Lecture 9: Feminist Epistemology

To know what feminist epistemology is, you have to think of what epistemology itself is.

1. What is Epistemology?:
   a. Account of what knowledge is.
   b. Account of how to get knowledge (what is justification).
   c. Account of what knowledge is worth getting.

(a) makes up ‘philosophical epistemology’, while (b) & (c) make up epistemology in the ‘everyday’ sense (i.e.: “complete set of regulative standards” p. 615).

Feminist critiques like Longino's directed more at B & C.

2. Feminist epistemology has more to do with the purpose rather than the content of the epistemic theory. A theory with the same content might be an anti-racist or even apolitical epistemology in the hands of a different writer.

Feminist epistemology shares strains with other critics of positivist/Cartesian epistemology (like naturalized epistemology, Kuhn, contextualism, externalism), but marshals them for a particular goal (“dismantling the oppression and subordination of women” (611)).

3. Question of sort (c) (which projects get funded to study etc.) have obvious political side.

4. Comparison of Longino’s contextualism with Kuhn and Foucault.

5. Longino/Haack debate about the legitimacy of contribution of political considerations structurally very much like the one between James and Clifford on the legitimacy of contribution of our passional nature.

Code: “Is the Sex of the Knower Epistemologically Significant”

596: Philosophers “have proposed methodologies for arriving at truth, and criteria for determining the validity of claims to the effect that ‘S knows that p.’ Such endeavors are guided by the putatively self-evident principle that truth once discerned, knowledge once established, claim their status as truth and knowledge by virtue of a grounding in or coherence within a permanent objective ahistorical, and circumstantially neutral framework or set of standards.”
“The question ‘Who is S?’ is regarded neither as legitimate nor as relevant to these endeavors.”

Description of epistemological relativism. “Broadly described, epistemological relativists hold that knowledge, truth, or even ‘reality’ can be understood only in relation to particular sets of cultural or social circumstances, to a theoretical framework, a specifiable range of perspectives, a conceptual scheme, or a form of life.”

“relativism is one of the more obvious means of avoiding reductive explanations, in terms of drastically simplified paradigms of knowledge, monolithic explanatory modes, or privileged decontextualized positions.”

“Schemes, practices, and paradigms evolve out of communal projects of inquiry. To sustain viability and authority, they must demonstrate their adequacy in enabling people to negotiate the everyday world of and cope with the decisions, problems, and puzzles they encounter daily.”

“The position I take in this book is that the sex of the knower is one of a cluster of subjective factors (i.e., factors that pertain to the circumstances of cognitive agents) constitutive of received conceptions of knowledge and of what it means to be a knower. I maintain that subjectivity and the specifications of cognitive agency can and must be accorded central epistemological significance, yet that doing so does not commit an inquirer to outright subjectivism.”

Descartes’ “claim that knowledge seeking is an introspective activity of an individual mind accords no relevance either to a knower’s embodiment or to his (or her) intersubjective relations.”

“It is this individualistic, self-reliant, private aspect of Descartes’ philosophy that has been influential in shaping subsequent epistemological ideals.”

“For epistemological purposes, all knowers are believed to be alike both with respect to their cognitive capacities and to their methods of achieving knowledge.”

“Proposing that the sex of the knower is significant casts doubt both on the autonomy of reason and on the (residual) exemplary status of simple observational knowledge.”

“Comparative judgements of the following kind are not what I expect to elicit: that if the knower is female, her knowledge is likely to be better grounded; if the knower is male, his knowledge will likely be more coherent.”
598: “In proposing that the sex of the knower is epistemologically significant, I am claiming that the scope of epistemological inquiry has been too narrowly defined.”

598-9: “There are questions about how credibility is established, about connections between knowledge and power, about the place of knowledge in ethical and aesthetic judgments, and about political agendas and the responsibilities of knowers. I am claiming that all of these questions are epistemologically significant.”

599: “Although it has rarely been spelled out prior to the development of feminist critiques, it has long been tacitly assumed that S is male.”

599: “Aristotle is just one of a long line of western thinkers to declare the limitations of women’s cognitive capacities.”

599: “Objectivity, quite precisely construed, is commonly regarded as a defining feature of knowledge per se. So if women’s knowledge is declared to be naturally subjective, then a clear answer emerges to my question. The answer is that if the would be knower is female, then her sex is indeed epistemologically significant, for it disqualifies her as a knower in the fullest sense of the term.”

600: Question of whether there are types of knowledge that are naturally (rather than merely continently) available to just one of the two sexes.

600: Problems with deciding which gender differences are ‘natural’ and which are the result of enculturation.

601: “Investigations that start from the conviction that the sex of the knower is epistemologically significant will surely question received conceptions of the nature of knowledge and challenge the hegemony of mainstream epistemologies.”

601: “Features of women’s experience commonly cited are a concern with the concrete, everyday world; a connection with objects of experience rather than an objective distance from them; a marked affective tone; a respect for the environment; a readiness to listen perceptively and responsibly to a variety of ‘voices’ in the environment, both animate and inanimate, manifested in a tolerance of diversity.”
602: “Differences in female and male brain functioning are just as plausibly attributable to sociocultural factors such a sex-stereotyping of children’s activities or to differing parental attitudes to children of different sexes, even from earliest infancy.”

603: “There is a persistent tension in feminist thought between a laudable wish to celebrate ‘feminine’ values as tools for the creation of a better social order and a fear of endorsing those same values as instruments of women’s continues oppression.”

603: [Hardings] “intention is to show that an espousal of empiricist theory, combined with an uncritical acceptance of feminine stereotypes, legitimates manipulative and controlling treatment of women in the social world.”

604-5: “despite the flaws of Harding’s analysis, her article supports my contention that the sex of the knower is epistemologically significant. If metaphysical theories are marked by the maleness of their creators, then theories of knowledge informed by them cannot escape the marking.”

605: On popularity of “adversarial method” in philosophy.

606: “A network of sociopolitical relationships and intellectual assumptions creates an invisible system of acceptance and rejection, discourse and silence, ascendency and subjugation within and around disciplines. Implicit cultural presuppositions work with the personal idiosyncrasies of intellectual authorities to keep certain issues form placing high on research agendas. Critics have to learn how to notice their absence.”

606: “A discipline defines itself both by what it excludes (repulses)and by what it includes. But the self-definition process removes what is excluded (repulsed) from view so that it is not straightforwardly available for assessment, criticism and analysis.”

606: “Feminist critiques reveal that this alleged neutrality masks a bias in favor of institutionalizing stereotypical masculine values into the fabric of the discipline – its methods, norms and contents. In so doing, it suppresses values, styles, problems, and concerns stereotypically associated with femininity. Thus, whether by chance or by design, it creates a hegemonic philosophical practice in which the sex of the knower is, indeed, epistemologically significant.”
Longino: “Feminist Epistemology as a Local Epistemology”

608: Feminist Epistemology “is not the study or defense of feminine intuitions, of ‘Women’s ways of knowing’, of subjectivism; it is not an embrace of irrationality or Protagorean relativism.”

608: Critical and constructive dimensions of feminist epistemology.

609: Feminist theoretical values: empirical adequacy, novelty, ontological heterogeneity, complexity or mutuality of interaction, applicability to human needs, and decentralization of power or universal empowerment.

Traditional theoretical values: empirical adequacy, consistency with theories in other domains, simplicity, explanatory power and generality, fruitfulness or refutability.

610: “Consistency with theories in other domains, for example, only has epistemic value if we suppose these other theories to be true.”

611: “I have, for each of the more mainstream epistemic values, indicated why their epistemic status is no greater than of the alternatives advocated by feminist researchers and philosophers. This raises the question why, in spite of repeated demonstrations of the weakness of their probative value, philosophers persist in invoking them.”

611: “What makes feminists feminist is the desire to dismantle the oppression and subordination of women. This requires the identification of the mechanisms and institutions of female oppression and subordination, that is, the mechanisms and institutions of gender. The cognitive goal of feminist research, therefore, is to reveal the operation of gender, by making visible both the activities of those gendered female and the processes whereby they are made invisible, by identifying the mechanisms whereby female gendered agents are subordinated.”

612: While feminist theoretical virtues help promote these cognitive goals, they don’t do so necessarily, and other virtues might be needed to promote those goals in a different context.

612: “their normative reach is, thus, local”

612: “in light of the semantic gap between hypotheses and the statements describing data, the latter acquire evidential relevance for hypotheses only in light of background assumptions. Justificatory practices must therefore include not only the testing of hypotheses against data, but
the subjection of background assumptions (and reasoning and data) to criticism from a variety of perspectives.”

613: “The idea state is not the having of a single best account, but the existence of a plurality of theoretical orientations that both make possible the elaboration of particular models of the phenomenal world and serve as resources for criticism of each other.”

614: “What might be called naïve feminist empiricism shares with standpoint theory the goal of a single best account and supposes androcentric science is a matter of failing to keep personal biases out of inquiry. Better science will be bias-free science.”

614: “Naïve empiricism shares with contextual empiricism the emphasis given to observational data, but supposes that observational data and logic are sufficient to generate and justify theories. Contextualism, on the other hand, argues in light of underdetermination arguments for the necessity of assumptions establishing the evidential relevance of data to hypotheses and theories.”

615: Both feminist empiricism and standpoint theory are normative views, while the view endorsed here is a descriptive one. “It offers an interpretation of normative claims rather than itself proscribing”

615: “The complete set of regulative standards, inclusive of theoretical virtues, guiding a community’s epistemic practices could be called its epistemology. This is the way the term ‘epistemology’ is used outside of philosophy. Given that communities will be distinguished from each other by those non-overlapping elements of community regulative standards, such epistemologies are local epistemologies. If general epistemic norms like empirical adequacy require supplementation by the more specific and distinctive norms, then normative epistemology, i.e. epistemic norms (apart from general prescriptions like “establish evidential relevance”) will only be locally and provisionally binding.”

615: “Philosophical epistemology, I propose, makes sense of our epistemically evaluative behavior, but it does not prescribe for it.”

615: “General philosophical epistemology, by contrast, makes sense of our most general epistemically evaluative norms and behavior that we share with others who share concepts such as ‘know’ and ‘believe.’ As philosophers we may be able to achieve some critical distance that facilitates our offering interpretations of our community’s practices to it, but changes in those practices must be recommended from a position that is embedded in the community, not one that stands apart from it.”
Haack: “Knowledge and Propaganda: Reflections of an Old Feminist”

617: “There seem to be two routs by which and epistemology are taken to be connected, corresponding to two interpretations of the phrase ‘the woman’s point of view’: as ‘the way women see things,’ or as ‘serving the interests of women.’”

618: “Those who think that criticisms of sexism in scientific theorizing require a new, feminist epistemology insists that we are obliged, in the light of these criticisms to acknowledge political considerations as legitimate ways to decide between theories… But on the face of it these criticisms suggest exactly the opposite conclusion – that politics should be kept out of science.”

618: “There would be a genuinely feminist epistemology if the aspiration to legitimate the idea that feminist values should determine what theories are accepted could be achieved.”

618: Since suspension of judgment is always possible: “Underdetermination … has not the slightest tendency to show that we may legitimately choose to believe whatever theory suits our political purposes.”

619: Since you can’t derive an ‘is’ from an ‘ought’, the blurring of the connection between fact and value is not enough to legitimate political considerations for theory choice.

619: The fact that scientists may never actually be without prejudice does not itself make it the case that the contribution of such prejudice is legitimate. “even if it is impossible to make science perfect, it doesn’t follow that we shouldn’t try to make it better.”

619: Middle ground between old romanticism (too logical) and new cynicism (too sociological) about science.

619: Sociology has value in showing which factors relevant to scrupulous attention to evidence.,

619: Feminist critics can contribute to traditional epistemic project of developing rules for inquiry, but such contributions require no “revolution” in epistemology.

620: “What is most troubling is that the label [‘feminist epistemology’] is designed to convey the idea that inquiry should be politicized, and that is not only mistaken, but dangerously so.”

620: “Think what ‘politically inadequate research’ refers to: research informed by what some feminists deem ‘repressive’ political ideals – and research not informed by political ideals at all, i.e.: honest inquiry.”