

The Early Feminist Epistemology of Frances Wright: Interconnectivity and Synthesis

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Frances Wright was born in 1795 in Scotland. Orphaned before she was three, Wright and her younger sister, Camilla, were brought up by their aunt. Wright found life with her aunt too restrictive and both sisters went to live with their uncle, James Mylne, when Wright was eighteen. James Mylne, a professor of philosophy, was a liberal thinker who, among other things, was a utilitarian. It was during the time spent at her uncle's house that Wright took part in discussion groups on literature and philosophy and she began writing herself.

In 1818 the Wright sisters left for America. It was here that Wright became involved with the abolitionist movement and moved in reformist circles, most notably that of the Scottish reformer Robert Owen. In 1828 Wright began her career as a public speaker, and her lectures are published as the *Course of Popular Lectures*. Wright was certainly a stirring public speaker and these early lectures were well attended; indeed, this period was the apex of Wright's intellectual and public career when halls were filled to capacity and she would receive thunderous applause at the conclusion of her lectures. However, she was also excoriated for daring to step outside of a "woman's sphere" and taking on the "masculine" role of public speaker. Wright left America in 1829 to travel to Haiti and then France; she did not return to America until 1835. Although Wright continued to write and speak for most of her life, she never again received the following she had during her first foray into public speaking and her writing is intellectually fallow; however, her decline in later years should not be allowed to detract from her earlier achievements.

Wright's philosophy

Little has been written on Wright as a philosopher; indeed, the vast majority of the academic secondary literature on Wright is on her role as an early female rhetor or her experiment in community living at Nashoba. It is not clear why this should be so. Her intellect was respected by Jeremy Bentham, among others; indeed, Henry Rogers, an American lecturer in natural philosophy, wrote after hearing Wright speak that she was a "prodigy in learning, in intellect and in courage, she awes into deference the most refractory of bigots."¹

The *Course of Popular Lectures*, Wright's major work, has a philosophical framework within which Wright has a – somewhat rudimentary – epistemology, metaphysics, ethics, and politics. Before we are tempted to dismiss her work for not offering a fully fleshed out philosophy, we must remember that she is not writing philosophy for its own sake but for the practical goal of social change. Her ultimate goal was "PRACTICAL EQUALITY, or, THE UNIVERSAL AND EQUAL IMPROVEMENT OF THE

¹ Quoted in Celia Morris Eckhardt, *Fanny Wright: Rebel in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 183.

CONDITION OF ALL, UNTIL, BY THE GRADUAL CHANGE IN THE VIEWS AND HABITS OF MEN, AND THE CHANGE CONSEQUENT UPON THE SAME, IN THE WHOLE SOCIAL ARRANGEMENTS OF THE BODY POLITIC, THE AMERICAN PEOPLE SHALL PRESENT IN ANOTHER GENERATION, BUT ONE CLASS, AND, AS IT WERE, BUT ONE FAMILY – EACH INDEPENDENT IN HIS AND HER OWN THOUGHTS, AND ALL CO-OPERATING, ACCORDING TO THEIR INDIVIDUAL TASTE AND ABILITY, TO THE PROMOTION OF THE COMMON WEAL” (Caps. in the original, Parting Address, June 1830, 16).² And here it would seem that Wright is arguing for a people undivided by race, class or gender. For Wright, there was one way and one way only that such equality could be achieved and this was through education. However, Wright was not talking about equal access to schools and colleges; her epistemological commitments also required a radical reconceptualization of what education was and how it was delivered.

The first three lectures are essential for an understanding of Wright’s philosophy and the epistemological commitments that lie behind her view of education; the other lectures are either expansions on the topics raised in these three, or discussions of practical political and social changes that come out of her basic philosophy. In the first lecture, “On the Nature of Knowledge,” Wright explains that knowledge is not what is taught in schools; rather it is “acquaintance with ourselves” and “with all things to which we stand in relation” (22). We obtain this knowledge through observation, specifically, our senses and “our faculties, as awakened and improved in and by the exercise of our senses” (22). For Wright, the truth or falsity of our opinions rest on the truth or falsity of the evidence they are based upon. In other words, “just opinions are the result of just knowledge” (19). If we later discover that our opinions were incorrect, then it is because we did not do a proper initial investigation or there is a problem with our recollection of our sensory perceptions (see 25).

Despite the fact that knowledge is discovered through the senses of individual knowers, what we discover will agree with that of others: “as we can only *know* a thing by its immediate contact with our senses, so is *all knowledge compounded of the accurately observed, accumulated, and agreeing sensations of mankind*” (29). Moreover, the goal of knowledge is not just to improve ourselves but to ameliorate the human condition and thus knowledge should be shared. We can benefit from the knowledge of others, although – for us – this will not be knowledge. For Wright, the distinction between what she calls true knowledge and what she calls belief is that in the latter case we are basing our opinion on the observations of others. This belief will be stronger or weaker depending on such factors as the known veracity of these other observers or whether they are reporting their own immediate experiences of those of a third party.

The immediate consequence of Wright’s view is its effect on the content and delivery of education. If knowledge is acquired through the senses, then students will learn through practical demonstrations in which they can hear, touch and see. If they are taught through lectures then they will only believe not know. This then also means that the different disciplines will be divided into two groupings – those of knowledge and those of belief –

² All quotations from Wright are from *Course of Popular Lectures*, New York, G.W. & A.J. Matsell, 1835.

with the study of chemistry, for example, classified under knowledge and that of history under belief. It is interesting to note that Wright is mistrustful of those who are currently educators because she believes that they are unlikely to question the material they are to teach as they do not want to lose their jobs.

The second lecture, “Of Free Enquiry Considered as a Means for Obtaining Just Knowledge,” expands on Wright’s claim that just knowledge comes from “a judicious education and a free spirit of enquiry” (41). Wright states that the improvement of the human race depends on the improvement of the situation of women. “Let women stand where they may in the scale of improvement, their position decides that of the race. Are they cultivated ? – so is society polished and enlightened. Are they ignorant ? – so it is gross and insipid. Are they wise ? – so is the human condition prosperous. Are foolish ? – so is it unstable and unpromising. Are they free ? – so is the human character elevated. Are they enslaved ? – so is the whole race degraded” (44-5). For Wright, women “form the opinions, sway the habits, [and] decide the destinies” of the human race, not only through their children but through their lovers and husbands (55).

Clearly then, Wright gives a lot of power to the influence of women, but this is not the typical “feminine” moral influence attributed to women by some nineteenth century writers. Moreover, while Wright may appear to be agreeing with a popular view among nineteenth century reformers, such as James Mill or Charles Fourier, that social progress could be measured by the level of women’s emancipation, there is more going on here. According to Wright, there is something about men that means that they are easily controlled by women: “Men will ever rise or fall to the level of the other sex; and from some causes in their conformation, we find them, however armed with power or enlightened with knowledge, still held in leading strings even by the least cultivated female” (54). It is not clear whether men are controlled through their sexuality by their wives and mistresses or whether they are just generally weak-willed in the presence of women. Either way, Wright comes to the radical conclusion that if only one sex is to be enlightened, then it should be women not men. Indeed, she even makes a claim for the superiority of women as they are “by far the most important and influential” half of the human race (44). These views would then seem to answer Wright’s claim in the previous lecture that her sex was actually a qualification for lecturing her audience on the truth.

However, Wright is not simply offering a utilitarian argument that educating women will benefit the human race. Nor is she arguing that women should replace men in the social hierarchy. The betterment of the human race will only come about through collective engagement with the work of enquiry and – Wright states emphatically – this can only come about when humans work collaboratively as equals. Here Wright is not just talking about sexual equality, she is also talking about racial (and class) equality. For Wright, equality of education is foundational to equality and equal rights: “Equality ! where is it, if not in education ? Equal rights ! they cannot exist without equality of instruction” (46). Here Wright means that we cannot exercise our equality of rights without this equality of instruction. Moreover, Wright argues, without equality there can be no liberty.

For Wright, it is freedom of enquiry that will lead us to understand and respect these rights of liberty and equality and the rest of the second lecture is devoted to the praise of free enquiry and an examination of its benefits.

The third lecture, “Of the More Important Divisions and Essential Parts of Knowledge,” is deceptively titled. Wright has shown us “the nature and object of just knowledge” and the means – free enquiry – for obtaining that knowledge and she states that she will now turn to a discussion of “those parts or divisions” of knowledge with which we should be most concerned (63). What follows, however, is far more than a discussion of the different branches of knowledge, such as physics, as Wright establishes her account of morality within her metaphysics and epistemology and initiates her criticism of organized religion.

Knowledge, for Wright, falls into two categories: knowledge of ourselves, and knowledge of the world around us. In the first category she places anatomy, physiology and the natural history of humans. The second category she calls physics and this includes astronomy and animal biology as well as what may properly be called physics. Once we have knowledge of these things, then we may study, for example, history, for we are now in a position to judge what we are told about history in relation to what we know about the nature of man and the world and thus to judge whether we should believe what we are told or not. With this, her basic account of knowledge and its acquisition is complete. Wright is now free to pursue the implications of this account, specifically, how moral knowledge fits into her account of knowledge.

Wright on moral philosophy

Wright’s moral philosophy is introduced in lecture three when she imagines an interlocutor claiming that moral knowledge falls outside the scope of her account of knowledge as moral truths appear to our feelings not our senses. Wright responds that we have a sensibility towards the pains and pleasures of others; we first learn to distinguish pain from pleasure in ourselves and this sensibility then allows us to estimate the feelings of others. Here Wright is offering a form of moral sense theory. Further, Wright claims, it is the “beneficial or injurious consequences of actions [that] make us pronounce them virtuous or vicious,” in other words, actions that produce pleasurable sensations are deemed good and those which produce painful sensations are deemed bad; the “man of cultivated sensibility then refers his sensations and applies his experience to others, and sympathises in the pain or the pleasure he conceives them to feel” (78-9). And here, Wright is writing as a utilitarian. In this way then, Wright can claim that moral truths are based on fact: they are grounded on what we would call human physiology and psychology.

This somewhat simplistic utilitarianism and moral sense theorizing is made more interesting by the way Wright grounds it in her metaphysics and epistemology. For Wright, we are part of a whole; the elements of our bodies may change but they will always be part of the matter of the universe: “we stand, in our very nature, allied and associated with the air we breathe, the dust, the stone, the flower we tread; the worm that

crawls, the insect that hums around us its tiny song, the bird that wheels its flight through the blue ether, and all the varied multitude of animal existences, from the playful squirrel to the lordly elephant” (64). Once we see ourselves as part of the world in this way, “How calculated to awaken our intellectual faculties and excite our moral feelings ! Our sympathy is attracted to every creature, our attention to every thing. We see ourselves in the midst of a family endlessly diversified in powers, in faculties, in wants, in desires; in the midst of a world whose existence is one with our own, and in whose history each mode of being is an episode” (64).

Wright’s account of morality, or what she calls the “science of human actions or of human life” is further developed in lecture five (109). Continuing with her notion of the interconnectedness of humans, she states that the standard notion of dividing up actions into those which affect only ourselves and those which affect others is nearly impossible to make. Wright argues that nearly any action we consider cannot be seen independently of its effects on others and the effects of these effects rebounding back on ourselves. She claims that the only actions which truly just affect ourselves are those that involve “the gratification of the appetites appertaining to our nature” (118). A careful calculation of the costs to ourselves of the gratification of these appetites will show us that there is a middle path of temperance between over-indulgence and unhealthy self-denial.

Wright continues to maintain in lecture five that we have a natural principle of sympathy for others and she now wants to show that this view is in accord with what she sees as the view of many philosophers – presumably she is thinking especially of Bentham here – that individual self interest lies at the foundation of morality. Wright is able to synthesize these two views by arguing that “self-love and self-interest, rightly understood... always lead to justice, beneficence, gentleness, truth, candor, and indulgent toleration” (119). She says if we calculate the consequences of our actions we can see that selfish enjoyments are brief, whereas pleasures we share with others or that we give to others remain in our memory and give pleasure whenever we are reminded of them, even if these pleasures also contain a loss of pleasure or inconvenience to ourselves. Thus rational calculation of our self interest means that we will promote the happiness of others. However, for Wright, there is something more to morality that is “better than any process of reasoning” and “which prompts us to spring forward to the relief of suffering” (120). We also have an emotion, “variously called by philosophers the moral principle, emotion, faculty, or sympathy,” which leads us to actively seek the pleasures of others, even at times in preference to our own (121). Despite the power of this emotion, Wright still maintains that it should not be the sole guide to moral action; instead it should be directed by our intellect.

This moral faculty is to be developed through education and thus again we can see how education is the cornerstone of Wright’s philosophy. Properly educated, the human race will develop morally, eschew the superstitions of religion, and respect the equal rights and liberties of others. Wright is clear about the interconnections of equal rights, the development of the moral faculty, and education: “equal rights must originate in equal condition... equal condition must originate in equal knowledge, and that sound knowledge... in similar habits, and those good habits... in brotherly sympathies” (Parting

address, 18). According to Wright, the foundation for these sympathies and habits will be a system of national education, a system that will be for rich and poor, male and female, and black and white and that will be grounded on Wright's view of true knowledge and how such knowledge is acquired.

Wright's philosophy and feminism

There is little doubt that Wright's philosophy draws from many sources, one commentator summarizes Wright's philosophy in the following way: "Wright's philosophy was primarily synthetic...the ideas behind Nashoba and her first lecture tour were compounded of Owenite antimarriage and antireligion themes, the utilitarianism of Bentham, the rationalist empiricism of Adam Smith, the common-sense philosophy of Thomas Reid, the feminism of Mary Wollstonecraft, and the antislavery feelings of British Whiggery."³

However, it is Wright's utilitarianism that she uses to bring together these disparate strands. At its core Wright's utilitarianism, as we have seen, is Benthamite. Vice and virtue are understood in terms of pleasure or pain. Good or virtuous actions are those which produce pleasure. However, Wright adds to Benthamite utilitarianism in two main – but interconnected – ways. A standard criticism that is often made of utilitarianism (or any form of consequentialist philosophy) is that it can lead to some kind of moral paralysis in our attempt to consider or calculate all the possible consequences of an action or in our recognition that a seemingly harmless act can have distant problematic consequences. What is interesting about Wright is that recognition of this interconnectedness of our actions is not a cause for paralysis but rather a cause for moral education and maturity. This is then linked to her second addition to Benthamite utilitarianism: her view that we have a natural principle of sympathy for others. Recognition of our interconnectedness will further this principle and – in its turn – this principle allows an understanding of our interconnectedness. Wright herself recognizes the divergence of this principle from Benthamite utilitarianism and – as we have seen – aims to show that this principle of sympathy is compatible with Benthamite individual self interest.

I would like to claim that these two divergences from Benthamite utilitarianism – and Wright's attempt to bring them together – constitute something more than a mere synthesis of Benthamite utilitarianism with other philosophies; rather Wright can be seen to be developing a perhaps rudimentary form of *feminist philosophy*: not a philosophical system that merely leads to feminist conclusions or reforms but one that is feminist in its actual structure. Wright's attempt to interconnect the different philosophical elements she draws upon is itself feminist in that she is eschewing an "adversarial" picture of philosophy: one where there are "winners" and "losers" and where the mark of the "winner" is the defeat of the arguments of – past or contemporary – others. Moreover, in offering a synthesized philosophy, Wright is implicitly rejecting the picture of philosophy

³ Robert J. Connors, "Frances Wright: First Female Civic Rhetor in America," *College English*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (Sep., 1999), 30-57: 39.

as a series of competing “isms,” which demands that we must take a position on one “ism” or another.

Instead – and in keeping with her approach to the search for truth – Wright wants to make connections between the different elements of philosophical thought that appear true to her and – more specifically – those that will bring about social change. Even though Wright sees women as more influential than men and as having a greater potential for enlightenment through knowledge, I am hesitant to say that her connective approach comes out of a “woman’s perspective”; rather it would appear to come out of Wright’s own version of utilitarianism: her utilitarianism is a philosophy of interconnections, both among human individuals and in terms of its philosophical structure.

Wright does not hold what modern feminist philosophers would call a “feminine ethics,” in that she is not claiming that an understanding of our interconnectedness and the principle of sympathy are related to the moral experience of women or are somehow more easily accessed by women. As I argued earlier in my analysis of the *Course of Popular Lectures*, Wright’s notions of interconnectedness and sympathy are grounded in her metaphysics and epistemology.

Instead, Wright’s philosophy is far better described as an early form of feminist philosophy. The core difference between feminist philosophy and mainstream philosophy is that the former does not claim to search for knowledge for its own sake, but rather for the sake of a political goal: resistance to, and elimination of, the subordination of women. Using this definition Wright’s thought is clearly a feminist philosophy; it is fundamentally a social philosophy designed to bring about social change, not just for women but for the other oppressed groups of working class and black Americans. Wright is demanding the inclusion of the interests of these groups and part of her ultimate goal is to give them moral agency and political empowerment.

It is not just in Wright’s social philosophy that an early form of feminist philosophizing can be seen, it can also be found in her metaphysics and epistemology. Modern feminist epistemologists have critiqued the way that women have been excluded from access to knowledge or have been labeled as incapable of knowledge in some way. Wright was an early precursor of this type of critique, moreover, she takes it further and states that denying women access to knowledge prevents the progress of the human race. Wright is not here holding some kind of “feminine” epistemology: she is not saying that there is some special “women’s knowledge” or “woman’s way of knowing” that will be added to the sum of human knowledge.

Wright’s epistemology is at its heart part of the traditional “masculinist” enterprise criticized by feminist philosophers. The ideal knower on this tradition is a solitary individual who obtains knowledge independently of other knowers; this knower reflects the experiences and ideals – not of humans in general – but of middle-class, white Western males. However, Wright shares with some (but not all) modern day feminist epistemological projects two elements: that knowledge has a political goal and that knowledge itself is ultimately accumulated agreement among the community of knowers.

Like some feminist epistemologists, Wright does not hold to the rigid dichotomy that is traditionally drawn between pure knowledge and the political values of the knower. For Wright, knowledge for its own sake is not the ultimate goal, rather knowledge must be shared and the ultimate goal of knowledge is the amelioration of social injustice. Even though Wright's knower is not the situated knower of modern feminist epistemology, this knower does not generate a universal account of knowledge in the traditional manner.⁴ Traditionally, it is only through being free of one's particular concrete situation that we can generate a universal account of knowledge. For Wright, not only are we accumulating knowledge for the sake of others as well as ourselves, but we must not conceive of ourselves as separate from the world around us. It is through agreement with others that we can generate a universal account of knowledge, and it must be remembered that – for Wright – this agreement is a collaborative enterprise conducted among equals.

Once we see Wright's work on this way, it serves to bring to the fore elements of her feminist view. Wright's focus is on the goal of education – the accessing of true knowledge – for women and other oppressed groups. Moreover, while she specifically identifies women more than other groups, Wright holds that social inequalities will only be dismantled through collective enquiry into knowledge, which – in its turn – will require a system of national education that will produce the foundation of a sense of interconnectedness with our fellow creatures.

Where Wright differs from other early feminists in her belief that education will bring about social justice is that she is not simply arguing for education for white women of the upper and/or middle classes, unlike, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft. Where she also differs from most other early feminists is that she grounds her views on education on a philosophical structure, and it is this philosophical structure that leads to Wright's radical conclusions about the equality of the races and classes, not just the genders. Indeed, Wright's ethics, epistemology and metaphysics could not lead to any other conclusion.

Ultimately, Wright's own version of utilitarianism lies at the core of her philosophy. As we have seen this version of utilitarianism is one of interconnectivity among humans. What is often seen as a problem for classical utilitarianism – moral totalitarianism, if you like – is something that Wright does not see as a problem but as a strength for her view of morality. On her account, “[t]here is a wrong and a right way of doing every things; a wrong and a right way of feeling everything; a wrong and right way of saying everything. We are therefore moral or immoral at every moment of our conscious existence” (116). This notion of interconnectivity among humans can be seen to play out in her ethics, epistemology and metaphysics. Moreover, I want to argue that this notion also plays out in the structure of her philosophical system, specifically in the way she synthesizes different philosophical views together. Her epistemological and moral goal is to find truths that will lead to the development and thus happiness of the human race. We are to work together to find these truths.

⁴ The concept of the situated knower means that the historical particulars of the knowers, such as their embodiment, relationships with others, social status, etc. affect both their access to knowledge and the way their knowledge claims are expressed, justified and accepted as authoritative.

What can we learn from Wright ?

I hope that I have been able to make a clear case for placing Wright into our history of feminist epistemology as well as feminist philosophy more generally. However, I recognize that initially it may seem a little odd that I am claiming her as a feminist epistemologist when I have stated that her philosophy has a moral theory – utilitarianism – at its core. This is the first thing we can learn from Wright as we look for our foremothers and as we think about our own projects in the present day. We tend to compartmentalize within our discipline, most of us work in particular sub-fields or areas. This means that when we look at historical texts we may have the tendency only to look for ethics, or epistemology or metaphysics, etc. We may then not do justice to the full scope of the work of our foremothers.

The individual components of Wright's philosophy probably have little use for us, but Wright leads us to a way of thinking about how modern feminist philosophy could look: a complete system. Through Wright we can learn how this system might look: it will need to be interconnected, with the explicit dismantling of disciplinary silos – metaphysics, ethics, etc. – that we have adopted from contemporary mainstream philosophy.