

## Feminist Epistemology: An Introduction

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Feminist epistemology, i.e., feminist theory of knowledge, is a relatively new development of feminist philosophy. There are various theories that are classified as “feminist epistemology,” and they are heterogeneous and irreducible to one another. However, regardless of the differences between feminist epistemologies, every feminist theory of knowledge is concerned with the ways gender influences what epistemic agents take to be knowledge. Feminist epistemology is in part motivated by the recognition that each epistemic agent occupies a position in one or more social groups (Webb 1995, 84). According to feminist epistemologists, “knowledge claims are always socially situated” (Harding 1993, 54). How we conceptualize things and what kind of standard of epistemic inquiry we use are socially and historically decided. One’s way of knowing is affected by one’s class, gender, and racial background. The gender identity of the knower is the main social aspect of knowing that feminist epistemology investigates, although it is not investigated in isolation from other social aspects such as class, race, and culture.

All feminist epistemologists have criticized traditional Western epistemology, by which is meant Cartesian Epistemology, or the Enlightenment or modernist epistemology that has been dominant in modern and contemporary science. Traditional Western epistemology focuses on the individual epistemic agent and holds that the epistemic agent is autonomous and can be completely impartial. It holds that knowledge claims are universal and absolute, not perspective. In other words, according to this epistemology, knowledge claims are made from no particular time, location, circumstance, and perspective, and therefore they are true in all situations and from all perspectives. In short, knowledge claims are made from nowhere and are universally valid. Such an epistemology clearly denies that knowledge is socially and historically constructed. It dichotomizes subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity, and nature and culture in an absolute manner. It values rationality and abstraction and devalues emotion and the concrete. Since the Enlightenment, it has been the dominant epistemology in Western philosophy and science. In the West, it was almost equivalent to epistemology before feminist epistemology emerged.

For feminist epistemologists, traditional Western epistemology is androcentric and male-biased. It fails to take women's experience and perspectives into account. Due to the existence of male domination, male norms have become dominant norms and been regarded as objective and universal standards for all. Accordingly, women's ways of thinking and knowing have been considered something inferior and invalid.

According to feminist epistemologists, such male-bias has severely hindered the advance of philosophy and science. For example, due to devaluing femininity, the knowledge that mothers have of children is not greatly appreciated (Anderson 1995, 50). In general, the more a kind of knowledge is associated with femininity, the less value it will be assigned by traditional Western epistemology. At the most general level, impersonal knowledge is coded “masculine” while personal knowledge is coded “feminine.” The former enjoys higher prestige than the latter. As far as specific subject matters and methods within theoretical knowledge are concerned, the natural sciences are “harder” and hence more prestigious than social sciences, which are supposed to be awash in feminine emotionality and subjectivity. Mathematics is the most masculine and therefore the most prestigious (see *ibid.* 64). At the personal level, research done by females is usually taken less seriously than that done by males. “Laboratory, field, and natural experiments alike show that the perceived gender of the author influences people’s judgments of the quality of research, independent of its content” (*ibid.* 59). Psychologists M. A. Paludi and W.D. Bauer in their survey found that the same paper was evaluated very differently when its author was perceived as male, female, or of uncertain gender. The same paper was sent to three groups of evaluators to rank its quality under three different author names. The paper was assigned a much higher average ranking by its evaluators when it was under the name “John T. McKay” than when it was under “Joan T. McKay.” The paper’s ranking was between the evaluations given by the above two groups when it was under “J. T. McKay,” a name that does not clearly identify the author’s gender (see Paludi and Bauer 1983, 287-390, and quoted in Anderson 1995, 59).

Academics are no less disposed than others to devalue women’s work. For example, before the Modern Language Association instituted blind name review for papers submitted for their meetings, men’s submissions were accepted at significantly higher rates than women’s. After the association adopted blind name review, women’s acceptance rates rose to equality with men’s (Lefkowitz 1979, 56, and quoted in Anderson 1995, 59). When a scientific discovery is made by a woman, it may not be taken as seriously as one made by a man. The case of Barbara McClintock is a good example of that. It took more than three decades for biology academics to recognize the significance of her discovery of genetic transposition (Anderson 1995, 60). Such cases show how male bias in the dominant epistemology underlying scientific research has slowed the progress of knowledge.

Although among feminist epistemologists there are disagreements on whether there are uniform women’s ways of knowing in the global sphere, to what extent traditional Western epistemology is male-biased, and whether some ways of knowing are shared by both genders, all feminist epistemologists agree that traditional Western epistemology is gender-biased and that feminist criticisms of it will significantly contribute to the improvement of theories of knowledge.

**References:**

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