

An Epistemological Position: Knowledge by Sensation is the only Knowledge that can be regarded as Truth

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Introduction

Most Empiricists from Locke through Russell to the present have ... taken it for granted that knowledge begins with the sensory ideas, impressions, data, or other mental content of a single individual.
- Elizabeth Potter¹

I will start my deliberation into a Gender Epistemological Theory by examining the proceeding argument:

- P1: *Sensation is the only means of establishing truth claims*
- P2: *Truth claims are essential for establishing claims to knowledge*
- Co: *Knowledge by sensation is the only Knowledge that can be regarded as truth*

The stance presented above will aid in my delivery of a relevant Gender Epistemological Theory. We are connected to the external world primarily by our senses (sense data). Any claims that we can make about anything of this world, be it true or false (truth claims) are reliant and dependent upon our senses and their ability to relay such claims to us in a comprehensive and clarifying manner so as to establish knowledge about such objects or propositions. As Rene Descartes so rightly fashioned by his cogito, "I think therefore I am," I am mindful of my senses, as the means of acquiring external truths, and they relay such truths (appearances of reality) to me 'the thinking thing'. As such, I am able to process these external truths and decipher what is essential for my claims to knowledge about any object or proposition, in the truest sense of the word. Elizabeth Potter uses expositions on '*Epistemological Individualism and the Private Language Argument*' to expand on the functionality of '*Gender and Epistemic Negotiation*'. Her view, in support of my argument, posits that:

*The isolation of the individual mind, alone with its sensory ideas, is the fundamental situation of the epistemic agent in the Cartesian project, and the fundamental epistemological project is to show that the isolated, individual mind can be sure that he has knowledge of the external world.*²

On Defence of Sensation

Bertrand Russell looks at the issue of the senses and how they encompass our ability to identify the real (truth) from its misconception. In Russell's '*Theory of Knowledge*', the analysis of the differences which may occur between various cognitive relations (such as attention, sensation, memory, and imagination), and an explanation of how cognitive data (such as perceptions and concepts) may become elements of knowledge, are expounded upon in great detail. Russell

¹ Quoted in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 162.

² *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 161.

explains how knowledge may involve acquaintance with logical or empirical facts, and discusses the difference between acquaintance (as a dual relation between a subject and an object) and belief (as a multiple relation between a subject and a complex of objects). Russell also discusses the distinction between truth and falsehood, and explains the difference between direct and indirect knowledge (i.e. knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description).³

An important question here, concerning the limits of knowledge, is whether knowledge may be attained of things which are beyond our own personal experience. To this effect, Russell argues that such transcendent knowledge is possible, because we may, in some cases, be able to describe things which we have not experienced, if we use terms which are within our own personal experience.⁴ Also, we may know, in some cases, that there are things which we have forgotten, even though we may not be able to name such things. It is here that P1 of our argument becomes realised and accounts of a priori knowledge are refuted. It is not in our ability as humans to conceive of that which we are unable to imagine outside of our experience. In other words, I cannot imagine something *a priori*, as for something to be imagined by me it must first be known to me by experience relating to one or more objects in relation to that which is being perceived real. And after the truth of that which is being perceived is realized, I may chose to interpret and create various characteristics of that truth in regards to that which I am imagining.

Another important question is whether the nature of our experience is mental or physical and according to Russell, "materialistic monism" is the theory that all reality is physical, and that mental phenomena are merely rearrangements of physical matter..., "idealistic monism" is the theory that all reality is mental, and that the physical world is produced by the mind... and "neutral monism" is the theory that physical and mental reality are not intrinsically different, and that physical and mental phenomena are merely rearrangements of a single, neutral substance or element. It is within this said breath that he criticises each for their claims to knowledge, "materialistic monism" is criticized for its assertion that every cognitive relation is physical, and for its assertion that there are no abstract facts; "idealistic monism" for its assertion that we cannot experience the physical world directly and that we can only experience the physical world through the medium of "ideas"; and "neutral monism" for its inability to determine whether sensory experience is mental or physical, and for its inability to distinguish what is mental from what is physical.⁵

Russell hereto posited that acquaintance is the basic cognitive relation and fundamental aspect of human experience. Acquaintance is a subject-object relation in which an object is experienced (perceived, reflected upon, remembered, or imagined) by a subject. He further argues that there are no unreal objects of acquaintance. Illusionary or imagined objects may be real objects of acquaintance. Imagination, as a relation of acquaintance, may be as real as sensation and so forth. Thus, sensation is a relation of acquaintance with a particular object, and that the object of

3 Bertrand Russell, *Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, edited by Elizabeth Ramsden Eames in collaboration with Kenneth Blackwell, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984.

4 Bertrand Russell, *Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, edited by Elizabeth Ramsden Eames in collaboration with Kenneth Blackwell, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984.

5 Bertrand Russell, *Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, edited by Elizabeth Ramsden Eames in collaboration with Kenneth Blackwell, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984.

sensation is simultaneously present for the subject. Memory, on the other hand, is a relation in which a subject recalls a past acquaintance with a particular object. Imagination is a relation which, unlike sensation or memory, does not depend on any temporal relation between the subject and the object.⁶ Russell thus explains that sensation and memory establish temporal relations between subject and object, while simultaneity and succession establish temporal relations between an object and another object. Past, present and future are temporal relations between subject and object, while earlier and later are temporal relations between an object and another object.⁷

Here it is understood that the value of sensation, acquaintance or experience, does in fact hold its weight when we begin to consider truth claims in relation to validating knowledge and a gender epistemological theory. Moreover, the subjective aspect of how we come to know is also indicated by our Keynote speaker, Professor Lorraine Code, in ‘*Taking Subjectivity into Account*’ that:

For Positivists epistemologists, sensory observation in ideal observation conditions is the privileged source of Knowledge, offering the best promise of certainty. Knowers are detached, neutral spectators, and the objects of knowledge are separate from them; they are inert items in the observational knowledge – gather process. Findings are presented in propositions (e.g. S-Knows-that-p), which are verifiable by appeals to the observational data. Each individual knowledge-seeker is singly and separately accountable to the evidence; however, the belief is that his cognitive efforts are replicable by any other individual knower in the same circumstances.⁸

It is somewhat remarkable that Philosophers of old seemingly, or is it wilfully, overlooked the possibility that knowledge is entirely subjective and that accounts of *a priori* knowledge are reduced to simply miscategorised *a posteriori* accounts. The ability to reason is useless unless reason in itself bears on some truth(s) that we can know with some degree of certainty. For such reason we must apply the method of accounting for our knowledge of what is considered truth bearing, as knowledge is reliant upon truth claims which is believed to be that which can be attributed to knowledge of anything within the external world.

Truth Claims are Essential in Establishing Knowledge

I may differ here from the conventional method of establishing truth, as I hold a neo-pragmatist view of truth. For it simply makes more sense that the other theories, standing on their own, will bring a concise applicable theory of truth. What Pragmatism simply does is to unite the major theories of truth under a subjective scientific appropriation. Truth claims do not necessarily have to be true. In fact, knowledge is not reliant upon the propositions or the object under consideration to be true, but rather truth is required to establish knowledge of such proposition or

6 Bertrand Russell, *Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, edited by Elizabeth Ramsden Eames in collaboration with Kenneth Blackwell, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984, pp 62-64.

7 Bertrand Russell, *Theory of Knowledge: The 1913 Manuscript*, edited by Elizabeth Ramsden Eames in collaboration with Kenneth Blackwell, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984, pp 64.

8 *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, pp 17.

object. Hence, the truth of the matter that the earth was flat is in fact, a valid account of knowledge of the earth's appearance up until 14th Century B.C. where that knowledge was replaced by another. So what are we really saying then, that knowledge cannot be universal and it is susceptible to change? This would lead to a 'no' and 'yes' response.

Unlike traditional methods or modules that account for what is considered knowledge, in the truest sense of the word, my gender epistemological position will greatly differ. First, how an individual come to know something is totally reliant upon sensation. As established previously, sensation is the only way we as individuals are connected to each other and the external world. It is by sensation that we come to know some propositions and objects under consideration and it is the only way that we can come to be cognisant of such said propositions or objects. For example:

P knows that L is, because P has experienced L and has truth of L, thus knows L.

The proposition is simply relaying that 'I am knowledgeable of a tree because I have experienced a tree and will know a tree whenever I see one; therefore I know what a tree is.' Truth claims are therefore indispensable for one to be able to claim knowledge about any particular proposition or object and for that matter anything that can be imagined or contemplated internally. This is particularly true, because we are only able to fathom that which we already are knowledgeable about and nothing that we did not experience in some measure. For I cannot dream of flying and I do not know what flying is, even if I should mix and match characteristics of events, objects or propositions, I must first be knowledgeable of all that will be contemplated in that dream. This position thus relays significant to our proposed argument P2. So then, as it relates to a gender epistemological theory, it has become clear that sensation is the only method of establishing truth claims, that truth claims are essential for establishing claims to knowledge, and here, that indeed, knowledge by sensation is the only knowledge that can be regarded as truth.

Objectivity Remapped

Well the most likely objection to my subjective walk, in establishing a subjective knowledge, is 'Objectivity'. However, objectivity is essentially a myth and as such is unwarranted as a criterion for acquiring knowledge as it is conventionally used. Let us take a closer look at objectivity as it relates to epistemology. Generally, objectivity is a characteristic which has been applied to beliefs, individuals, theories, observations, and methods of inquiry. It is generally thought to involve the willingness to let our beliefs be determined by 'the facts' or by some impartial and non-arbitrary criteria rather than by our wishes as to how things ought to be.⁹

As it relates to its epistemological positions, the sceptical argument is directed towards the possibility of objective enquirers who adopt objective methods which lead to true theories. The most common reason given for a sceptical conclusion is that there can be no value-free enquiry. Clearly the assumption behind this reason is that whenever values or interests are shown to be influencing an enquiry or informing a method then the enquiry and the method are not objective

⁹ Longino, Helen. (1990) *Science as a Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp 62.

because the facts are not directing. Either both values and interests are guiding the enquiry or the facts are. It was assumed that at most one of these can be at work.¹⁰

However, the conception of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination from the results of research, yet it has been operationalized to identify and eliminate only those social values and interest that differ among the researchers and critics who are regarded by the scientific community as competent to make such judgements. If the community of “qualified” researchers and critics systematically excludes, for example, all African-Americans and women of all races and if the larger culture is stratified by race and gender and lacks powerful critiques of this stratification, it is not plausible to imagine that racist and sexist interests and values would be identified within a community of scientists composed entirely of people who benefit-intentionally or not-from institutionalized racism and sexism. This kind of blindness is advanced by the conventional belief that the truly scientific part of knowledge seeking – the part controlled by methods of research – occurs only in the context of justification. The context of discovery, in which problems are identified as appropriate for scientific investigation, hypotheses are formulated, key concepts are defined – this part of the scientific process is thought to be unexamined within science by rational methods. Thus “real science” is restricted to those processes controllable by methodological rules. The methods of science – or rather, of the special sciences – are restricted to procedures for the testing of already formulated hypotheses. Untouched by these methods are those values and interests entrenched in the very statement of what problem is to be researched and in the concepts favoured in the hypothesis that are to be tested. Recent histories of science are full of cases in which broad social assumptions stood little chance of identification or elimination through the very best research procedures of the day.¹¹

Thus, objectivism operationalizes the notion of objectivity in much too narrow a way to permit the achievement of the value-free research that is supposed to be its outcome. But objectivism also conceptualizes the desired value-neutrality of objectivity too broadly. Objectivists claim that objectivity requires the elimination of all social values and interests from the research process and the results of the research. But this can only hold to be true in theory, and if it is true only in theory then it does not correspond, coheres or pragmatically relates to that of reality, hence objectivity as it relates here is in substantive. Rather it is a subjective correlation which is embedded in value based scientific enquiry that will be objectively classified as truth and Knowledge worthy.

A Gender Epistemological Theory

This brings me to my Gender Epistemological Theory. According to Miranda Fricker in her work, *‘Knowledge as Construct: Theorizing the role of gender in knowledge’*:

¹⁰ *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, London: Routledge 1994, pp 81.

¹¹ *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 161.

*There are two specifications for establishing any adequate epistemology which provides the ground-rules... They are... norms for belief and... that it must distinguish between a first and second-order perspective on belief in a way which sustains the capacity for self-criticism. Without these two requirements, we would be burdened with an epistemology forbidding as to think of ourselves as believers in any but the most impoverished sense.*¹²

Looking at the first specification, “norms for belief”, if there is nothing that we ought to believe, but merely a range of possible beliefs to choose from at will, then this renders belief a largely arbitrary business. Now turning towards the second specification, this is that a theory of knowledge must distinguish between a first and second-order perspective to enable self-criticism, which is seemingly implied by the first specification. It is also empirically imperative that an epistemology can account for how it is indeed possible to criticize our own practice at least up to a point, since human beings plainly have some limited self-critical faculty.¹³ This is essentially what epistemology is and it is my aim to associate a gender epistemology with these specifications as its ground-rules.

Helen Longino has argued that the ideal of a value-neutral science is misconceived.¹⁴ And in essence, her argument has four main steps first of which she makes use of ‘the underdetermination thesis’, that theory is underdetermined by data, in order to argue that values of some kind are always involved in the formulation and evaluation of hypotheses. Second, it follows from this that there is no way of eliminating *a priori* the invocation of values in hypothesis formation and evaluation. Third, she sets up a possible distinction between ‘constitutive’ values internal to the sciences, which determine rules of method, etc., and ‘contextual’ values external to proper scientific practice, which is culturally or socially contingent. But it follows, once again from the underdetermination thesis that there are no formal grounds to differentiate between these two types of values and fourth, that science which explicitly invokes ‘contextual’ values is not necessarily ‘bad’ science.¹⁵

The overall aim of the argument, then, is to show that there can, at least sometimes, be ‘good’ science which invokes socio-politically relevant values. This is not to say that all scientific reasoning involves value-related assumptions. Sometimes auxiliary assumptions will be supported by mundane inductive reasoning... If, however, there is no *a priori* way to eliminate such assumptions from evidential reasoning generally, and, hence, no way to rule out value-laden

12 *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, London: Routledge 1994, pp 96.

13 *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, London: Routledge 1994, pp 96.

14 Longino, Helen, ‘Can there be a Feminist Science?’ in *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 203-16.

15 *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, London: Routledge 1994, pp 97

assumptions, then there is no formal basis for arguing that an inference mediated by contextual values is thereby bad science.¹⁶

Conclusion

This is in fact the case with feminist epistemology, African epistemology and so on. However, I dismiss any claims to knowledge under these titled disciplines and posit that a gender epistemology is more fitting to incorporate all the different epistemologies that were negated from philosophy from its western-derived-male conception. Looking at African Epistemology you can clearly see that there are in fact differences from the mainstream to how one comes to know and this is a clear indication that culture and or society plays a significant role in how we derive our knowledge. This is also the case with Feminist Epistemology as it shows that even within culture and society there exists difference in views based on gender, social status, and historical framework. This undoubtedly leads to not just an African, Chinese, Palestinian, Male, Female, etc, epistemology but rather a gender epistemology.

The structure of this theory I will not begin to discuss in this presentation, but rather, let us think on the points that such a position means when it relates to knowledge or the basis of how we come to conclude that we are in fact knowledgeable of a proposition or an object. A gender epistemology will radicalize philosophy not just on the basis of knowledge but on several avenues that once excluded such considerations.

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¹⁶ Longino, Helen, 'Can there be a Feminist Science?' in *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 207.