemological theories, highlighting “distorting” and “harmful stereotypes” present in philosophy (Longino 329). The study of what counts as knowledge appears to favour a biased male position, from ancient Greeks believing only men are capable of rationality, to Descartes discarding the body as unreliable as a source of knowledge. Females have long been described as being too bodily or relying on intuition or emotion, i.e., not a reliable source of knowledge (Pavco-Giaccia et al.).

Feminist epistemology is not independent of the aims of general epistemology in the fact that it seeks truth. But many feminist theories recognize the pursuit of truth is unavoidably collective or social (Crumley 211). As a category, feminist epistemology challenges the idea of objective truth by showing objectivity, as it’s commonly understood, excludes the position of the female and the feminized. According to Philip Kitcher, the objective aim—the ‘legend’ of the scientific method—commits science to foundationalism (Crumley 213). To consider propositions impartially without emotion or bias, values must be excluded from the result of the inquiry. Feminist epistemological theories show this Cartesian ideal of inquiry assumes “a view from nowhere” but is the view from an embodied man attempting to remove his body’s connection to reason (Crumley 213). The results of this inquiry are processed and explained through language. Language is a product of a culture and culture is value-laden; Quine states “language is socially inculcated and controlled” (81). Recognizing that objectivity cannot be achieved without the blur of interpreting fact through values does not have to be a negative for epistemology. Feminist epistemologists want to acknowledge bias and values of all gendered perspectives as our subjectivity. Pure objectivity may not be achievable, but less subjectivity is. These theories hold that science is not, and never has been, the view from nowhere. ‘Objective’ science is

undertaken with a brain within a body, within a community and culture, within a time and a place. Humans are embodied creatures; biological beings capable of self-representations existing as a physical, “flexible” entity (Newen).

Longino’s Feminist Lens

Longino’s work shows adopting a feminist lens to epistemological inquiry leads to more inclusive knowledge. I define “feminist lens” as a viewpoint that acknowledges the position of the individual inquirer, as well as those that differ from them, i.e., different genders, races, cultures, classes, and economic status. Like Nagel proposed, an individual can never *know* the lived experience of another being (441). Yet, we can acknowledge their differing views—their standpoint—to make knowledge more inclusive. Different ways of experiencing the world result in different ways of knowing the world. Socially conditioned masculinity shapes a conception of knowledge by categorizing the separation and difference in objects of knowledge, while conditioned femininity forms knowledge of objects through their connections and related identity (Longino 330). If only one kind of knowledge meets epistemic conditions, differences in *coming to know* challenge what knowledge means, and question who is capable of knowing.

Longino challenges traditional epistemological assumptions by reclaiming embodiment for the inquirer. The “situatedness of the knower, the interdependence of knowers, and the ontological parity of subject and object of knowledge” have been neglected by Descartes’ standard of a lone-rational inquirer model of knowing (Longino 331). The canon of Western philosophy seems to depend on disembodied reason to uncover the truth of reality. Descartes, as the *father* of epistemology, holds “the immediacy of introspective beliefs account for their infallible

character” (Crumley 113). Any information from the body should be excluded as a source of knowledge because “its sensible properties are unstable and hence less knowable” (Longino 332). The exercise of segregating rational capabilities from their corporal origins cannot be separated from the subjugation of women in society. Women are considered governed by bodily whims of intuition and uncontrollable emotion. Research by Pavco-Giaccia et al. shows implicit links with concepts of ‘male and reason’ and ‘female and emotion.’ These gendered semantics links are examples of how women implicitly have been regarded as “incapable of the kind of abstract and formal thought required by the ideal of reason” (Crumley 220).

Context Matters for Standpoint Theory

The tradition of the ideal of reason is a product of valuing logic or the ‘masculine’ brain higher than other ways of knowing. When Descartes holds disembodied reason as the only reliable source of knowledge, he disregards the fact that our brain functions with physical objects like hormones and provides belief about perceptions such as smell, memory, or touch. This dualism, a separation of mind and body, values imaginative thought higher than bodily perceptions in a scheme of justification. It does not allow for varying experiences to influence how we acquire knowledge. Yet, this is the knowledge of reality as we experience it. By reclaiming the body as a source of knowledge, feminist epistemologists open the possible domains of knowing to a more inclusive and therefore less subjective standard.

As stated, feminist philosophers differ in their theories of understanding what constitutes knowledge. Cartesian theories and modest foundationalism are supported through the legend of the scientific method by holding to value-free, basic belief. To obtain

objective knowledge is to come to hold a justified, true belief. As the name suggests, for foundationalists these beliefs are supported by reason which rests on a ‘foundation.’ The foundation is the end of a justificatory chain that provides a reason that is not belief—a reason of objective fact about the real world. In comparison to foundationalism, Longino argues that belief is rooted in the idea that objectivity is collective and social (Crumley 217), i.e., context matters. Inquiry is led by the values a society or scientific community upholds. Longino exposes foundationalism’s aim to arrive at value-free, belief-independent objective fact as impossible, as an individual’s desire to know X is shaped by their existing circumstantial values (Crumley 218).

Stewart Cohen also holds that knowledge depends on social values because it only needs valid reasons rather than “ideally good” ones (Longino 336). Ideally, good reasons mean a knower always has a “restoring defeater” in light of every defeater which undercuts a knowledge claim (Longino 336). A defeater is a belief held which is incompatible with a previously held belief. Merely good reasons only require a restoring defeater when societal standards dictate (Longino 336). Considering Cohen and Longino’s work, the end of the foundationalist’s evidentiary chain seems to rely on what community the evidence is asked to be produced from. Society seems to hold a foundational belief to be justified and true.

John Pollock’s social aspect of knowledge states a community demands awareness of things (Pollock 192). By stressing the societal expectations of knowing, Pollock advocates for a societal point-of-view of what counts towards the evidence. “The basic idea is that believed defeaters can prevent justification, and defeaters that are true but not believed prevent knowledge while leaving justification intact” (Pollock 190). Longino supports the theory of societal expectations of knowing by showing that ‘to

know' works as a verb "whose meaning is determined in a context of criticism, concurrence, assent, and dissent" (Longino 337). These societal expectations and beliefs factor into the recognition of knowledge. Longino wants to reassess how justification and meeting epistemic conditions are achieved considering the societal context. This is achieved by abandoning the singular description of what we can know in favour of standpoint theory, a theory championed by Sandra Harding, which recognizes knowledge as social, and the position of the knower in society as valued (Lindsay). This position of the knower is thus the context in which beliefs are formed. This theory sees the standpoint of the less-privileged members of society as a lens to acquire more objective knowledge (Crumley 223; Lindsay).

It cannot be ignored that a knower is situated. Even in the skeptic's favoured brain-in-a-vat world, a knower exists somewhere. Standpoint theory acknowledges the diversity of situations; that "bodies are in particular places, in particular times, orientated in particular ways to their environments" (Longino 333). Testimony weighs heavily in forming belief for a knower. The source of testimony and its authoritative status structures our belief on *who* can know and *how* we can know. Longino's aim to radicalize beliefs of objective knowledge challenges the idea of a unified account of existence (Longino 339). It also challenges the belief of the body's unreliability. Feminist theorists aim to understand the driving intentions of scientific inquiry and knowledge. They hold epistemology should start at the position of the marginalized and amplify political and social situatedness (Lauro 2). This way, it is possible to see truths that "members of the dominant group" either subconsciously expect or ignore (Crumley 224). Changing the expectation of knowledge stemming from a disembodied, singular reality to an embodied, social actuality allows for knowledge inclusivity. A knower's political, economic, and social situation structures how and what they know.

Inclusivity widens the margins of knowledge by acknowledging and then subverting bias. A feminist lens sees that our investigation of truth holds preconceived beliefs such as women are less than capable, less than rational, and less emotionally stable. These types of beliefs exist in the foundation which secures the aim of objective, scientific knowledge. Therefore, our investigation into objective knowledge is impossible; “we cannot achieve a value-free inquiry” (Crumley 224).

No Value-Free Inquiry in Naturalized Epistemology

To resolve this conflict, some epistemologists who approach knowledge with a feminist lens appeal to naturalized epistemology. Naturalized epistemologists posit existence includes only natural experience and the natural sciences are how to acquire truth on what knowledge is (Brown and Luper). This can be connected to Quine in his appeal to psychology to solve empirical, epistemological questions. For Quine, naturalized epistemology is to hold a theory of knowledge based on human perception capabilities (Brown and Luper). By appealing to psychology, the discipline allows us to “discover how science is in fact developed and learned [rather] than to fabricate a fictitious structure” (Quine 78). Even if the appeal to psychology is unattractive, naturalized epistemology allows for the recognition of a knower’s subjective situation. Our situated embodiedness is a reality of the world as we experience it. By investigating the values, biases, and beliefs that structure our cognitive methods for understanding knowledge, we can be more inclusive and less subjective. Louise Antony argues bias is “necessary for the success of epistemic endeavours” and to narrow possible options (Crumbly 226).

Longino wants a belief’s justification to reflect the context it arises from; context is key to both standpoint theory and

naturalized epistemology. Using context as a starting point provides the cognizance of where values come from and identify which values are intertwined within a theory. Longino states that to avoid subjectivity, interactions must be weaved into the concept of justification (342). Engagement with how knowledge is acquired—the senses and the natural world—is essential for justified, true belief. An epistemologist with a feminist lens sees that embodied beings *know* and that they know *within* the context of their situation. An embodied being is influenced by its perceptual capabilities, social standings, and environment. Discarding the foundationalist notions of Descartes' disembodied knowledge ("I think, therefore I am") allows the embodied self to exist within a naturalistic system that accounts for situational differences and the phenomena of self (Newen). This lens also sees values as social, able to ground "justification not in indubitable or basic foundations nor in systematic coherence of a set of beliefs, but in the survival of criticism from opposing or different points of view" (Longino 343). I think the justification of knowledge as objective truth may not be able to withstand feminist criticism.

Feminist Theory Criticism

Although, Longino has met criticism from her peers. Antony suggests the social aspect of contextualism is not useful to feminist philosophers. She worries that methodological individualism (i.e., singular motivation as shaping the collective; the norm) is lost by focusing on social context and standpoint (Longino 345). Antony worries the structure of our Western social reality is one that women must not become opaque as unique and individual cognizers under the "effects of socially consensual misogyny" (Longino 347). Haack worries that viewing science as social mixes up the epistemological idea of warrant (good reasons) with the

psychological idea of acceptance (approval) (Schrag 88). Longino counters Haack by stating her concern is based on a faulty understanding of underdetermination, the idea that evidence may lack the support in forming a belief about it; “choosing a theory is not equivalent to deciding it’s true” (Longino 348). Her rebuttal to Antony urges her to see reasoning as a naturalist. There is no contention between individual reasoning and knowledge as the product of community. Her social contextualism does not stress community as the primary way to access knowledge, but instead, sees community as providing the confirmation of justifying belief as knowledge (Longino 347). For Longino, knowledge is interactive. Many epistemological theories stand firmly against this concept.

Postmodern epistemology, in rejecting a worldly and comprehensive account, challenges contextualism and standpoint theory’s categories of knowing. Postmodernists deny the benefit of categorizing ways of thinking such as ‘women’s’, or more specific kinds within that category. For the postmodernist, knowledge is practical; values help navigate the “constructs” of community and we should “circumspect any view that tries to identify an appropriate ‘standpoint’ for theorizing” (Crumley 233). Standpoint theorists obviously disagree. Longino holds value in the context in which knowledge can arise. And like any school of thought that challenges accepted norms and values, there will be deep-rooted opposition from within allied positions. Crumley sees the value in feminist epistemology in its challenge to traditional scientific methods and epistemological theories. He summarizes their outlook and endeavour as a way to better understand the established canon. By scrutinizing and challenging the gendered authority built into epistemological methods, epistemologists can see the search for knowledge is gendered in unexpected ways (Crumley 234). Longino agrees. Changing the aim from objective knowledge to *less* subjective knowledge

allows values to be recognized for their role in what we know and how we know it. For Longino, social values ground critique of biases and assumptions to grow empirical inquiry in new ways (348).

Using the Feminist Lens to Challenge Objective Truth

As a feminist thinker, I see the benefits of using the feminist lens to acquire what I can know about the world. This means acknowledging my privilege as a White, middle-class, university-educated woman in Canada. Although I have experienced gendered discrimination, my standpoint is much different from that of a person of colour, and even more so of a woman of colour. Recognizing my standpoint and the context of my embodied situatedness allow me to acquire knowledge as an individual, as an individual restricted in my society, and as an individual part of a global reality. My lens is wide enough to see my position and others similar to and dissimilar to me.

My criticism of Longino's position is that it does not seem to go far enough. A woman's embodiment is inescapable from her experience. From childbirth to child-rearing and menstrual cycles which heighten senses and change our bodies, there are a multitude of ways that those born female-bodied can *know* that those male-bodied cannot. This reality is more than an abstract standpoint on how I understand and know this world; my body is the key that locks or unlocks doors of knowledge. Being an embodied woman carries the millennia of gender bias in which my physical signals (body, name, voice, etc.) are associated with emotion rather than reason (Pavco-Giaccia et al.) This bias of non-rational capabilities means I exist in our world in ways most Western men cannot know. I cannot reason as the disembodied.

Gendered description in science both enforces bias and reflects a present reality (Pavco-Giaccia et al.). Learning to

understand and then adopt a feminist lens is a way we can collectively challenge the biased notion of objective truth. This includes the context in which we inquire into, acquire, and assert knowledge. We ought to acknowledge that thought, logic, and reason emerge within a self—a self with emotions, feelings, and a body situated within a collective, social experience. Acknowledging these truths broadens epistemological possibilities. Epistemology must abandon its androcentric past. A feminist lens challenges the ingrained and accepted norms to pivot what is possible as knowledge. While true objective knowledge may not be possible, a less subjective and less male-centric standard is. It is clear, knowledge is an active verb. It is something we do, not something we have. The Cartesian legend of objectivity must be abandoned to narrow this subjectivity. Acknowledging the context of others' standpoints allows broad knowledge to emerge. Illuminating and valuing the female experience in all scientific disciplines eliminates the historic, male-centric gatekeeping. The gendered bias has been well-documented (Burke and Mazarella; Borgman; Hollingsworth; Smith). This is only the first step in dismantling the subjective—and disembodied—myth of objective knowledge.

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