

## *Feminist Epistemologies: Critiques and Concerns*

Feminists' thinking about epistemology, like feminists' thinking about almost everything else, has become much more nuanced, variegated—and interesting—over the course of several decades. As Sandra Harding observes,

Feminist analyses . . . are not monolithic. There is no single set of claims beyond a few generalities that could be called “feminism” . . . [F]eminism is itself a contested zone not only within feminism but also between feminism and its critics.<sup>1</sup>

Thanks to wake-up calls issued by women of color, lesbian women, Third World women, and women with disabilities, among others, against their automatic and inappropriate inclusion in categories designed by and about relatively privileged, white, heterosexual, Euro-American women, feminist thought and practice have moved toward greater recognition of the astonishing variety of women and women's experiences.<sup>2</sup> Few feminists missed the irony of the fact that second-wave feminist thinkers who had protested the inclusion and consequent effective erasure of women in the

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male-defined generic category “man” themselves invited a not altogether dissimilar course-correcting admonition.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the intrafeminist stir generated by questions of difference, diversity, identity, and so forth, has resulted in a mix of far richer, more nuanced, and more useful contemporary conversations about a variety of issues that affect women’s lives. The following discussion seeks to keep in mind some of the lessons taught and learned at the feminist roundtable.

As the introduction pointed out, feminist thinkers who have made epistemology their business have moved it out of the philosophical seminar room and into the larger, public stage of society and culture where the politics and ethics that attach to knowing, knowers, and knowledge neither can nor should be avoided. Feminist epistemologies are especially remarkable in that they do not argue whether knowledge is possible or not, that is, they do not engage the traditional epistemological issues. Instead, they question the terms of the enterprise itself, an approach that would not be possible without the critical perspective they commend to all who deal in epistemological questions, a perspective variously articulated but fervently shared by feminists of all descriptions.

The basis on which they describe and question the terms of traditional epistemology is a twofold inadequacy: scientific and moral, or ethical. While these two types of inadequacy can be distinguished, feminists say, they cannot be separated. Ultimately—and even in the shorter run—the kind of science we do and the kind of moral deliberation we engage in depend on epistemological assumptions and categories, even on which questions we ask about knowing and which ones we do not ask; it also affects the way we see ourselves and the sort of relationships we have with others. Bodies of knowledge and practice (like science) affect self-identity and relationships by shaping them, explaining them, justifying them, institutionalizing them, and perpetuating them.

Those who have a hand in forming and those who chiefly benefit from what Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich calls the “dominant meaning system”<sup>4</sup> would seem to have least incentive to entertain countervailing views. They have the luxury of not noticing, perhaps because they do not need to notice, the destructive consequences their epistemological framework brings with it. In addition, feminists argue, the powerfully positioned have the least developed capacity to assume, even intellectually, a position that is critical of—“over against”—their own scientific (and ethical) projects. Such a critical disposition is key to producing and advancing science; the rub is that the advances realized because of such critical “over-against-ness” always also strengthen the possibility of undermining dominance based on the power to limit voices of critique or dissent.

This chapter functions to describe my own commitment to a feminist approach to questions of knowing and my interest in appropriating this approach vis-à-vis epistemology and, further along, the theological-ethical proposal toward which this project aims. It also intends to elucidate this approach in a way that justifies such a commitment. Key feminist treatments of epistemological questions, particularly those of Sandra Harding, Donna Haraway, Lorraine Code, and Elizabeth Kamarck Minnich, will act as points of reference.

These and other feminist thinkers have engaged with epistemology in two principal ways, which will organize the discussion that follows. First, they have brought a profound critique to bear on the approach to epistemology taken by those who represent the post-Enlightenment Western philosophical tradition.<sup>5</sup> From several angles, this critique, focused primarily on how science is done, has targeted “totalizing theories” that have tended to exclude or leave out those considered unreliable or unworthy “knowers,” especially women. Inattention to the ethical and political freight borne by such theories and by the knowing they

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sanction and frame is another key complaint feminist thinkers raise in relation to traditional epistemology.

Feminist writers have also generated a good deal of constructive work. Some of this work responds to questions such as What is or ought feminist epistemology be? Can there be such a thing? How might feminist epistemologies contribute to a larger liberatory project? Few feminists insist on a single approach to “feminist epistemology”; increasingly, contributors to the conversation focus on clarifying those elements and themes they believe essential to a liberatory epistemology. Among these are the roles experience plays in knowing, especially in view of multiply identified knowers; the difficulties of retaining some useful, nontotalizing understanding of “objectivity”; and what it means for knowers to be accountable to one another and to a shared future.

The following discussion will begin with the feminist critique of traditional epistemology and its impact and an assessment of the constructive tasks facing feminist epistemologists. It will then describe and comment on how experience, objectivity, and accountability figure in feminist approaches to knowers, knowing, and knowledge.

### *Traditional Epistemology Characterized*

Epistemology “made by professional philosophers of the mainstream,” Lorraine Code contends, “is one of the more arcane and esoteric artifacts of men[,] . . . in the main, of white men.”<sup>6</sup> Historically, and most broadly, it has dealt mainly with the issues of whether knowledge is possible<sup>7</sup> and if it is, what conditions are necessary and sufficient to define and discuss it; and what sort of relationship exists between knowledge and reality. These tasks have been predicated on a vision, born in the Enlightenment, according to which the human mind could reflect perfectly an

existing world “out there” that is ready and able to be reflected. That is, there *is* something really there, and it is possible for human observers to position themselves to *see* what is really there—nature and social life—as they really are. Both the questions raised and the resolutions philosophers have reached generally have been and are phrased in terms of “all men,” not just philosophers. To claim this sort of universality reflects, at its best, the broad significance philosophers believe these matters have, as well as the possibility that their resolution will have the same long reach; at its worst, the blanket “all men” makes differences disappear and suffocates critical inquiry that might improve the questions and notice the impact of their resolutions.

Western science, seeking to underwrite knowledge about what is “really there,” wants to tell “one true story”—some-what like a multi-million-piece jigsaw puzzle whose pieces, however numerous, still all fit together—rather than live with the ambiguity that may well exist and might persist if science confined itself to trying to tell less false stories. In pursuit and defense of “one true story,” stable and coherent theories and categories, and what Sandra Harding, recalling Descartes’ language, describes as a “powerful transcendental Archimedean standpoint,”<sup>8</sup> have great value, even when the former may not account for actual instabilities and incoherences, and the latter may not exist in real life.

The central assumptions underlying traditional epistemology, which are most clearly expressed in modern science, are taken to be value-free, neutral, and universally applicable. Those who make either science or knowledge rarely acknowledge the effects that the wider cultural, political, or social contexts may have on their activities, a state of things attributable in large measure to the high status of scientific knowledge. The alleged value-free character of scientific knowledge, according to which “values” and “facts” can be (and usually are) strictly separated, confers on those who pursue it a freedom from preoccupation with how the

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knowledge that “facts” comprise will be used.<sup>9</sup> “The separation . . . between facts and values,” Lorraine Code writes,

supports the conclusion that facts are “just facts” and worth pursuing for their own sake. Questions about the social and/or moral consequences of discovery can, consequently, be designated as separate matters with which . . . knowledge seekers . . . need not . . . concern themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Little account is taken of the interpretive nature of scientific descriptions—that they are, as Donna Haraway observes, “produced, not just innocently available.”<sup>11</sup>

The knower in mainstream epistemology is, Code writes, “a featureless abstraction,” not a person with individual capacities, location, interests, and so forth, each and all of which might affect—though not necessarily distort—his or her observations.<sup>12</sup> The knower/subject and the known/object occupy different causal planes; neither their relationship nor the knowledge the knower/subject generates is negotiated or reciprocal. Instead, according to this mainstream epistemological model, the knower/subject has a kind of nonsymmetrical power over the known/object, whether that is a chemical reaction, a social system, or another person. The subordination of the known/object creates an “other,” whose contributions to knowledge become part of the knower’s “material.” Such relationships of super- and subordination underwrite the illusion of epistemological control and relieve the anxiety epistemological ambiguity can produce.

In suggesting a typology of four major errors that characterize not only *what* but also *how* (we think) we know, Minnich has summarized some of the key practical consequences of epistemology-as-usual. “The dominant culture,” she writes,

as complex and contradictory and many-voiced as it is, is built on *faulty generalizations* (taking a particular “kind” of people, works, acts to be generic, representative, inclusive, normative for all), and *circular reasoning* (by which “kinds” are selected as generic, et al); historically, abstractions are derived from them; and then those abstractions are used to justify the continuing centrality and normativity of the kinds from which they were abstracted in the first place, which lead to *mystified concepts*, such as a notion of excellence that conflates it with exclusivity (that hide and thereby perpetuate those errors) and thence to *partial knowledge* that claims generality.<sup>13</sup>

“Faulty generalization” both emanates from and helps to create the “one true story” approach to epistemology. What belongs to the critically most *real* category, for example, comes to define both what is within *and* what is outside the chief category; what is within is valued, while what is outside is devalued, considered less important, deviant, or helpful only insofar as it describes the truly valued.<sup>14</sup> As Minnich points out, generalizations are not necessarily faulty; they are, however, when they function to exclude on the basis of hierarchy and power.

“Circular reasoning” proves the truth of an assertion by defining as irrelevant whatever might disprove it on the basis that anything that might disprove it is irrelevant. If it is true, for example, that scientific knowledge is value-free or (even) transcendent, then any claim that knowledge reflects the interests or values of those who produce it, or any claim that knowledge is “situated,” is ruled out by virtue of the prior assertion—which is itself a close relative of “faulty generalization.”

Excellence, judgment, equality, intelligence, woman, sex, man, and gender exemplify what Minnich calls “mystified

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concepts.” These and others, because of both how they have been mystified and how they mystify, are particularly persistent because what they mean, how they are used, and what effect their use has, are so seldom scrutinized. Their invocation often stops critical thinking, conversation, and dissent from prevailing but largely implicit understandings of what these concepts actually entail. Sheila Briggs’ observations about the evident commensurability between white, male, middle-class identity and the definition of equality illustrate what Minnich means by a mystified concept, and how the mystification of one (equality) is implicated in the mystification of another (human nature):

Those who do not share this particular identity have access to equal treatment only when their identity is “overlooked.” Hence, to be black, or hispanic, or female, or on welfare becomes detrimental to one’s claim to equality, unless one appeals to a more “fundamental” human nature. It then becomes “unfair” to treat such persons with regard to their sex, race, or class, because this would prejudice their rights. And it becomes “unfair” to treat white middle-class males with regard to their sex, race or class, because this would grant them undue privilege.<sup>15</sup>

In their ambiguity and opacity, mystified concepts can be fashioned easily into platitudes and pieties, invoked without fear of challenge and therefore capable of wielding great power in service of an exclusionary status quo.<sup>16</sup>

By “partial knowledge,” Minnich means knowledge, established by the dominant tradition, that is partial in two senses: “It makes the part the whole, and that whole is partial to the interests of those thus enshrined at the defining, controlling center.”<sup>17</sup> This error, which overlaps with “faulty generalization,” focuses particular attention on the



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role of power in establishing what will be *acknowledged* as true, important, real. Knowledge is what is known by those whose knowing is recognized as “knowledge”; rules, boundaries, definitions, criteria regulate the process of coming to know and of recognizing that knowing. Some regulation occurs through professions, disciplines, and language; much of it is implicit, but not arbitrary, at least not from the viewpoint of those who hold power. Even to disagree with the regulation of knowledge is to recognize the rules of the debate. Those who refuse to enter into the debate according to conventional rules are shut out, and those who violate them are thought dangerous to good order: epistemologically, academically, even politically.

To question the ethical or scientific adequacy—or the usefulness—of traditional epistemology is, in traditional epistemological terms, heretical.

### *The Impact of Epistemology-As-Usual*

Embedded epistemological assumptions—both “positive” ones having to do with who qualifies as a knower, the separation of facts and values, the relation between knower and known, and so forth, and “negative” ones that obviate the need to ask *who* knows and what knowing might be *for*, for example—have profound implications in many quarters. Code observes, for example, that

institutionalized disciplines that produce knowledge about women, and position women in societies according to the knowledge they produce, are informed by versions of and variations on the methods and objectives that received epistemologies authorize . . . .<sup>18</sup>

Key feminist critics of “received epistemologies” have focused on science and philosophy as knowledge-producing

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and women-positioning disciplines; their analyses have pride of place in what follows. It is important to note that the high regard accorded “scientific” knowledge, as well as the tenacity of “faulty [philosophical] generalizations” carry the epistemological assumptions that underlie them into all sorts of nonscientific, nonphilosophical conversations about knowing and knowers. It is also worth pointing out that explicit feminist critiques of traditional epistemology are emerging in other disciplines, including bioethics and theology.<sup>19</sup>

The language of these disciplines as they have been written and taught in the academy and in the professions has traditionally, consistently communicated the inferiority of women in a host of ways. Specifically, it has assumed that they are “incapable of having knowledge of the best and most rational kind.”<sup>20</sup> “Woman the knower” has been understood to be a contradiction in terms; as Harding points out, convention has held that to be “scientific” has meant “to be dispassionate, disinterested, impartial, concerned with abstract principles and rules,” while to be a woman has meant “to be emotional, interested in and partial to the welfare of family and friends, concerned with concrete practices and contextual relations.”<sup>21</sup> Such assumptions provide the basis on which to exclude women from teaching, research, policy-making, and other positions that by “convention” “require” qualities women are not thought to have—on the grounds of the same conventional epistemological assumptions.

Without regard to gender, learners absorb lessons that define knowing, knowledge, and knowers in terms that grant privilege to some and exclude other classes of knowing, knowledge, and knowers. Donna Haraway observes, “If our experience is of domination, we will theorize our lives according to principles of dominance.”<sup>22</sup> If we have learned to make sense of our experience—to “know” it—in terms that explain, rationalize, and implicitly or explicitly defend relations of such domination as “natural” or at least “given,” then we will be less likely to question our places, whether

we are on the short or the long end of the stick. Without the categories to notice and name the emperor's nakedness, we are likely to applaud his procession—and to join in silencing the voice of an impertinent child. “Insofar as we speak and think and act in ways that make sense to other people within the dominant meaning system,” Minnich writes, “we cannot avoid participating . . . in precisely that which we wish to change.”<sup>23</sup>

To name the significant dimensions of my own location may be a partial antidote to such participation. Explicitly, it entails acknowledging my limitations: not so much what they are, since I do not know exactly what they are, but rather that I have them. To acknowledge that I have them, in turn, is to acknowledge that there is much I do not know, that I need to hear from other sources, to hear other voices. It means, too, that I have a contribution to make, and that it is a particular contribution, not a universal declaration, to the conversation. It also means that I do want to be part of a conversation.

Implicitly, naming my own coordinates identifies me in relation to others like me, pulls at me to identify myself in relation to those who are like me and in some way to articulate the accountability I have to whom I have it. Doing so also distinguishes me from those who do not share significantly in my location, and in some way makes it incumbent on me to account for myself to them.

Even so, as Minnich reminds us, the temptation to lose consciousness and a restless, critical edginess over against “the dominant meaning system” is virtually irresistible—probably for everyone, but perhaps especially for women who enjoy relatively more privilege within that system. Here, the panoply of different women's voices mentioned at the beginning of this chapter may serve to strengthen resistance. The words Maria Lugones addresses to white women theorists might almost as easily have been addressed (by Lugones or by her addressees) to men of privilege:

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Plurality speaks to you of a world . . . that you inhabit unwillingly[,] . . . a world inhabited by beings who cannot be understood given your ordinary notions of responsibility, intentionality, . . . precisely because those notions presuppose that each person is one and each person . . . can effectively inform her actions . . . all by herself. All other ways of being are outside value . . .<sup>24</sup>

Even for women who share with one another a deep commitment to transforming a reality in which women are subordinated, “multiple identities”—some relatively privileged, some marginalized—surely present substantial challenges both intra- and interpersonally. Epistemology-as-usual is no respecter of persons; for feminists, however, its internalized effects may seem doubly pernicious.

There is another, related issue. Feminist thinkers have launched their critiques of epistemology-as-usual from the solid if varied terrain of women’s life experiences; their analyses have gathered intellectual steam and moral passion because of their attention to its impact on women’s lives. From the start, they observed a long Western philosophical and theological history associating women with nature (“objectivity” expressed the control the Man of Reason—Descartes was an exemplar—sought, through “knowing,” to exert over nature; women were “by nature” incapable of realizing this epistemological ideal).<sup>25</sup> More recently, however, feminists have begun to draw together the threads of what are often referred to as “interlocking” oppressions—those that are based not only on gender but also, for example, on class, race, and sexual orientation. While these different forms of oppression have different histories and contemporary dynamics, epistemology-as-usual has tended to deny access to marginalized knowers and refused to recognize as “real” knowledge produced by groups who suffer these forms of oppression. Many feminists have sought to make common

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epistemological cause with, as well as deepen their informed respect for, those for whom the struggle against domination has a different starting point.

*Assessing the Tasks of Feminist Epistemologies*

Those who expect theories of knowledge, the stock in trade of traditional epistemological inquiry, to deal with the experiences of knowing that ordinary knowers have on a daily basis or with the place, value, or dilemmas of knowing in people's lives, or to help shape ways of describing how the world is that will help transform it toward something better, are not likely to get much help from epistemology-as-usual. "As the map [of the epistemic terrain] is currently drawn," Code writes,

there is no place for analyses of the availability of knowledge, of knowledge-acquisition processes, or—above all—of the political considerations that are implicated in knowing anything more interesting than the fact that the cup is on the table, now.<sup>26</sup>

Knowers who have the privilege to define the proper quarter of epistemology in terms of the possibility of knowledge of cups on tables, now, are likely to be those who have had the luxury to choose to confine their reflections to such types of knowledge. Power and politics, as has been suggested, play important roles in shaping and pursuing epistemological agendas; and the outcomes of these agendas, whatever their philosophical value, must also be read ethically.

The questions mainstream epistemology has asked may have narrowed its scope too much. In suggesting a host of additional questions, feminist theorists of knowledge break open the field of inquiry. "Who can be subjects, agents, of socially legitimate knowledge?" Harding asks.

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What kinds of things can be known? . . . Can . . . socially situated truths count as knowledge? . . . What is the nature of objectivity? Does it require point-of-viewlessness? . . . What should be the purposes of the pursuit of knowledge? Can there be “disinterested knowledge” in a society that is deeply stratified by gender, race, and class?<sup>27</sup>

Most of these questions and the responses to them have been implicit in the program of conventional epistemology. Now, however, they have been raised explicitly: from a critical stance, from the lives of those whose experiences have not fit the “regularities” social scientists have sought to explain using conventional epistemological assumptions. As a result, more often than not “ . . . a ‘line of fault’ opens up between [women’s] experiences of their lives and the dominant conceptual schemes.”<sup>28</sup>

A preliminary assessment of the tasks feminist epistemologies face surely reveals the need to continue to deconstruct epistemology-as-usual and the science theories and practices that depend on it insofar as these act to erase, exploit, or marginalize persons, particularly women. Minnich maintains that this has been and remains the task of feminist scholars and activists “not because the task *could* not be taken on by non-feminists, but because it *has* not been . . . .”<sup>29</sup> Others would argue, instead, that women and/or other disenfranchised people are singularly positioned to engage it.

Furthermore, epistemological proposals, even as they seek to satisfy our shared human need for reliable, useful knowledge, must also be held ethically accountable. These two requirements are inextricably linked, as the foregoing feminist critiques of traditional epistemological approaches make clear. The criteria an epistemology offers for determining who can be a knower; what tests beliefs must pass in order to be legitimated as knowledge; and what kinds of things can be known, signal implicit and explicit ethical

(and political) agendas. Cloaked in the mystified concepts and faulty generalizations of which Minnich writes, these agendas are rarely exposed and corrected as needed. Feminist thinkers argue that such agendas, whatever their content, should be held accountable; the alternatives they propose invite ethical as well as “scientific” scrutiny.

The accountability feminists refer to here requires that the injustices done with the help of traditional theories of knowledge be revealed in all their depth and breadth. But it also requires that new epistemologies be developed that generate what Code calls “emanicipatory effects.”<sup>30</sup> What we do bears intimate relation with what we know—and vice versa—in both science and everyday life; we must pay close attention to the ways we can and do shape that relation, especially when we qualify or disqualify certain knowers and kinds of knowing.

In the critical and constructive work feminists are doing, several key themes emerge repeatedly; reflection about these themes is contributing substantially to the development of new epistemologies. In what follows I will discuss three of them: experience, objectivity, and accountability. As will become clear, they can be treated as discrete themes only if their mutual implication is heard as a continuous background harmony.

### *Experience*

The notion of “lived experience” counts heavily in feminist thought. Feminists use the modifier *lived* to secure the value of information and insights (knowledge) gained from having lived, from having “been there,” where what the knowing is about is occurring. “Lived experience” authorizes the knowing associated with it in a way that “experience” as an abstract, universalized epistemological concept does not. The frank critique feminists imply in distinguishing “lived

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experience” from “experience” as a philosophical concept responds to the fact that traditional epistemological theories and the systems of knowledge they support have more often than not ignored, underrated, or excluded the knowing that issued from the “lived experience” of women.

“Lived experience” suggests a legitimate claim to knowing at least some kinds of things and people. It also makes clear that the “thing or two” one may have learned by virtue of having “lived” counts as knowledge. To assign positive epistemological value to lived experience means to recognize explicitly the embodiment of knowing: not so much its concreteness but its incarnate character. As Beverly Wildung Harrison observes, “all our knowledge, including our moral knowledge, is body-mediated.”<sup>31</sup> This dimension may not be all there is to all knowing, but conventional epistemologies usually ignore its significance altogether. In order to be persuasive or plausible, a theory of knowing must take account of lived experience.

For many women and men, the notion of “lived contradiction” is likely to accompany epistemological respect for lived experience. As feminism’s second wave gathered momentum in the 1970s, lived contradictions were often described as “click!” experiences: accepted “wisdom”—what “everyone” knew to be true, say, about women—was experienced (with an accompanying Aha-like “click!”) as baloney by women themselves. Minnich’s “mystified concepts” are replete with such contradictions; discovered in the course of the activities of daily living and conversation, they spark recognition and then critique. “Universal” principles like equal rights are not usually color- or gender- or class-blind; and what “most people” consider “normal” relationships or behaviors neither commends the “normal” nor condemns the “non-normal.” Theories of knowledge invite scrutiny from those who have experienced lived contradictions.

But what counts as “experience”? Feminists rightly criticized traditional theories of knowledge for their failure to



include the epistemological fruits of “women’s experience”; what these critics discovered, however, was that it is as difficult to identify and collect all the building blocks of that notion as it is to find something essential at its core. Modifying the original expression from “women’s experience” to “women’s experiences” lessens the danger of lumping “women” together and implying that their experiences have something fundamental in common, but it does not fully resolve the uneasiness. The wider the conceptual net is cast in an effort to round up evidence, the more specificity is lost—and with it, the consciousness and contributions of those specific lives that did not fit the mold of (androcentric) generality in the first place.

“‘Women’s experience’ does not pre-exist as a kind of prior resource, ready simply to be appropriated . . . ,” Donna Haraway observes, any more than *any* “sort” of experience precedes its articulation by means of “particular social occasions, the discourses, and other practices.” As experience becomes articulated in itself, she argues, it also becomes articulable with other experiences, which in turn enables “the construction of an account of *collective* experience.”<sup>32</sup> The collective experience thus accounted for—say, “women’s experience”—is characterized by contradictions, connections, differences, distinctions, tensions, and affinities (rather than identities), none of which disappears simply because all have been gathered under the same rubric. It continues to be the “nature” of “women’s experience” that it is, Haraway would say, “structured within multiple and often inharmonious agendas.”<sup>33</sup>

It is no small accomplishment to recognize the heterogeneity of “agendas” that comprise “women’s experience.” Intellectually and, particularly, epistemologically, such recognition cohabits with resistance to totalizing assumptions about who may know and what knowledge is valued. Ethically, it depends on willingness to be held accountable *to* others *for* one’s own agenda/s. And, one might add,

politically, it involves renouncing the exercise of power as domination, wherever that might be an option.

The multiple-agendas plot continues to thicken if the focus shifts from the collectivity of women to the individual woman, who experiences her life in what Sheila Briggs calls “a multiplicity of identities.”<sup>34</sup> According to Briggs, one person’s identities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (to name only some of the weightiest variables used to distinguish humans from one another) may place him or her on both sides of what is culturally dominant. Each of these identities has its own history, in society’s as well as in the individual’s life, and its own peculiar meanings—again, societally and personally. Some identities may confer privilege on, others stigmatize, the same individual; society frequently metes out rewards and punishments for certain identities only to those who actually claim, or disclaim, them. As Briggs says, “To live with differently stigmatized identities, or with a combination of stigmatized and privileged identities, makes it hard sometimes to find one’s face in the mirror.”<sup>35</sup> Identity is no more a “prior resource” than experience is; identity, too, becomes articulated and articulable—even within each person. Multiple identities do not undergo homogenization into a smooth and easily managed blend; instead, they jostle, poke, disturb, and even exclude one another as often as they enrich, complement, and build each other up: all of this, within one person!

Perhaps it is a reflection of what Briggs calls the “fragmentation”<sup>36</sup> of which the social world, like our identities, partakes—and what Haraway calls “the always already fallen apart structure of the world”<sup>37</sup>—that the most difficult struggles, inter- and intrapersonally, occur because perceived and real privileges and stigmas are associated with our multiple agendas and identities. Power and conflict characterize these struggles; feminists would say that accountability must, too.

There is no innocent, no nonresponsible, no “outside” position from which to engage in these struggles. To argue, as feminist epistemological critiques do, that women have been and continue to be marginalized in and by theories of knowledge that dominate the history of Western philosophy, and that this marginalization has had and continues to have terrible human costs, which women pay disproportionately, is not to let women off the hook. As Code points out, “The [feminist epistemological] project demands an ongoing consciousness of the fact that an inquirer is implicated in every inquiry and is as culturally and historically constituted as any of her allies, collaborators, or subjects of study.”<sup>38</sup> Her observation applies as much to the informal setting of everyday life as to formal academic research and scholarship.

The concern that women’s status as bona fide knowers be recognized is the ubiquitous partner of the critique that they have not been so recognized. And the constructive work feminist thinkers continue to do in epistemology aims precisely at making contributions to the larger project that, in taking women’s exclusion seriously, help ensure broader participation in that project. This means, among other things, that the complicated, delicate questions of whether and how women participate in oppressive as well as in liberatory agendas have to be dealt with forthrightly. This was a particularly discomfiting matter for feminist theologian Sharon D. Welch, whose self-awareness about her “double identity” generated great resonance in me when I first read her *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*, perhaps because it seemed I had much in common with her, including having had a quite significant experience in war-torn Central America. She wrote:

For me, to be a Christian is to become aware of the degree to which I am a participant in structures of oppression, structures of race, class, and

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national identity. As a woman, I am oppressed by the structures of patriarchy. Yet as white, I benefit from the oppression of people of other races. As a person whose economic level is middle-class, I am both victim and victimizer of others. As an American, I live within a nation whose policies are economically, politically, and environmentally disastrous for far too many of the world's peoples.<sup>39</sup>

Welch called her book “an attempt to respond to [her] ‘double identity’”; for me it was not coincidental that her book dealt theologically with epistemological themes, including what counts as knowledge, whose knowledge is privileged, what the relation is between experience and knowledge, and so forth. Significantly, her recognition of a double identity—or perhaps more precisely, a “set” of conflictive identities—led not to moral paralysis but to acceptance of the challenge it represented, and to engagement.

Feminist writers have tended to grant favored epistemological status to what Haraway calls “the vantage points of the subjugated.” Her justification of this favor is worth quoting at some length:

The standpoints of the subjugated . . . are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretative core of all knowledge. They are savvy to modes of denial through repression, forgetting, and disappearing acts—ways of being nowhere while claiming to see comprehensively. The subjugated have a decent chance to be on to the god-trick . . . [Their] standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world.<sup>40</sup>

Women's experience of subjugation as knowers sparks insights illuminating a wider conversation about knowing that invites participation from both men and women. As Harding points out, however, it is not women's experiences in themselves that ground knowledge reliably. Rather, the process of recognizing how the experience of domination is put together and maintained (at the expense of some and for the benefit of others), and of struggling against this domination, may provide a solid epistemological base.<sup>41</sup>

At the same time, no position, not even subjugation, intrinsically exempts the one who occupies it from critical reflection, deconstruction, and reconstruction. These essential epistemological activities thrive on the dissonances that exist within collectivities of knowers, and within individual knowers, when "who we are" is in at least two places at once: outside and within, margin and center."<sup>42</sup> Along these lines, bell hooks describes one of the formidable gifts of the "outsider-within" standpoint that her mother taught her, namely, the "power to be able to separate useful knowledge that I might get from the dominating group from participation in ways of knowing that would lead to estrangement, alienation, and worse—assimilation and co-optation."<sup>43</sup> Those in relatively more privileged positions (by virtue of the preponderance of "advantage" among their multiple identities) have much to learn from "outsiders within"; they may learn something about the perspective from the margins, but they may also learn to see themselves with greater clarity. Code is persuaded of the possibility of realizing an equitable "conversational format" in which "no participant need deny the unique contribution that her interim privilege or lack thereof enables her to make."<sup>44</sup>

Experience, then, counts heavily in feminist epistemological proposals. But experience is understood as "lived," a generator of consciousness-awakening contradictions, and a shaper of the particularity of persons (rather than an

homogenizer). Each one's experiences play a part in the creation of what turn out to be multiple identities, which in turn have a hand in organizing each one's experiences. The negotiation of what we have in common because of our experiences is as much a challenge to our sense of responsibility as is the recognition of our differences.<sup>45</sup>

*Objectivity*

Objectivity is, as Code says, one of the key "regulative principles"<sup>46</sup> governing any serious discussion of epistemology, especially as it takes up the issues of what—about the knower, the method of coming to know, and (sometimes) the object of knowledge—legitimizes real "knowledge" even as it denies that status to beliefs and mere opinions. Rigorous scientific standards ensure objectivity. Objectivity ensures trustworthiness, in knowledge-seeking as well as in adjudicating matters of "justice." Objectivity denotes levelheadedness, dispassion, clarity of perception, the setting aside of partisan interests. Objectivity is generally held in high regard.

Feminist projects in epistemology take the matter of objectivity very seriously. While much of what feminists have to say about it is quite critical—as we shall briefly review—the quality of their criticism suggests that they are not as interested in dispensing with objectivity as they are in "separat[ing it] from its shameful and damaging history"<sup>47</sup> and reclaiming for it a constructive rather than an exclusive and, frankly, unrealistic epistemological function.<sup>48</sup>

In fact it may make more sense to ask how objectivity *functions* than to ask what it is. Admittedly, to begin with the question of function reveals some skepticism about objectivity's reputation as the last word in justifying our acceptance of something as "true." (Objectivity may be another of those "mystified concepts" Minnich has sensitized us to.) Asking how it functions, however, probably

will give us a better angle on its several dimensions. It will also draw us into the question of whether we can do without objectivity; relativism hovers, which makes everyone (perhaps especially feminists) nervous.<sup>49</sup> In the end feminist conversation about objectivity turns constructive, offering some novel angles of its own.

Objectivity's good name seems to be built on the conviction, too simply stated here, that reality is "out there" and that its components can be "objectified"—in some crucial sense, held apart from and over against those who observe—and known. "Objectivity" in this sense is better renamed "objectivism." As discussed earlier in this chapter, the respective roles objects and subjects play in knowing are distinct and nonreciprocal: objects are the "know-ees" and subjects, the "know-ers." Assuming the rules of the game are strictly adhered to, objectivity-as-objectivism becomes a way of indicating the correspondence between reality and our epistemological grip on it.<sup>50</sup>

According to this view, value-free perspectives exist and must be maintained. The objectivist view is, in a curious way, the view from nowhere<sup>51</sup>; because reality *is* in principle accessible to "objective" observers, it does not matter precisely where they are: they could be anywhere and the view would still be the same, if the observers *are* in fact "objective." (There is a certain circularity about the reasoning.) Social causes do not—cannot—bear serious epistemological weight, except as an interesting gloss on the harder evidence that establishes the "objective" truth about something. Knowledge production must (implying it *can*) be protected from politics. When "objective" knowledge is challenged, "ideology" or "politics" is sure to be accused of playing a subversive role.

One of the most trenchant criticisms of this sort of objectivity-as-objectivism comes from Harding, who writes,

[W]e have no conception of objectivity that enables us to distinguish the scientifically "best

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descriptions and explanations” from those that fit most closely (intentionally or not) with the assumptions that elites in the West do not want critically examined.<sup>52</sup>

Unless there is a conception of objectivity, or an alternative to it, that makes room for critical treatment of dominant assumptions, scientific or other, “best descriptions and explanations” will be a category empty of epistemological value.

But what happens if we do give up on objectivity? If an insistence on objectivity is predicated on the conviction that there is a knowable, “one-true-story” sort of reality, then its counterpart, relativism, may be said to rest on the conviction (or, in some, incite the fear) that there is no such thing. At its best, relativism in epistemology means that “there is no universal, unchanging framework or scheme for rational adjudication among competing knowledge claims.”<sup>53</sup> At its worst, relativism assigns primary epistemological value to the productions of personal subjectivity, the expressions of an individual’s spontaneous consciousness. In any case, all knowledge is constructed and socially located. If this is true, what possibility exists for reliable, solid knowledge? Relativism may be, as Haraway suggests, “the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both . . . [promise] vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully.”<sup>54</sup>

Like objectivity-as-objectivism, however, relativism may be better understood in terms of its function. Harding observes that relativism as an epistemological issue, and value, emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century: “[It] was a safe stance for Europeans to choose; the reciprocity of respect it appeared to support had little chance of having to be enacted.”<sup>55</sup> In any case, it may be that relativism becomes a problematic (rather than a helpful) construct when the views of those who dominate are being challenged.



When established relations of power (and the theories of knowledge that sanction them) are threatened, the fallout can make it seem as if the world—or at least the one true story about it—is coming to an end. “Relativism” becomes the intellectual equivalent of the plague.

What makes the tension between “objectivity” and “relativism” interesting in the context of the present discussion is that feminist epistemologists are no more eager than anyone else to dispense with either one. Haraway describes the parameters of the problem:

. . . “[O]ur” problem is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects . . . *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.<sup>56</sup>

It is perhaps not surprising that, even as she describes the problem, Haraway affirms what a review of feminist epistemological work suggests: “In traditional philosophical categories, the issue is ethics and politics perhaps more than epistemology.”<sup>57</sup> Her clarification is helpful, especially for those who are skeptical (to say the least) about whether what Haraway and others are doing really is epistemology. However, the point of this new work is precisely that it adapts and augments the epistemological vocabulary to enable talk about knowing to correspond to what makes the notion of “objectivity” so difficult to specify in the midst of daily living. Here, feminists argue, to neglect—among other matters—how power and privilege help define legitimate knowers and knowledge, and how and whom privilege-legitimated knowing serves, is to free epistemology from any accountability. Drifting untethered over the political and moral landscape, it

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remains an abstraction, an intellectual hot-air balloon, with no discernible connection with the embodied reality of actual people's lives.

Coming up with a usable understanding of objectivity that acknowledges the constructedness of both knowledge and epistemology's terms of reference, on the one hand, and yet offers rigor and reliability, on the other, involves a degree of intellectual imaginativeness not usually associated with the term. Harding believes that in the wider conversation about objectivity, feminists must—remarkably—insist on tougher standards. What she calls “strong objectivity” requires critical identification and evaluation of the *causes* of human beliefs—even, or maybe especially, those powerful background beliefs that have long passed for “objective truths.” “. . . [E]ven if the ideal of identifying all the causes of human beliefs is rarely if ever achievable,” Harding asks, “why not hold it as a desirable standard?”<sup>58</sup> Strong objectivity may be seen to extend the notion of scientific research to include systematic examination of mystified concepts and faulty generalizations.

How can this be accomplished? We must “start thought . . . from multiple lives that are in many ways in conflict with one another and each of which has its own multiple and contradictory commitments.”<sup>59</sup> Among these “multiple lives” and “multiple and contradictory commitments” we are perhaps best advised to start from the less favored positions—those whose peculiar partiality<sup>60</sup> has a good chance of alerting us to the distortions we cannot see when we are comfortably ensconced, or entrenched, in them. Haraway's observation about what she calls the “knowing self” suggests what makes it possible for us to enter into this process:

[It] is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and *therefore*

able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.<sup>61</sup>

Not only knowledge (and the world knowledge is about) and epistemology are constructed; we as embodied, knowing selves and as communities of such selves are also constructed—"stitched together imperfectly." What might seem an epistemological objectivist's nightmare is construed by feminists as the necessary starting point for talking about knowledge claims, which are, as feminists say, claims on people's lives. For feminists, objectivity is not about transcending limits and responsibility, but about apprehending embodied specificity and being answerable for what we learn to see and know.

Perhaps because women have been and are so frequently objectified, feminist epistemology lays great stress on a quite different disposition, one that regards the object of knowledge

as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as a slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and authorship of "objective" knowledge . . . . [C]oming to terms with the agency of the "objects" studied is the only way to avoid gross error and false knowledge of many kinds . . . .<sup>62</sup>

"Coming to terms with the agency of the object of knowledge" also shows respect for the object; this is more a statement commending observer/subject humility vis-à-vis the surround than it is a glorification of the actor-agent/object. The disposition to regard the object as agent does entail risks—personal, epistemological, even political. It has a chance to work better if "conversation" replaces "discovery" as the key metaphor for knowledge-seeking. Such conversation involves sensitivity to relations of power and

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privilege that silence some voices and amplify others. It also involves commitment to participatory rather than coercive values. Among these values care (in the sense of both “carefulness” and “loving care”) counts for a great deal: there is a kind of reliable, very elaborate specificity about the world (including other humans) that, if attended to with care, generates quite sturdy knowledge.<sup>63</sup> (It should but probably does not go without saying that subjectivity cannot help playing a role in the establishment of objectivity; that role, monitored self-consciously, is positive.)

Feminist thinkers argue that “objectivity” must cease to name the epistemological outcomes of a driving ambition to control or master the objects of knowledge. Instead it must be associated with the provisional, partial, and ongoing search for fidelity in and about a world, as Haraway points out, in which “‘we’ are permanently mortal, that is, not in ‘final’ control . . .”<sup>64</sup> Attentive humility and answerability are two of the qualities most in demand for this sort of search.

### *Accountability*

Accountability has been part of this discussion from the start. The whole project of feminist epistemologies arose from a profound dissatisfaction with the perceived unresponsiveness of traditional epistemological frameworks to “what women know,” to “women’s ways of knowing,” and to issues of moment to women’s lives but excluded from prevailing (androcentric) agendas in scientific research (both “hard” and “social”) and philosophical/ethical reflection. Feminist discussion of traditional epistemological frameworks has judged them wanting in two ways. First, it has dealt with what might be called their “incompetence” to encompass or acknowledge a wider epistemological horizon—one that takes women, for example, into serious account. As Minnich points out, this incompetence was a “log” in the

eyes of those who discerned the “motes” distorting others’ vision: “. . . *the reasons why it was considered right and proper to exclude the majority of humankind were and are built into the very foundations of what was established as knowledge.*”<sup>65</sup> Any theory or way of talking about how we know must be “competent” to include the knowing of those (like women) who have been excluded.

Second, feminists have dealt with the injustices that flow from—or are at least fostered by—faulty epistemological frameworks. In doing so, they have given a particularly spirited series of accounts of the ethical and moral dimensions both of what we know and, at one level of abstraction removed, of the criteria we use to gather, test, legitimate, and pass along what we know. They have shown the intimate, reciprocal interrelation between the construction of knowledge and the construction of epistemologies, between what is “seen” and the lenses through which we look. Whatever the aesthetic or even intellectual merits of this sort of analysis (and there are some), feminists have been driven mainly by a conscientious awareness of the damage—physical, psychological, economic, spiritual, and other—exclusionary frameworks foster, and their commitment to changing such frameworks.<sup>66</sup> Even those who benefit from such frameworks are damaged by them, though not in the same ways or to the same degree.<sup>67</sup>

The point of distinguishing what is “incompetent” (in the sense used here) from what is wrong (because it generates injustice) is to establish both that there are two elements involved and that, while they can be distinguished, they cannot be separated. Code makes this quite explicit:

Every . . . process [of moral deliberation] has a cognitive core, for the quality of the deliberation and the conclusions—both theoretical and practical—it legitimates are shaped by an agent’s *knowledge* of the situation, the problem, and the people

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concerned . . . [The] quality of the cognitive project in which it is based shapes moral thought and action . . . [And] conversely, ethical issues are implicated in analyses of knowledge . . .<sup>68</sup>

If this argument is valid, as most feminists would claim, then to the extent that one accepts accountability for one element, one must also accept it for the other.

But feminist epistemologists understand accountability not only—or even primarily—as an individual (or collective) moral burden “over against” intellectual or ethical standards set for knowers, knowledge, and knowing, whether that burden is borne by privileged men (who may exclude women), or by relatively privileged women (who may also exclude others). Epistemological accountability, feminists argue, is rather—and mainly—interpersonal, a matter of going about the tasks of scrutinizing frameworks, constructing alternatives, examining consequences, legitimating epistemological evidence, and so forth “. . . in *shared* processes of discovery, expression, interpretation, and adjustment *between persons*.”<sup>69</sup>

In lifting up the differences between knowing “objects” and knowing people, Code seeks to illustrate the negotiated (even more than the constructed) character of much of our most highly valued knowledge as social and political creatures. “. . . [K]nowing other people,” she writes, “precisely because of the fluctuations and contradictions of subjectivity, is an ongoing, communicative, interpretive process.”<sup>70</sup> The reciprocity involved in this sort of knowing invites accountability; when reciprocity is not recognized, nor accountability accepted, brute power fabricates what passes for knowledge, and such knowledge need not be “competent” in the sense described above.

Interpersonal epistemological accountability is risky business, for it requires ongoing involvement with others. And

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[i]f the others I need to understand are actual others . . . and not . . . replaceable occupants of a general status, they will require of me an understanding of their/our story and its concrete detail. Without this I cannot know *how it is* with others toward whom I will act . . . .<sup>71</sup>

The understanding “others” will require takes at least some of its shape from the assumptions epistemological frameworks help us to sustain about what can be known, who can know, and what knowledge is for as well as what it is about. The fact that knowing in this interpersonal context means knowing “actual others,” not “replaceable occupants of a general status,” means that epistemological frameworks must avoid what some feminists call “totalizing,” that is, acting as if one size assumption, criteria, or guideline is appropriate to all. Uniformity and completeness, resolution and stability, antidotes to the anxieties generated by their mundane opposites, inspire totalizing theories in many disciplines, the sciences and philosophy among them.

Accountability in epistemological terms means embracing the notion that knowledge is a profoundly moral concern. It means acknowledging the range and richness of the ways knowing and theories about it take moral shape. Finally, it means acting as if one is answerable, both individually and as a member of the larger human collectivity, for one’s approach to knowing.

*Turning to Luther*

Late twentieth-century feminists who have thought a lot about knowing began to do so out of a passionate concern, rooted in (their) lived experience, that traditional epistemologies nourished on power and privilege not only

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underreport reality but also wreak havoc ethically. Feminists' constructive responses to the ignorance and abuses fostered by exclusionary theories about knowing stress greater sensitivity to the value and complexity of our various "lived experiences," individually and collectively. There are no "innocent" positions in the struggles to transform both ways of knowing and the reality that knowing refers to. A "strong objectivity" involves a provisional, partial, and ongoing search for fidelity within and about a world we do not, finally, control; in this search, we need to seek out multiple voices beginning, perhaps, with those whose voices have not yet been heard. This project requires accountability, not only to reliable standards of evidence but more important, to one another and a shared future.

At this juncture, I will risk asserting that as we turn from secular feminist philosophers and their twentieth-century epistemologies to Luther and his sixteenth-century theology of the cross, we may find intriguing affinities. I am less interested in spelling them out here—their collaboration is taken up in Chapter 3—than in suggesting that they are there, and in inviting the reader to meet a different kind of reformer: one whose life, disposition, and work are rich resources for a conversation we've wished we'd been able to have for years.