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Naomi Scheman

Shifting Ground: Knowledge and Reality, Transgression and Trustworthiness

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*Reviewed by Jennifer Jill Fellows*

*Narrated by Miranda Pilipchuk*

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"The essays aim to shift the metaphorical ground beneath our feet. They aim to cause earthquakes, unsettling us as philosophers and disturbing or dismantling our common metaphysical and epistemic theories and practices."

Naomi Scheman's 2011 book is a collection of essays that have all previously been published in other formats from 1995-2008. But to say it is *just* a collection of essays would undersell the work as a whole. Scheman states in her introduction that one aim of this book is to introduce these essays to one another (3). The book does just this. By placing the essays in thematic relationships to one another, the book enables the reader to draw out connections between Scheman's earlier and later works, thus strengthening and clarifying her overall arguments. Another aim of this collection is aptly captured in the extended metaphor of the title itself: *shifting ground*. The essays aim to shift the metaphorical ground beneath our feet. They aim to cause earthquakes, unsettling us as philosophers and disturbing or dismantling our common metaphysical and epistemic theories and practices. These earthquakes draw our attention to two things: 1) the "ground" beneath our feet--the theories and assumptions we may, as philosophers, unreflectively hold--is much less firm than we might assume, and 2) the ground *is there*. Scheman, in this way, weaves a path between objectivism and relativism, one that is likely familiar to many feminist philosophers. In weaving this path, Scheman argues that epistemology and metaphysics *are* and *ought to be* deeply political, and that philosophical investigation needs to be perspectival.

The book is divided into three sections: "Knowledge," "Reality," and "Transgression and Trustworthiness." Each section contains three or four essays. Although the essays collected in each section do have thematic resemblance, there are also strong connections among the essays in different sections. Really, the sections only collect essays with a stronger resemblance in a web of essays that all bear a family resemblance to one another (to borrow from Wittgenstein, a philosopher whose works Scheman cites as one of her greatest influences). The interrelation between the essays in this text supports Scheman's overall commitment to the political nature of our investigations, regardless of whether we characterize these investigations as metaphysical or epistemic.

The essays in the "Knowledge" section illustrate Scheman's commitment to standpoint theory. It is an appropriate way to begin her book as the essays in this section answer the question "who are 'we'?" or at least, "who is Scheman?" These essays are surprisingly autobiographical, detailing everything from Scheman's childhood on Long Island to her dis-ease with her position as a full professor in academia, illustrating for the reader who she is and from what perspective she begins her reasoning.

With reference to the third essay in this section, "On Waking Up One Morning and Discovering We are Them," in a footnote added in 2010, Scheman reports that

[t]his chapter generally is not only more specifically autobiographical than the others in this volume; it is also more dated and more uncomfortable for me to read. My including it . . . reflects my hope that the squirmy discomforts it occasions will speak to at least some readers, despite its idiosyncrasies and datedness. (54)

The chapter did speak to this reader--perhaps most explicitly in Scheman's account of her shift from a more analytic perspective on metaphysics and epistemology to a perspective that is informed by feminist theory. Scheman writes that in her early years in philosophy she took for granted that there was nothing political about metaphysics or epistemology, and that as a result her political beliefs did not fit with her philosophical interests. It was only later that she found the two interests did naturally align. In this essay, Scheman expands on one problem that results from the trajectory her intellectual life has followed: when it comes to speaking to philosophers, particularly women philosophers, who are not working within the feminist tradition, Scheman fears that her words may convey a belittling of their own philosophical interests as merely precursors to hers.

Since I used to be in their position, hooked on epistemology and metaphysics, which I confidently believed had nothing to do with gender or with anything else political, I feel I know something of what it's like. But that feeling is an illusion. For one thing, it's hardly helpful to convey the impression (and hard to avoid doing so) that, since I was once where they are, they will someday, when they learn better, be where I am. (60)

Scheman acknowledges the ways in which feminist theorists may (even inadvertently) convey a sense of superiority. One might--even unintentionally--convey the sense to other philosophers that what they are doing is not *real* philosophy but instead is a necessary process that they will go through on the road to discovering what the real philosophical questions are. Scheman, with her Wittgensteinian commitments, may be more at risk of this line of thinking than others, but this sense of superiority can be found in all branches of philosophy, and Scheman's acknowledgment of its hurtfulness and potential power to alienate allies is a rare thing for a philosopher to do. She reminds those of us working in feminist philosophy that we ourselves are not immune to hubris. But this also raises a puzzle that seems never to be resolved: how does one engage with philosophers working outside of the feminist tradition without alienating them?

The second section of Scheman's book deals with "Reality" and purports to explore the rough ground beneath our feet. Scheman, in her introduction, tells her reader that she will argue that the ground beneath our feet is rough, but "firm enough to hold our weight and the weight of the questions we have a *real* need to ask" (77). This, following on the heels of her autobiographical statements in the "Knowledge" section, runs the risk of invoking the hubris stated above. It's hard not to read this as a condemnation of other philosophical questions as illusory. But the position of the "Reality" section within the book, sandwiched between a section that deals with Scheman's own perspective, and one that deals with real-world issues facing marginalized groups, puts this claim in context. What might initially seem like hubris is instead a call to examine what led us to the questions we ask, and why we find the questions we do ask to be salient (in addition to why we might find others to be illusory). This invitation to explore could be extended to any and all philosophers, and this seems to be Scheman's intent. Scheman has already, in her first section, told us of her own path to the questions she now asks, and why she finds them to be salient. Now we are prompted to examine our histories. This is just one of many ways in which these essays, having been introduced to one another, become stronger together. The call for philosophers to take up questions of *real*

need, is, in this context, subtly deepened to a call for philosophers to examine how they identify the questions that are of real need, and what this identification entails.

In this second section, Scheman gives the reader another extended metaphor: she speaks of constellations as opposed to galaxies. In the first chapter, "Against Physicalism" she argues that not all causal explanations can be reduced to the physical. In some, the social framing of our need to find explanations can drop out of the story. But in other cases, to drop the social framing is to lose the explanation. This chapter supports and reinforces her next chapter, wherein Scheman argues that emotions are not states of individuals; they are social. Scheman claims emotions are like constellations, not like galaxies. The stars exist (the physical states exist) but they gain their shape (their salience, their name and their connections to one another) from society. Orion is only Orion because we see it that way. Likewise, remorse is only remorse because we find and socially inscribe a pattern onto a set of physical states. Emotions are "situationally salient socially meaningful patterns of thought, feeling and behavior" (99). Here again Scheman weaves a path between two different camps: physicalism and dualism. In claiming to be against physicalism, Scheman is not endorsing dualism. Instead, she once again draws our attention to social and political forces at work in creating patterns of salient behavior.

If the first two papers of this section are about social salience and social creation, the third paper, "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer," is about exclusion. Or, to extend Scheman's constellation metaphor further than she did, this paper is about stars that don't fit into the constellations imagined by society. The stars are there, but they are often not taken to belong where they are. They are overlooked, ignored, and at the very worst, denied. Scheman, in this last paper, seems to be trying to make these excluded stars stand out and simultaneously draw the constellations themselves into question (the "stars" in this case being the nonnormative experiences of the male-to-female transsexual and the secular Jew). This paper highlights an important limit to Scheman's commitment to the social construction of individual experience. Although it may well be that emotions, like constellations, are socially created patterns of salience, they are created out of already existing material. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations are woven together into a pattern. But when that pattern is not socially woven, those thoughts and feeling do not disappear. They must, instead, find a way to weave themselves into already existing patterns, simultaneously attempting to change the patterns and to fit in. When she says early on that we are not only the persons we remember ourselves as being but are "equally, for better or worse, the persons others remember us as being" (112), this "equally" is just that. There is a balance between my own agency in trying to create myself, and the social forces shaping my emotions, my intelligibility, and my very being.

The final collection of essays, under the heading "Transgression and Trustworthiness" is where Scheman promises to pull her epistemic and metaphysical commitments together. This section explores the "gap between the right words and the words we can intelligibly say" (145). The immediate questions that this statement raises for me are: "What are the right words? Who decides?" There are few clues as to how Scheman intends to answer these questions. But one appears in the first chapter of this section, where Scheman argues that "there is nothing outside of what we do to determine whether or not we are doing it right" (154). This statement seems to have clear pragmatist overtones. I wonder to what extent Scheman sees her position as aligning with those of pragmatists like Sharyn Clough or Cheryl Misak.

One of the strongest and clearest examples of the way in which this collection of essays allows for each essay to reinforce others appears in Scheman's last essay "Epistemology Resuscitated: Objectivity as Trustworthiness," where she takes up the issue of a breakdown of trust between some scientific and marginalized lay communities. It is not, on Scheman's account, the fault of the distrusting members of the lay community that they distrust scientists. Instead, often marginalized lay communities are fully justified in their distrust of scientists when the workings of the scientific institutions are "demonstrably unjust" even if the injustices do not affect the validity of the knowledge-claims being made (146-47). Scheman's example is of the African American community's distrust of medical research as a result of the history of the Tuskegee experiments. One might object that medical researchers' knowledge-claims should *not* be dismissed because the history of medical research has shown it to be unjust. To dismiss them because of this history is to offer an invalid, *ad hominem* attack. However, a reader of this volume of essays will know

that the matter is not so simple. In the first section ("Knowledge") in chapter 2, Scheman examined Gettier cases and argued that

[T]he point of [Gettier-style] counterexamples is that my belief may have been a justified one in the sense that I was justified in holding it (I had what according to the relevant norms were good enough grounds for holding it) but semi-objectively--looking at my epistemic state from some omniscient position--that belief was not in fact justified, in that my grounds for holding it were, *for reasons it was not my responsibility to be aware of*, inadequate or irrelevant or undermined. (50-51; emphasis added)

With this background, a reader of "Epistemology Resuscitated" might ask the following: "Is the lay public responsible for learning the scientific practices that would allow them to judge the validity of scientific knowledge claims?" And the answer is surely "no." It is unrealistic to expect members of the lay public to be responsible for judging the technical claims of scientists, since they lack the expertise to do so. In the absence of this expertise, it is reasonable to judge present scientists based on past encounters with scientific institutions. What might seem to be an abstract epistemic question (Gettier cases) is revealed to be deeply political. Throughout the book, Scheman is trying to draw our attention to the larger webs of causality that our philosophical work touches on, even in abstract cases. She claims that one of the core unifying ideas of this book is that "everything is what it is because it fits into the world around it . . . its structure shapes and is shaped by its relation to other things" (147). This is no less true for philosophers puzzling over the gap between belief and justification than it is for anything else.

The book as a whole provides few definitive answers and no theories. Scheman acknowledges this in her introduction. "I do not aim at a *theory* of anything, but rather at ways of seeing sets of practices as connected to each other and my accounts of them as connected to the work of others" (3). From this perspective, it would be nice if this 2011 collection of essays included updated footnotes connecting her work to work by other feminist philosophers conducted after Scheman's essays were written. For example: Heidi Grasswick, Kyle P. White and Robert Crease, and Moira Howse all do interesting and informative work on trust-building (indeed Grasswick, and White and Crease build on the suggestions Scheman made in the final chapter of this volume). And Cressida J. Heyes's work on gender and sexuality has drawn on Scheman's argument in "Queering the Center by Centering the Queer." Although there are helpful footnotes that were added in 2010 connecting Scheman's essays to one another, there is little in the way of connecting the essays to more recent work in the fields of feminist and social philosophy. Nonetheless, the book provides an engaging and thoughtful account of how to deal with rough ground. The book aims to speak to a wide audience and to explain how one can survive these earthquakes disturbing one's core assumptions without abandoning ground entirely and fleeing into relativism. It would be an asset to any philosopher's bookshelf, and would be of particular interest to those who seek to understand how philosophical puzzles might affect, and be affected by, other social practices.

**Jennifer Jill Fellows** is currently an instructor in the interdisciplinary Arts One program at the University of British Columbia. She earned her PhD in Philosophy at UBC under the supervision of Dr. Alan Richardson. Her dissertation explored the role of objectivity as an epistemic ideal. Her research interests are in Metaphysics and Social Epistemology particularly focused on issues of trust and personhood. She also has interests in Philosophy of Science, Feminist Philosophy and Existentialism. She has a forthcoming publication in *Social Epistemology* entitled "Downstream of the Experts: Trust-building and the Case of MPA's." fellows.jill@gmail.com  
<https://sites.google.com/site/fellowsjill/>

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