

Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgens (Editors)

Engendering rationalities

ALBANY: SUNY PRESS, 2001

*Reviewed by Jennifer Faust*

ISBN: 0791450864

The projects that fall within the scope of feminist epistemology and thus within the present volume vary widely. Some authors defend traditional epistemic concepts/values, and argue that feminist theories offer better accounts of them than do nonfeminist versions; others reject aspects of traditional theories altogether. These essays offer a sampling of some of the best and most important debates.

Over the last several decades, feminist theorists went to great pains to show that—and how—the personal was political. Within the academy, some of these theorists argued that knowledge was personal, not in the sense of the Cartesian *individual* but in the sense of Code's *subjective knower*, with the resulting claim that we should expect our personal "locations" within the knowing community (for instance, our gender, class, ethnicity) to matter. If we put the two insights together, we draw the inevitable conclusion that knowledge is political, and thus that our theories of knowledge must take into account sociopolitical features of knowledge production. In a nutshell, this is the project of feminist epistemology: to examine the ways in which epistemology would—indeed, must—change to accommodate the heretofore ignored subjective, communal, and sociopolitical features of knowing. The aptly named *Engendering Rationalities*, an anthology of recent work which grew out of the first-ever NEH Summer Seminar on feminist epistemology, presents us with the state of the art in the field today. Editors Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen have gathered sixteen original essays here; although most of the contributions are by philosophers, contributors also weigh in from English, Latin American literatures, linguistic anthropology, political science, physics, sociology, and women's studies. (Perhaps not surprisingly for work in feminist theory, the philosophers are also uncharacteristically interdisciplinary.) This cross-disciplinary perspective not only showcases the many concerns that feminist theorists bring to the philosophical table, but also the many ways in which epistemological theory is put to use.

In her introduction, Tuana claims that feminist epistemology (unlike, say, Platonism or empiricism) is not defined by an adherence to some central dogma(s), but rather, she argues, by a shared set of concerns, a common history, and the acknowledgment that gender and gender-specific interests and experiences influence both the activity of knowing (or knowledge production) and the theory of knowledge. But to say, as Tuana does, that "gender is a central lens through which we conduct inquiry" (2) is not to say that what we see through that lens is the same for every inquirer, and the plethora of results reported in this collection illustrates this nicely. Nonetheless, Tuana hopes in her introduction to give the reader an overview of the field as it stands today. She does so by reviewing thirteen themes of central concern to feminist epistemologists. In addition, the introduction also maps the volume's essays onto these themes and refers to many of the now canonical figures in the area (Harding, Code, Antony, Longino, Nelson). Although Tuana's account downplays the extent to which feminist epistemologists *do*

share a “core” philosophy (all agree that the knower plays a constitutive role in knowledge and thus that her subjectivity matters both to knowledge and to theory of knowledge, and that the reigning paradigms in epistemology do not adequately account for this insight), her review is highly valuable and will greatly assist students and scholars new to the field in understanding the central concerns of feminist epistemology. Indeed, the excellent introduction and the twelve-page bibliography of feminist epistemologies are themselves worth the price of the book.

The projects that fall within the scope of feminist epistemology and thus within the present volume vary widely. Some authors defend traditional epistemic concepts/values, and argue that feminist theories offer better accounts of them than do nonfeminist versions; others reject aspects of traditional theories altogether. These essays offer a sampling of some of the best and most important debates in contemporary epistemology (not “merely” in contemporary feminist epistemology), for the questions addressed here are at the heart of current theories of knowledge. Consider Naomi Scheman’s distinction between two different conceptions of objectivity: *internalist* conceptions claim that epistemic norms govern knowledge-producing methods, whereas *externalist* conceptions add to the internalist view that moral or political norms ground these epistemic norms. She argues that externalist accounts are better, both descriptively and prescriptively, as accounts of justification. The reasons for this assertion supervene on traditional notions of justification. A central focus of epistemology is the articulation of methods for arriving at true beliefs, and much of the work on justification is premised on the assumption that one needs standards of justification in order to arrive at true beliefs. Here, the assumption is that if one merely follows the universally applicable methods, one will have true beliefs. But Scheman argues that methods traditionally articulated (such as “*the scientific method*”) are impossible to apply on an individual basis and that the disenfranchised (which is to say, nearly everyone other than scientists themselves and white, male, elites in whose service science works) may have no reason to believe the pronouncements of science. Thus, she argues, on the traditional view “objective truth” is available to only a few and all others either lack any reason to believe it or possess reasons to resist it. In diagnosing the problem, Scheman argues that trust is ineliminable in epistemic practices and that conditions of social justice ground this trust; in the absence of social justice, trust—and thus truth—is undermined. Thus, Scheman embraces the traditional goal of objectivity as a necessary condition on true belief, but radically revises our conception of objectivity; rather than a distance from social factors or values, objectivity is defined as a measure of the credibility of those claiming to possess the truth, where credibility rests on socially grounded reasons for trusting. What is the upshot of all of this, for Scheman? “If you want truth, fight for justice” (38). That is, if we want to increase the incidence of true belief (surely, in keeping with the traditional goals of epistemology), we must work to change the social conditions that give rise to resistance to the truth claims emanating from science.

A more radical departure from traditional conceptions of objectivity and realism is found in Lisa Heldke’s contribution to the volume. Taking relationships to be of primary importance in coming to know (and in constituting) reality, she defines objectivity as a measure of the extent to which participants in inquiry acknowledge, fulfill, and expand their responsibilities to others in contexts of inquiry (85–86). Because this sort of responsibility requires one to acknowledge privilege and power differentials involved in contexts of inquiry, objectivity on Heldke’s view requires a rejection of value neutrality. It follows on this account that objectivity is a *moral* norm, not simply an epistemic norm (indeed, Heldke rejects the epistemic/nonepistemic distinction

altogether). One might wonder at this point why Heldke characterizes her work as a redefinition of objectivity, rather than a set of moral constraints on inquiry (one might argue, for instance, that any morally or politically correct inquirer should meet her responsibilities to others, in inquiry as elsewhere). The response lies in a close look at Heldke's unconventional view of reality, which she sees as being constituted between inquirers and the objects/persons inquired about; the latter—even when inanimate—are participants in inquiry. For example:

If a gardener trying to understand why her pepper plants are not thriving understands the soil as a participant in that inquiry, she will proceed differently than if she sees the soil as simply an object she employs . . . . It might for example make her think about ways she could help the soil to fulfill the responsibilities it has to the plants living in it. (85)

This will strike many readers as going too far, no doubt, for many will want to preserve more of the traditional epistemology than Heldke (for example, a distinction between subjects of inquiry and objects).

Yet other contributors to the volume, such as Sarah Hoagland, reject more fully the tradition and some feminists' inclinations to engage it in dialogue. Hoagland challenges the other contributors on grounds that they are, in virtue of their engagement with it, furthering the agenda of dominance and oppression inherent in the androcentric philosophical tradition. Instead, she argues for a conceptual relativism, which seeks to provide a new source of meaning other than the dominant paradigm. In her view, one can challenge a statement by arguing within its familiar conceptual framework that it is false, or by rendering it nonsense by moving to a new conceptual framework. Feminists have much to gain by the second strategy, Hoagland argues, for it rejects the authority and hegemony of philosophically and politically dominant frames.

Several of the authors choose a different strategy, defending feminist epistemology against charges levied from traditionalists, such as the claim that it is “inappropriately political,” propagandistic, or a threat to objectivity and rationality. These arguments will be useful to anyone whose scholarship and teaching includes feminist theory, for the objections will be familiar. Lynn Hankinson Nelson takes on those who claim that gender issues are external to science and epistemology, claiming that they beg the central question and thus that they have the burden of showing that epistemic issues are free of social content. Her argument is convincing, but somewhat unsatisfactory—more progress is to be made if we can *show* why such arguments are not only as yet unfinished, but bound to be unsuccessful. Linda Alcoff goes further than Nelson, arguing the positive case for feminist epistemology. She takes on an important and ubiquitous complaint—to wit, that attention to social or political features of knowers is inappropriate because knowledge is a function of universal human capacities such as perception, and social features are not indicative of epistemic reliability. Alcoff argues in response that “perceptual framing occurs not only at the species level but also at the level of social identity” and that “and difference between . . . ‘frames of intelligibility’ will count, as long as it is correlated to social identity and it is relevant to knowledge” (68).

Finally, several of the authors show how the insights of feminist epistemology are applied to various other disciplines or to “ordinary life.” For example, Louise Westling argues that Virginia Woolf's female characters in *To the Lighthouse* illustrate the advantages of an epistemology that

is embodied and enmeshed in the natural world, as opposed to the sterile, disassociated, and destructive Platonic conception touted by her male characters; further, Westling argues, these same themes were “being seconded” at the same time by John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Sue Campbell examines the epistemological failings of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation, arguing that they are largely a product of a failure to take seriously women’s reports of their own experiences. Susan Hekman argues for a multiplicity of legal strategies, to replace the prevailing model of “impartial justice”; indeed, she argues that we already have such a system (here, we need to adjust our legal theory to be in line with practice). Judith Richards and Lanita Jacobs-Huey illustrate the application of feminist epistemology to Chicana literary theory and ethnographical studies of women’s narratives about hair, respectively.

One of the most valuable aspects of this volume is the opportunity it provides for dialogue among authors and the opportunity to see how various aspects of feminist epistemology can be combined to form a more complete theory. For example, Heldke admonishes us to recognize the demands made upon us by others in inquiry, and this requires that we acknowledge their needs. But, as Lorraine Code argues in her essay, even the most responsible and rational inquirer is limited in how far she can get from here (for any “here”), via her own imagining of the others’ reality. At the very least, the two arguments taken together entail the need for multiple participants and multiple perspectives in truth-seeking inquiry, thus supporting Sandra Harding’s defense of standpoint epistemology. A diverse knowledge community is going to be better, morally and epistemically, than one that is not. Barbara Whitten’s contribution illustrates this insight of standpoint theory—namely, that our knowledge is more complete if the knowledge community is more diverse—through an account of the physicist Michael Faraday, whose working-class background was essential to his novel perspective on the theoretical problems confronting him.

This whirlwind tour of *Engendering Rationalities* should only whet readers’ appetites for the essays in this volume, which represent some of the best work in feminist epistemology today. The collection is a must-read for anyone who wishes to know what work is being done in the field, and will likely be useful for scholars in other fields who are doing work in epistemology, broadly construed. Combined with several of the “classics” (including Harding’s *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, Longino’s *Science as Social Knowledge*, and several of the papers collected in Alcoff and Potter’s *Feminist Epistemologies*) it will make an excellent text for an upper-division or graduate course in feminist epistemology. One hopes, after reading this volume, that there will be many more NEH seminars on the topic, resulting in more anthologies of work of this caliber.

**Jennifer Faust** is Professor of Philosophy at California State University, Los Angeles. Although her primary area of interest is epistemology, she also works in the areas of philosophy of science and race/gender studies, philosophy of law, philosophy of religion, and bioethics. Her current projects include manuscripts on the use of arguments in religious contexts and on the philosophical and scientific theories of race underpinning eugenic practices (and resistance to them) in the Southern U.S.