

Chapter 1

The Marginalization of Feminist Epistemology and What That Reveals About Epistemology ‘Proper’

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Abstract Though feminist epistemology has been in place for a quarter century, it still remains marginalized, if not invisible, in ‘mainstream’ epistemology. An implicit, if not explicit, assumption that feminist epistemology is not epistemology ‘proper’ regularly underwrites this marginalization. The construction of feminist work as ‘other’ to epistemology ‘proper’ reflects the legacy of a philosophical history of sexism and racism more than it reflects a uniform coherent project or area of inquiry that has been in place under the rubric ‘epistemology.’ Specific epistemological as well as political insights into the development of epistemology (of knowledge about knowledge) are available when we critically examine the relationship between feminist epistemology and mainstream epistemology. These epistemological or, in many cases, *metaepistemological* insights merit particular attention and development at this time. The proliferation of different approaches or directions in epistemology in recent decades provides rich ground for advantageous feminist intervention. Such intervention is necessary for the recovery of epistemology as a central philosophical discipline attuned to worlds of moral and political complexity.

Keywords Marginalization of feminist epistemology • Epistemology ‘proper’ • Feminist as other • Metaepistemology • Feminist metaepistemic advantage

*I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out;
and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in.*

– Virginia Woolf, *A Room Of One’s Own*

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1.1 A View from the Margins

It happened again just in this past year (2007), something that those of us who work in feminist epistemology had hoped to consign to the first 5 or 10 years in the development of the field. I was at a conference talking with two ‘mainstream’ epistemologists when I mentioned that my main area of research is feminist epistemology. Both looked somewhat puzzled and one of them asked, ‘What is feminist epistemology?’

On the face of it, this question seems quite innocuous, an expression of interest in feminist epistemology. It is a question that we who work in the area frequently address in our teaching or in explaining what we do to people who don’t work in epistemology. But situated in this professional context the question points to something of a problem: it underscores the persisting marginalization of feminist epistemology within the field of epistemology.

Feminist epistemology has been around for a quarter of a century now and it has not been hidden. Even a quick search on the Internet yields introductory essays and bibliographies that give a very good sense of the field.¹ My two discussants, both within a decade of graduate school, both claiming epistemology as their main area of interest in philosophy, had, it seems, never encountered feminist epistemology in any meaningful way in their classes or readings or professional contacts. If they had heard of the area (it’s difficult to know how they could not), their interest hadn’t been piqued enough to do a minimal search that would soon give a good indication of the variety of questions, interests, topics, and debates that those who work in the area engage, a variety that speaks against the kind of simple answer, the circumscribed description of feminist epistemology that my discussants seemed to expect on this occasion. (Another feminist epistemologist with whom I discussed this phenomenon of the irksome question in epistemology contexts said that she felt like carrying around a list of key readings in feminist epistemology to give to such questioners, asking them to come back after they had read them for a more meaningful conversation about feminist epistemology!)

The marginalization of feminist epistemology within the field as a whole is illustrated in other ways. Those of us who have wanted to incorporate feminist epistemology into our general epistemology classes have been hard-pressed to find epistemology texts that do that. The vast majority of these texts (which demarcate

¹ Among such readily accessed Internet essays are Elizabeth Anderson’s ‘Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science’ and Heidi Grasswick’s ‘Feminist Social Epistemology,’ both in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Anderson 2009 [first published in 2000], Grasswick 2008), and Marianne Janack’s ‘Feminist Epistemology’ in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Janack 2004). The earliest works in what is now identified as feminist epistemology/philosophy of science include papers by four prominent pioneers in the field: Sandra Harding (1980), Lorraine Code (1981), Helen Longino (1981), and Evelyn Fox Keller (1982). A significant number of the papers in Harding and Hintikka’s *Discovering Reality* (1983) deal with feminist epistemological questions. These works were soon followed by Genevieve Lloyd’s *Man of Reason* (1993 [1984, first edition]) and the development of feminist epistemology was well under way.

what, for now, I take to be ‘the mainstream’) still give no indication that there is even such a thing as feminist epistemology, though they now regularly give some attention to other relatively new directions or approaches in epistemology – naturalized epistemology, virtue epistemology, or neo-pragmatist epistemology, for instance. The situation is somewhat better with philosophy of science texts, which have begun to include papers or discussions in feminist philosophy of science, though that inclusion is still relatively minimal. Feminist philosophy of science and feminist science studies have been very prominent within feminist epistemology (broadly construed), and this accounts for some, but not all, of this discrepancy in textual inclusion.² Yet feminist epistemologists have also drawn significant attention to other areas of human knowledge: moral knowledge, historical knowledge, or ‘everyday’ personal, social, cultural, or political knowledge. In addition, feminist epistemologists engage in debates about general understandings and philosophical conceptions of *evidence*, *reason*, *objectivity*, *justification*, and *knowledge* – the same core topics that mainstream epistemologists examine.

I will attend to feminist epistemology in this broader sense, particularly since feminist epistemology’s relationship to mainstream epistemology (as that is related to, but also differentiated from, philosophy of science) is a central focus in my paper. There are, I will argue, specific epistemological as well as political insights into the development of epistemology (of knowledge about knowledge) that are available with the critical examination of this relationship that I undertake. These epistemological or, in many cases, *metaepistemological* insights merit particular attention and development at this time. Drawing in part on a standpoint epistemological perspective, I will argue that certain (meta)epistemic advantages accrue to feminist epistemology’s marginal status, facilitating, in effect, specific insights about epistemology that are not otherwise available. But first, we need to reflect further on the contours of this marginality.

If my two discussants had previously heard of feminist epistemology it’s quite likely that their disinterest rather than their interest would have been piqued. There has been a persistent refrain in mainstream epistemology circles that feminist epistemology is not epistemology ‘proper,’ and thus not something with which epistemologists need concern themselves. This refrain has ranged from hostile to dismissive to limited acknowledgement. On the more hostile side, feminist epistemologists are dogmatic ideologues, driven by ‘political correctness’ and ‘agendas’

²By the mid-1980s important works by, among others, Ruth Bleier (1984), Anne Fausto-Sterling (1992 [1985]), Keller (1985), and Harding (1986) provided significant impetus to the development of feminist philosophy of science and feminist science studies (which also includes historical and sociological examinations of the sciences and technology). Also see Tuana (1989) for an important collection of essays on feminism and science that were published in *Hypatia* in 1987 and 1988. By the 1980s many mainstream philosophers of science were incorporating historical and sociological studies of real-world scientific developments into their philosophical projects, and this helped facilitate some mainstream recognition of the philosophical significance of feminist work on science.

rather than by the traditional norms of apolitical, value-free, rational investigation that have long been the hallmarks of good inquiry – including in epistemology itself. Feminist epistemology can, therefore, be dismissed, or, at best, recognized as part of political philosophy.³ On the limited acknowledgement side, feminist epistemology is recognized as epistemology but only in a restricted sense. It is a form of applied epistemology, for example, something that might be applicable in contexts where gender roles or practices are epistemically significant. Or it is recognized as a type of epistemology but it is not new: it is a form of, or subarea within, naturalized epistemology, social epistemology, pragmatist epistemology, or virtue epistemology – where these projects have achieved some recognition within the mainstream. (The relationships between feminist epistemology and these other approaches or directions in epistemology are important and I will return to these later.)

I was introduced to such hostility and dismissal quite soon after I began to develop interests in feminist epistemology. At an institution where I formerly taught I mentioned to a colleague that I was interested in the feminist question with reason and rationality. Without even asking what this question might involve, he simply quipped as he moved on, ‘Oh, so you [meaning those of us with interests in this question] are going to tell us that there is a male logic and a female logic!’ And that was the end of that conversation, which was quite unlike any other conversation I’d had or witnessed with this particular philosopher. Such a reaction was not isolated, I soon learned, even if others were a bit more subtle. I’ve heard about numerous similar experiences from others who work in this area. Though quite painful to live through and hear about still, these experiences have given us a sharper awareness and understanding of the ways in which the subtle or not-so-subtle operations of epistemic authority and credibility work within epistemology – and within philosophy more generally. These dismissals and exclusions are problematic for epistemological as well as political reasons. In particular, specific *epistemic* problems are evident in documented efforts to summarize, dismiss, or denigrate feminist epistemology, and these, as we will see, are quite revealing of unexamined assumptions about epistemology ‘proper.’

My third discussant (if one could call this exchange a discussion!) illustrates a not uncommon phenomenon, epistemically confounding as it often is. There are philosophers with minimal knowledge of feminist epistemology who nonetheless have little hesitancy about deciding what it is. Their assumptions seriously strain epistemic norms of accurate description. For example, feminist epistemology has sometimes been described as involving theories of knowledge about ‘women’s

³Stressing the political connection with feminist epistemology, Susan Haack has remarked, ‘The rubric “feminist epistemology” is incongruous on its face, in somewhat the way of, say, “Republican epistemology”’ (2003, 8). Similar moves to deem feminist epistemology a non-starter, or to make it disappear, are evident in paper titles such as ‘Why Feminist Epistemology Isn’t’ (Richards 1996) and ‘Feminist Epistemology as Folk Psychology’ (Klee 2003).

ways of knowing.’⁴ The idea of ‘women’s/feminine ways of knowing’ has indeed surfaced in feminist epistemology, but the primary focus has been on how problematic the idea is. Among other things, it involves generalizations about women (across different races, classes, and cultures, for example) that have been the focus of significant critical scrutiny in the past three decades of feminist theorizing.⁵ But the ready acceptance of this particular inaccuracy has not been innocuous. It has, one suspects, prompted the hostility that some women in philosophy have shown to the very idea of feminist epistemology. *If* feminist epistemology is promoting a ‘women’s ways of knowing,’ they can well argue, then it is getting too close to lending support to one of the most persistent sexist refrains in the history of Western philosophy – the idea that women have different *and inferior* ways of reasoning and knowing, something that feminists surely ought to be challenging.

Other problematic modes of critique of feminist epistemology are evident in *Scrutinizing Feminist Epistemology* (Pinnick et al. 2003), a significant number of the essays in which adopt a disparaging attitude toward the field. In their reviews of this volume both Elizabeth Potter and Elizabeth Anderson draw attention to critical assessments of the field as a whole. Most of the authors are animated not by the impulse ‘to make it better [but] to make it go away’ (Potter 2004, 7); they aim ‘to show that the entire enterprise [of feminist epistemology] is a failure’ (Anderson 2006).⁶ The move to disparage a whole field of inquiry is, in itself, disquieting as well as politically suspect, but especially so when standard *epistemic* norms of respectful philosophical discussion and argumentation – the very norms we teach in our introductory philosophy, epistemology, and logic classes – are set aside. I noted above that general characterizations of feminist epistemology can strain

⁴For example, Noretta Koertge begins an essay as follows: ‘Feminist epistemology consists of theories of knowledge created by women, *about* women’s modes of knowing, *for* the purpose of liberating women. By any reasonable standard, it should have expired in 1994’ (1996, 413). Though he does not mention feminist epistemology directly, Michael Williams seems to have it clearly (and dismissingly) in mind when he writes, ‘cultural relativism sometimes leads to the embrace of “standpoint epistemology,” according to which ethnic, class, gender, or other “cultural” differences are associated with distinct “ways of knowing”’ (2001, 220).

⁵See Lorraine Code (1991, 251–262) for a critical examination of the use of ‘women’s ways of knowing’ as a sociological or epistemological category. In particular, in reference to a particular sociological study of ‘women’s ways of knowing,’ she is concerned that, ‘Essentialist assumptions about “women” are mirrored [...] in essentialist assumptions about knowledge, experience, and authority’ (260).

⁶Anderson notes, however, that unlike most of the other essays in this volume, those by Sharon Crasnow and Janet Kourany ‘are models of respectful, intellectually serious critical scholarship.’ (Anderson 2006). The idea that feminist epistemology can be accepted or rejected as a whole is also evident in a special issue of *The Monist* devoted to the topic: ‘Feminist Epistemology – For and Against’ (*The Monist*, vol. 77, no. 4, 1994). This ‘astonishing topic,’ Lynn Hankinson Nelson has remarked, ‘suggested that whether one is “for” or “against” “feminist epistemology” is a matter of subscribing to one of two clearly delineated, complete, and mutually exclusive sets of tenets... [which] badly mischaracterized much of the work at the intersections of feminism, epistemology, and philosophy of science’ (Nelson 1995, 32).

norms of accurate description. Straw man attacks, or, as Potter remarks, ‘unrecognizable caricatures of feminist scholars’ (2004, 7) and their work make a frequent appearance in these critiques. Discrepancies bordering on inconsistencies also surface. Anderson notes, ‘[these critics of feminist epistemology tell] us that it’s wrong to think that all women think alike. But apparently [these same critics think] that it’s ok to think that all feminist epistemologists think alike’ (2006). Hasty generalizations tend to accompany such notions. The views of one or two feminist epistemologists/philosophers of science are taken to be the views of most or all feminist epistemologists.⁷ These ‘representative’ views are, in turn, often taken from the work of a particular scholar without adequate attention to the full context and development of her work. Sandra Harding seems to have drawn particular attention in this regard. Accounts of her positions are regularly drawn from a limited reading of her work, or her early positions are taken as static and representative when, as is the case with most epistemologists, her positions have developed and changed, often in response to respectful criticism from others who work in feminist epistemology. A recent essay titled ‘The Failure of Feminist Epistemology’ (Shelton 2006) cites feminist works which were all published in the 1980s, save two, both published in 1991. In effect, a decade and a half of very active feminist scholarship is simply ignored. Harding’s 1986 book is cited (and there are references to two papers in her 1987 co-edited volume) but not one of her six authored or edited volumes published from 1987 to 2006 is mentioned.

What is going on here? Why is it that critics of feminist epistemology (of the field as a whole especially) regularly set aside standard philosophical and epistemic norms of careful research, reading, and reasoning in their critiques? Even if specific works by feminist epistemologists have errors or poor arguments (which are best illuminated by careful reading and reasoning in any case), why does it seem acceptable to these critics to then disparage the field as a whole? Suppose that we were to take the principle operating here and apply it more broadly, that is, decide that any area of philosophy that has produced poor work should be deemed a failure and banished from the philosophical map. We would, in effect, soon have to close down all of our philosophy departments! So why is feminist epistemology singled out in this regard? (Certainly other areas of feminist philosophy have met with similar resistance, but not quite to the extent that feminist epistemology has.) We cannot simply confine this less-than-respectful attitude toward feminist epistemology to

⁷One of the most egregious examples of this tendency to morph feminist epistemologists into one comes from Ellen Klein’s description of feminist critical analyses of reason and objectivity: “‘Reason’ does not deliver to us “a single objective truth” [1] because “objectivity, the ‘ostensibly noninvolved stance’,” [2] “is the male epistemological stance...we see a male-created truth and reality, a male point of view, a male-defined objectivity” [3].’ (Klein 1996, 18) As Klein indicates in footnotes, the three quotes in this single sentence are sentence fragments that come from three different authors discussing reason or objectivity in quite different contexts: Genevieve Lloyd in her analysis of the historical philosophical ‘man of reason’ (Lloyd 1993 [1984]); Catharine MacKinnon with her primary focus on objectivity in legal and political arenas (MacKinnon 1982); and Ruth Bleier (1984) in a discussion of objectivity in science.

individual critics: as personal anecdotes and publications continue to reveal, there has been a kind of professional acceptance, if not endorsement, of this attitude.⁸

The most immediate explanation of these problematic critiques of feminist epistemology is that there are lingering forms of sexism – perhaps in some cases misogyny – at work. The fact that this is an area of epistemology that has been developed primarily by women seems to trigger assumptions to the effect that the work is likely be of an inferior sort and, consequently, doesn't merit the careful research and reading accorded other areas of epistemology developed primarily by men. In his paper, 'Feminist Epistemology as Whipping-Girl,' Mark Owen Webb maintains that 'Feminist epistemology has become one of the whipping-girls of choice for overtly and covertly sexist elements in philosophy' (Webb 2002, 49). In this case the discipline simply reflects and reinforces forms epistemic injustice evident in the larger culture.⁹ But claiming sexism as an explanation is only a first step. The sources, forms, and workings of sexism in epistemology, as elsewhere, are not all as readily apparent as we might initially think they are – or indeed hoped they were. Gender is a factor, but not in some obvious ways. Not all of those who contribute to the development of feminist epistemology are female, and not all of

⁸One might note, for example, that these problematic critiques of feminist work also pass through the hands of philosophy referees and editors, seemingly without comment. In addition to dismissive exchanges such as those noted earlier, quite telling indicators of professional resistance come from reports by feminist scholars (I've heard two more in the past year) who say that they did not go 'public' with their interests in feminist philosophy until after they had job security with tenure. Sally Haslanger (2008) provides a very helpful analysis of 'the ideology and culture of philosophy' that still sustains discrimination against women and minorities, a culture that, she notes, has also contributed to the hostile reception that feminist philosophy and feminist philosophers have often received. In her recent examination of feminist work in philosophy of science, Sarah Richardson (2010) also emphasizes connections between the marginalization of feminist thought and the marginalized status of women in philosophy. In addition to noting explicit marginalization (exclusions from elite publications and faculty positions), Richardson comments on the more implicit 'subtle everyday' forms of marginalization 'through discursive and disciplinary constructions that exclude, other, and delegitimize gender as a properly philosophical topic and feminist thought as a properly philosophical occupation' (2010, 351). These persisting problems of exclusion and marginalization still figure among the recurring topics in feminist philosophy discussion lists. All of this reflects poorly on a profession that, on the surface at least, promotes intellectual diversity and freedom.

⁹In her examination of the backlash against feminist philosophy, Cressida Heyes has noted that claims that feminist work is narrow, biased, and dogmatically ideological 'mesh neatly with sexist beliefs that have long and dishonorable histories: this culture commonly understands women as excessively concerned with the parochial and personal, incapable of seeing the "big picture," and [...] unable to exercise our rationality to attain intellectual objectivity' (Heyes 1999, 37). In addition to Webb's, other papers in Superson and Cudd (2002) also examine philosophy's particular backlash against feminism. For an important analysis of the concept of *epistemic injustice* see Fricker (2007). The marginalization of feminist epistemology can also be explored in a comparison with the documented patterns of exclusion and invisibility that women in many science disciplines still experience. Alison Wylie examines these patterns and the specific forms of epistemic injustice they reveal (Wylie, this volume). Carla Fehr also addresses the epistemic problems linked to the diminished levels of intellectual authority granted women in the sciences (Fehr, this volume).

those who disparage it are male. In addition, sexist assumptions and attitudes are not always a matter of consciously available, articulable beliefs. Many of these critics might claim that they support equal opportunity and respect for women in philosophy – though the hostility and invective of some would lead one to seriously doubt that in some cases.

A deeper understanding of the workings of sexist or gender-limited attitudes and practices in this situation requires insights developed specifically in feminist work, the very insights that many of these critics (with their relatively superficial reading and understanding of that work) clearly aim to keep at arm's length. As feminist theorizing more generally continues to illuminate, sexism and problematic gendering are significantly a matter of background social and cultural institutions and practices. These include linguistic practices, cognitive practices of attention or inattention, and power-inflected epistemic practices that confer or withhold credibility, for instance. Such practices frame individual and community attitudes and behavior, and they do so in ways that may not be visible as sexist or gender-inflected without specific *feminist* intervention. Indeed, the task of *making gender visible* has been taken to be constitutive of a range of feminist epistemological projects.¹⁰ Thus, for example, making visible the impact of women's epistemic disenfranchisement, that is, their dismissal as serious reasoners and knowers in a variety of knowledge areas and disciplines as well as in philosophy, continues to be a defining project in feminist epistemology. However, making gender visible has also required the development of nuanced understandings of gender.¹¹ Among these we can include the textual, metaphorical construction of *gender* in traditional philosophical theorizing. Something of a displacement of *gender* as the primary or only focus of attention must also be included here, given important feminist work on the intersection of gender with other epistemically salient social/status divisions such as race and class. These enhanced understandings provide additional insights into the problematic marginalization of feminist epistemology, and some are further developments of Simone de Beauvoir's key insight into the philosophical construction of *woman* as 'Other.'

In her paper 'The Feminist as Other' Susan Bordo reflects on the marginal status accorded feminist cultural critique and feminist ethical theory within their respective mainstream theoretical arenas. Her explanatory framework also applies to the situation with feminist epistemology, though most immediately to the less hostile, limited acknowledgement forms of its marginalization:

...feminists [are construed] as engaging in a specialized critique, one that cannot be ignored, perhaps, but one whose implications are contained, self-limiting, and of insufficient general consequence to amount to a new knowledge of 'the way culture operates.'

¹⁰Helen Longino, for example, has proposed as 'a bottom line requirement of feminist knowers on cognitive standards [across a range of knowledge/epistemology projects]: that they reveal or prevent the disappearing of gender' (1994, 481).

¹¹Sally Haslanger (2002, esp. pp. 87–91) provides a helpful examination of feminist theoretical work on the concept of *gender*. For feminist epistemological work, in particular, Haslanger emphasizes an understanding of *gender* as something that is fundamentally constituted by systems of social relations and norms.

One does ‘gender’ *or* one engages in criticism of broad significance; pick one. [...] this construction is not merely an annoying bit of residual sexism but a powerful conceptual map that keeps feminist scholarship, no matter how broad its concerns, located in the region of what Simone de Beauvoir called the ‘Other’ ...feminist theory swims upstream against powerful currents whenever it threatens to assume the mantle of *general* cultural critique, rather than simply advocate for the greater inclusion or representation of women and their ‘differences’ (Bordo 1998, 297, 306–07).

The regular ‘misreading’ of feminist work, Bordo argues, ensures that ‘the insights of feminist philosophy are “kept in their place,” where they make no claim on “philosophy proper”’ (308).

The ‘powerful conceptual map’ that Bordo refers to is quite familiar to feminist philosophers. However, where the traditional construction of woman as ‘Other’ remains unrecognized and unexamined – as it does still in non-feminist philosophy circles – the conceptual map it has engendered remains largely intact. And where that map remains intact, feminists’ concern with women and gender (along with the common assumption that only women are gendered) is sufficient to slot feminists themselves and their work into the place of the ‘Other’ – even when their concern involves challenging this historical construction.

Bordo’s explanation of the persisting marginalization of feminist work lends itself to further expansion in connection with feminist epistemology. For example, critics of feminist epistemology often use wording such as ‘feminist epistemologists maintain...’ or ‘the feminists say...’ where, apart from problems with hasty generalizations, it is quite clear that the authors want to distance themselves from ‘the feminists.’ They present feminists as ‘other,’ just as, historically, male philosophers regularly discussed women as other to themselves and their anticipated audience. Yet women were sometimes assigned their special circumscribed place; so too mainstream responses to feminist epistemologists’ work sometimes accord it its theoretically circumscribed place. Misogynistic refrains of hostility, of battling, of warding off women or ‘womanly’ characteristics also informed the historical construction of woman as Other – not least when ideals of pure reason and knowledge were under discussion. Women, ‘woman’ or ‘the feminine’ regularly served as the literal embodiment of, or the metaphorical representation of body, emotion, subjectivity, particularity, and disorder, the *other* in relation to which (or in contrast to which) the realm of the truly rational, the truly philosophical was regularly conceptualized.¹² This imaginary or metaphorical underpinning thus insinuated the view

¹²In her book, *The Philosophical Imaginary*, Michèle Le Doeuff sums up Western philosophy’s ‘imaginary portrait of “woman”’ as follows: ‘a power of disorder, a being of night, a twilight beauty, a dark continent, a sphinx of dissolution, an abyss of the unintelligible, a voice of underworld gods, an inner enemy who alters and perverts without visible signs of combat, a place where all forms dissolve’ (1989, 113). For specific examinations of the metaphorical construction of ‘woman’ as *Other* to ‘the man of reason’ see Rooney (1991) and Lloyd (2002). This displacement of woman as ‘Other’ was often confounded (and rendered ‘invisible’) by the related displacement of metaphor as ‘feminine’ decoration or embellishment of language, as that which is *other to* the linguistic place of clarity and purity in language – the place of the core content of philosophy (Rooney 2002).

that following the path of reason and true knowledge required a kind of continual warding off, a battling against threatening, confounding, or bewitching ‘feminine’ elements. The additional hostility that feminist epistemology garners thus likely reflects the lingering impact of these misogynistic aspects of philosophical theorizing. Feminist epistemologists don’t generally endorse the feminine other of traditional conceptions of reason and knowledge, since it is largely a caricatured construction of a sexist and misogynistic cultural imaginary – a point that was clearly made and well-taken a quarter of a century ago.¹³ However, they *do* stand ground against the sexism and misogyny that engendered that construction, and they question ideals of reason and knowledge that have implicitly imported aspects of that construction. But this distinction is quite lost among critics of feminist epistemology who simply assimilate feminist perspectives with ‘the other’ of reason and knowledge. Feminist epistemology thus emerges as a hostile principle, as a threat to ‘pure’ epistemology.

Some of the epistemically confounding criticisms of feminist work now come into clearer focus. Despite the fact that feminist epistemologists present a range of different and nuanced arguments about a variety of epistemological topics, those differences are morphed and assimilated when filtered through the specter of the threatening feminine Other. And despite the fact that feminist epistemologists are significantly engaged in constructively developing accounts of reason and objectivity that pay attention to a greater range of reasoning and knowing situations and contexts than many traditional conceptions did, that work is still regularly framed as an attack or ‘assault’ on reason and objectivity, as something hostile to the very ground of epistemology ‘proper.’

Women, ‘woman’ or ‘the feminine’ are not the only real or imaginary constructions to occupy the realm of the Other, however. Otherness, Bordo notes, has many faces and is reflected also in the (mainstream) marginalization of philosophical work on race: ‘Every time black authors are quoted only for their views on race – expertise about “general” topics being reserved for white males who are imagined to be without race and gender – the Otherness of the black is perpetuated’ (1998, 298). Racial and other cultural forms of otherness also made their mark in the history of philosophy. Charles Mills has documented the facility with which philosophers of the pre-Enlightenment and Enlightenment discussed ‘barbarians... men who are like beasts’ (Grotius), ‘savage people’ (Hobbes), ‘savages’ (Rousseau – even if some of his savages were ‘noble’), or the fundamental ‘difference between [the black and white] races of man’ (Kant) (Mills 1997, 64–71). Along with ‘woman,’ the categories of ‘the savage’ and ‘the primitive’ carried epistemological weight – they too were regularly invoked to mark that which is beyond the realm

¹³ Though this point was made elsewhere, Genevieve Lloyd made it quite clearly in the concluding remarks of her *Man of Reason*: ‘The affirmation of the value and importance of “the feminine” cannot of itself be expected to shake the underlying normative structures, for, ironically, it will occur in a space already prepared for it by the intellectual tradition it seeks to reject... What has happened has been not a simple exclusion of women, but a constitution of femininity through that exclusion’ (1993, [1984], 105–06).

of the truly rational. (Debates about whether or how ‘primitive people’ are rational cannot even be consigned to the distant past in epistemology.)

Mills has argued that centuries of racial injustice and white epistemic authority were sustained by what he calls an ‘epistemology of ignorance.’ He notes that political theories (social contract theories supporting white privilege, for instance) typically require epistemological commitments about what counts as credible experience and genuine knowledge about the world. By excluding the experiences and knowledge of those not counted among the theories’ ideal moral and political agents, these theories thus sustain systematic ignorance, not only about the social realities of those ‘others,’ but, just as significantly, about the ways in which the social realities of the included are constructed and privileged by the lives and work of those others. According to Mills, centuries of white racism have thus prescribed:

an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance [which is] a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made...[this involves] a cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities (Mills 1997, 18).

Among recent developments in feminist epistemology are many that address the ways in which patterns of race and gender subordination and exclusion reflect and reproduce patterns or forms of ignorance.¹⁴ Thus, here and elsewhere, the epistemological concerns raised by liberatory movements addressing gender injustice intersect with those addressing race or other group-based forms of injustice. Where it incorporates these intersections feminist epistemology is no longer focused exclusively on *gender*. (It seldom was to the extent that its critics often assume – Harding’s work is a notable case in point.) I understand ‘feminist epistemology’ to encompass these theoretical intersections and expansions, though some now prefer the term ‘liberatory epistemology(ies).’ Whatever term is used, however, these liberatory perspectives in epistemology share common concern with making visible the forms of ignorance systematically produced and reinforced by mainstream perspectives that still insist – explicitly or otherwise – that particular groups of knowers, particular forms of knowledge, understanding, and insight, or particular topics and questions about human knowledge (including questions about connections between human knowledge and human justice) are beyond the pale of epistemology ‘proper.’ As we will next explore, the mainstream’s insistence here is the kind of thing that can come back to haunt, particularly when reflected back from the margins, from the place of the Other. The idea that there is such a thing as a clearly demarcated epistemology ‘proper’ turns out to be the product of the same philosophical imaginary that created the idea of its Other.

¹⁴The 2004 conference at Penn State University, ‘Ethics and Epistemologies of Ignorance,’ foregrounded these important connections between feminist epistemology and philosophy of race, and between epistemology and moral and political philosophy. The conference directors, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, have published two volumes of papers from the conference: *Feminist Epistemologies of Ignorance*, a special issue of *Hypatia* (Tuana and Shannon 2006), and *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Sullivan and Tuana 2007).

1.2 Feminist Metaepistemic Advantage

Being on the margins is not all bad – especially when one has good company there! Some epistemic advantages may also accrue to this location, a key insight in (feminist) standpoint epistemology particularly. We need not assume here what Alison Wylie calls the ‘thesis of *automatic epistemic privilege*... [the claim] that those who occupy particular standpoints (usually subdominant, oppressed, marginal standpoints) automatically know more, or know better, by virtue of their social, political location’ (2004, 341). As Wylie notes, this has been, at best, a controversial thesis in standpoint epistemology and it is not clear that any theorist has endorsed it in this general form. (It is, however, the kind of general thesis that critics of feminist epistemology are likely to attribute to it.) The kinds of standpoints that merit particular epistemological attention are, as Wylie and others stress, those that are achieved by a critical consciousness attuned to ‘the nature of our social location and the difference it makes epistemically’ (Wylie 2004, 344). The epistemic import of any such critical consciousness thus depends on specifics of the subdominant or marginal location and the particular forms of marginality it represents.

Despite differences in specifics there are recurring themes in arguments for standpoint-informed epistemic *advantage* that also pertain to arguments for feminist metaepistemic advantage. Prominent among these are claims of straightforward experiential or empirical advantage: the lived experience of marginalization can enable one to see and understand things that are quite ‘invisible’ to those not marginalized. (For instance, I doubt that I would have seen so clearly some of the workings of epistemic authority and credibility within epistemology – and professional philosophy more generally – had I not experienced them first-hand by coming up sharply against them when I simply expressed positive interest in feminist epistemology.) Empirical advantage is sometimes spelled out in terms of the ‘double consciousness’ of the ‘outsider within,’ as Patricia Hill Collins has done in her exploration of Black women’s status in sociology. As academicians Black women have acquired a certain ‘within’ or ‘insider’ status, Collins argues, but when they find their lived experiences devalued or negated in sociological paradigms they may also become quite conscious of their ‘outsider’ status there, and ‘their difference sensitizes them to patterns that may be more difficult for established sociological insiders to see’ (1991, 53). Feminist epistemologists have also acquired something of an outsider within status. To the extent that we have the time and resources to read, teach, or write feminist epistemology we are likely to have attained some type of insider status in philosophy or in other academic disciplines. Our outsider status is made known to us, however, when we confront the various forms of marginalization noted above. In addition, many of us have come to this work after developing more traditional epistemological interests – in effect, we were ‘proper’ epistemologists before we became ‘improper’! We can thus mine the epistemic benefits of this particular double consciousness, of what Collins calls the ‘the creative tension of outsider within status’ (53).

As suggested in the previous section and elucidated further below, the marginalization of feminist work affords specific insights into the limited understandings of

epistemology that are conveyed in the endorsement of a non-feminist or contra-feminist ‘real’ or ‘true’ or ‘pure’ epistemology, or an epistemology ‘proper’ – even if these terms are not used explicitly.¹⁵ Yet, as we will see, the unity or uniformity that these terms suggest stands in marked contrast to the proliferation of approaches and directions in epistemology developed during these past decades, not to mention historically. This proliferation has ushered in something of an age of metaepistemology, insofar as it invites us to be more reflective (and reflexive) about the different approaches we might adopt in philosophical thinking about knowledge and related epistemic concepts. This invitation is also advanced by (recent) futuristic speculations about where epistemology is going or ought to go. I will now explore this metaepistemological terrain, paying particular attention to the ways in which it proves to be rich ground for feminist metaepistemic advantage.

In my paper so far the term ‘mainstream epistemology’ has seemed to indicate a relatively uniform, circumscribed body of inquiry. But that uniformity has been largely constituted by its practitioners’ quite uniform neglect, dismissal, or inability to engage and incorporate feminist work in epistemology. We have noted that when mainstream dismissals assume or posit a (non-feminist) ‘real’ epistemology they, in part, follow the contours of an entrenched conceptual map linked to a philosophical history of sexism and racism. Thus, such dismissals illustrate the very significance of feminist epistemology. They also suggest that the notion of epistemology ‘proper’ is largely a defensive front that is marshaled against the threat of the very idea of ‘feminist epistemology.’ Let us explore further how this suggestion pans out.

Elisabeth Lloyd has examined a similar stance of unity or uniformity in connection with mainstream reactions to feminist work on *objectivity*. When feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science argue for the importance of paying attention to sex and gender in examining the ways in which scientific knowledge is produced and validated, they are portrayed, Lloyd notes, as: ‘playing “out-of-bounds” in terms of mainstream understandings of the problems of epistemology and philosophy of science; feminist work can, therefore, be safely ignored, set aside, or characterized as of interest only in marginal cases’ (Lloyd 1995, 352). She maintains that this marginalization has its source in a specific ‘philosophical folk story about objectivity,’ in which...

‘objectivity’ [is taken] as a sort of beautiful primitive, self-evident in its value, and all-powerful in its revelatory power... a unified front is implicitly presented against feminist epistemologists: ‘objectivity’ is of utmost clarity and importance to everyone except the feminists, who are caricatured as disregarding it in order to further their political agendas. (375)

Lloyd argues that this philosophical folk story about objectivity is just that. She examines in some detail different conceptions of *objectivity* that are in broad use in

¹⁵Suppositions to the effect that feminist epistemology is not epistemology ‘proper’ are often conveyed by the marginalizing gestures noted above. Webb describes how he was ‘met with puzzlement’ (including from fellow graduate students) when he pursued interests in feminist epistemology, and he was sometimes asked, ‘When are you going to get back to real epistemology?’ (2002, 51).

debates in contemporary analytic philosophy. These conceptions, she argues, incorporate substantial recognition of the significance of social practices and social standards in good inquiry (a central focus in *social epistemology* particularly), and they do so in a way that cannot, without argument, preclude examinations of social practices linked to sex and gender. When we take into account recent developments in (mainstream) work on objectivity, she continues, it is not the term ‘feminist epistemology’ that emerges as an oxymoron but, instead, terms such as ‘value-free inquiry,’ ‘disinterested knowledge,’ and ‘pure epistemology’ (374).

An analogous (and, of course, related) argument can be made about a philosophical folk story about *epistemology* that surfaces in mainstream reactions to feminist work, where *epistemology* also emerges as kind of ‘beautiful primitive... as transparent, simple, stable, and clear in its meaning’ (Lloyd 1995, 375). When we push beyond initial characterizations of epistemology (as something like ‘the philosophical study of the nature, sources, and limits of knowledge’) we find anything but general agreement about what, more precisely, its core topics, questions, methods, and directions are or should be. This has been the case historically but, quite specifically for our purposes here, this has been the case during these past decades – these same decades in which feminist epistemology has been ignored or deemed out-of-bounds by mainstream perspectives.

By the end of the twentieth century, in fact, it looked like the worst of times and the best of times for epistemology. Some had notably proclaimed the ‘end’ of epistemology. Richard Rorty figured quite prominently with such claims, though his main focus was the modern project of establishing secure foundations for knowledge – with knowledge understood in terms of mental representations that mirror truths in the world. W. V. O. Quine also proposed something like an end to epistemology with his argument for ‘epistemology naturalized,’ for the replacement of epistemology (as primarily a philosophical project of conceptual analysis) by the cognitive scientific study of knowing and knowledge as natural phenomena.¹⁶ Many deemed a core project in standard analytic epistemology, the analysis of *knowledge* as justified true belief (JTB analyses), as futile, given the seemingly endless production of Gettier-like counterexamples to such analyses – those ‘countless and wonderfully rococo counterexamples’ (Bishop and Trout 2005, 702).

Yet in the last few decades of the twentieth century a whole range of new epistemologies, new directions or approaches in epistemology, or newly reworked versions of older epistemological orientations also emerged. In addition to naturalized epistemology, we now have social epistemology, virtue epistemology, pragmatist or neo-pragmatist epistemology, and, of course, feminist epistemology. New work on the epistemic status of moral judgments and beliefs gave some prominence to moral epistemology. Late twentieth century developments in continental and postmodern epistemology can also be included here, even if some of this work is positioned as deflationary with respect to the ‘traditional’ project of epistemology. Some projects in feminist epistemology especially (by Linda Martín

¹⁶See especially Rorty (1979) and Quine (1969).

Alcoff, Susan Bordo, and Lorraine Code, for instance) connect the analytic and continental traditions in constructive and original ways, and thus contribute new topics and directions in epistemology.

These worst and best of times mark an interesting time for epistemology, certainly, but they also signal a significant shift into *metaepistemological* terrain. In pronouncing the end or limited viability of particular ways of doing epistemology, ‘end’ claims invite serious consideration of other ways of doing it (as Rorty did in his engagement with pragmatist epistemology and Quine did with his proposal for naturalized epistemology). Many have questioned whether *knowledge* ought to be the constitutive or core concept of epistemology: some have argued that *epistemic justification* is the more tractable core concept; *understanding* is also a proposed alternative (Elgin 2006). In addition, when presented with a range of new epistemologies or new directions in epistemology, we are encouraged to ask metaepistemological questions such as the following: How does one choose among these different directions or approaches in epistemology? What are the goals of epistemology anyway – goals that would help guide one’s choices here? What constitutes epistemological progress? (Many epistemologists make individual choices by engaging the opportunities or directions in epistemology that are available to them, or that they find interesting – or that their thesis/dissertation advisers did. They may proceed with little more than a hand-waving dismissal of other questions and approaches as uninteresting, or as not ‘real’ epistemology – a move that simply begs the question in the best of these metaepistemological times.) In a chapter titled ‘Epistemology’s End,’ Catherine Elgin draws attention to the metaepistemological considerations that she thinks attend basic disagreements in or about epistemology:

To view [epistemological theories] as supplying alternative answers to the same questions is an oversimplification. For they embody disagreements about what the real questions are and what counts as answering them....To understand a philosophical position and evaluate it fairly requires understanding the network of commitments that constitute it; for these commitments organize its domain, frame its problems, and supply standards for the solution of those problems (1996, 3).

Feminist epistemology’s development in constructive conversation with a variety of approaches or directions in epistemology merits particular attention in this discussion. Code’s early work, *Epistemic Responsibility* (1987), though not as explicitly feminist as many of her later works, set the stage for the ongoing intersection of her work in feminist epistemology with virtue epistemology. Her title concept ranks centrally among the intellectual and epistemic virtues that virtue epistemologists examine and promote – others are truthfulness, open-mindedness, curiosity, intellectual integrity, epistemic trust, and intellectual autonomy and courage. (For the purposes of this paper, it is worth noting that just about all of the non-feminist virtue epistemologists who make reference to her early book make no mention of Code’s later feminism-inspired work.) Miranda Fricker’s recent work, *Epistemic Injustice* (2007), also exemplifies important connections between feminist epistemology, virtue epistemology, and social epistemology. She examines the epistemic significance of power-inflected social relations such as gender, race, and

class, particularly as they effect unequal distributions of epistemic trust, credibility, and authority. Many identify feminist epistemology as a form of social epistemology, where the latter is broadly characterized as encompassing the epistemological study of the ways in which social relations and institutions shape knowledge practices and achievements. Though Heidi Grasswick thinks that ‘by far the majority of work in feminist epistemology is best understood as a form of social epistemology,’ she also notes that feminist epistemology predates social epistemology as the latter is now understood (Grasswick 2008). Thus, instead of thinking of feminist epistemology as simply a subarea or form of social epistemology, we might think of it as a significant inspiration and resource in the development of social epistemology, something that cannot be ignored by (mainstream) social epistemologists.

There are, however, feminist epistemological projects that develop important connections with other – though arguably related – directions or perspectives in epistemology. Many have emphasized specific links with pragmatist epistemology.¹⁷ In promoting understandings of knowers as engaged inquiring actors in the world, and in drawing connections between practices of inquiry and broader social and political practices and concerns, pragmatism facilitates the incorporation of political awareness into epistemological reflections, and is thus consonant with many feminist projects. Pursuing a somewhat different orientation, many of the authors in Nelson and Nelson (2003) develop feminist epistemological perspectives in both easy and uneasy conversation with Quine-inspired naturalized epistemology. I argue there, however, that an ‘uneasy alliance’ between these two areas or directions in epistemology speaks against an easy subsumption of feminist epistemology as a part of naturalized epistemology – as the latter is commonly understood (Rooney 2003). A significant naturalist dimension is also evident in ongoing feminist epistemological engagement with feminist research projects across a range of areas and disciplines of knowledge – notably, though not exclusively, in the natural and social sciences.¹⁸

¹⁷Lisa Heldke (1989) argued for significant similarities between the epistemological projects of John Dewey and Keller. A special issue of *Transactions of the C.S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* (vol. 27, no. 4, Fall 1991) was devoted to ‘Pragmatism and Feminism.’ Charlene Haddock Seigfried edited a special issue of *Hypatia* (vol. 8, no. 2, Spring 1993) on ‘Feminism and Pragmatism,’ and developed specific connections between feminist philosophy and the work of William James and Dewey (Seigfried 1996). I have examined notable links between feminist epistemology and pragmatist epistemology in Rooney (1993). Sharyn Clough (2003) also examines connections between feminism and pragmatism as she develops ‘a pragmatist approach to feminist science studies.’

¹⁸Interdisciplinary work continues to be significant in feminist epistemology, broadly construed. For example, the program for the first FEMMSS (Feminist Epistemologies, Methodologies, Metaphysics, and Science Studies) conference in Fall 2004 listed participants from the following disciplines, in addition to philosophy and women’s studies: physics, education and information sciences, english, psychology, law, political science, science and technology studies, economics, sociology, nursing, mathematics and computer sciences. <http://depts.washington.edu/femmss>. Also see Alcoff and Potter (1993) and Tuana and Morgen (2001) – important collections of essays in feminist epistemology that engage with a variety of approaches in epistemology. The introductions to these volumes also provide helpful overviews of topics and methods in feminist epistemology.

The boundaries between or among these different directions or perspectives in epistemology are neither rigid nor static. Specific differences or connections among them depend on how narrowly or how broadly one characterizes any given perspective. Some, for instance, understand social epistemology (insofar as it incorporates empirical studies of social practices and institutions) as an extension of naturalized epistemology. These different perspectives also lend themselves to various hybrid epistemological viewpoints, as connections with and through feminist work make especially clear.

Yet some boundaries between not-specifically-feminist projects and feminist epistemology stubbornly persist in familiar ways. While mainstream proponents of ‘new’ epistemological approaches regularly contrast their work with ‘traditional’ approaches, their work still reflects the marginalization inspired by that very tradition. More specifically, conversations between feminist and mainstream projects have, to date, been notably one-way. Quite typical in this regard is a recent analysis of intellectual virtues that incorporates an endorsement of virtue epistemology as a ‘regulative epistemology’ (Roberts and Wood 2007). The authors maintain that ‘the triviality of standard epistemology’s examples’ and the ‘cottage industry’ that sprang up with Gettier-informed analyses of knowledge contributed to analytic epistemology’s becoming ‘increasingly ingrown, epicyclical, and irrelevant to broader philosophical and human concerns’ (2007, 5–8). They argue that virtue epistemology ‘holds enormous promise for the recovery of epistemology as a philosophical discipline with broad human importance... [where epistemology] connects with ethical and political issues’ (6, 9). Such a ‘recovery of epistemology’ has been central to many projects in feminist epistemology for some decades, yet again (and this, by now, *is* a broken record) feminist work is nowhere mentioned in this text.¹⁹

More generally, other than, at best, limited recognition of feminist work as an example or a subarea within their respective developments, mainstream advocates of these new perspectives do not engage feminist work in any substantive way – indeed most seem quite unaware of its existence. If open-mindedness as openness to new or different perspectives is an intellectual or epistemic virtue (and I certainly think it is), then openness to readily-available new or different epistemological perspectives and directions is surely a metaepistemic virtue, and it is one that feminist epistemologists are in a position to claim to their advantage. In particular, by failing to avail themselves of the reflexive awareness and critique of their own epistemological assumptions and practices that more thoughtful attention to feminist work would surely bring, mainstream proponents of these other perspectives put themselves at a distinct disadvantage in the metaepistemological terrain mapped out by these different perspectives in epistemology.

¹⁹There is mention of Code’s early work (1987) but, again, no mention of her later explicitly-feminist work in epistemology. In a much more inclusive vein, Laura Ruetsche (2004) makes constructive use of a model of Aristotelian virtue in her examination of the concept of *warrant* in feminist epistemology.

Feminist metaepistemic advantage can also be assessed in connection with recent futuristic thinking in philosophy, some of which is prompted by the kind of drawing back and looking at the longer view that the turn of a century – or in this case a millennium – inspires.²⁰ Most significant for my discussion is Stephen Hetherington's edited volume *Epistemology Futures* (2006). In his introduction, Hetherington lists some key metaepistemological questions that frame the essays in the volume. These include back-to-the-drawing-board questions about what the purpose or goal of epistemology is, what cognitive or epistemic phenomena it should study, what core concepts it should examine ('maybe other epistemic concepts... [besides] knowledge, evidence, warrant... would be more penetrating and apt'), what methods it should use, and what should count as epistemological progress or achievement (2006, 1–9).

How does feminist epistemology figure into Hetherington's epistemology futures? At first glance, not at all. In none of the 13 essays in this volume is feminist epistemology mentioned or referenced, though, taken together, the essays engage a range of directions or approaches in epistemology – in standard analytical, naturalist, pragmatist, and virtue epistemology. According to this text, not only is feminist epistemology nonexistent in the present but it doesn't figure into any epistemology future either.²¹

On second glance, however, the volume, as well as specific remarks by Hetherington, establish both the legitimacy and the necessity of feminist epistemology. For a start, critics of feminist epistemology who assume or claim that it is not epistemology 'proper' stand on shaky ground when, as is evident in this volume and elsewhere, what constitutes epistemology 'proper' is very much open to debate. In addition, Hetherington frames the metaepistemological explorations in his volume in a way that (unwittingly it seems) directs attention to the significance of feminist or other 'outsider' perspectives in epistemology. He wonders whether...

...our current grasp of epistemological possibilities is itself more limited than we realize.... How good are we at judging epistemological proposals without reflecting entrenched yet narrow or misleading central concepts, standards, methods, questions, and so on? How good are we at improving upon those, even at imagining *new* central concepts, standards, methods, questions, and the like? ...This process [of moving into an improved epistemological future] can stagnate, as we assume that some proposals are irrelevant or mistaken, simply because of how 'implausible' they can currently strike us as being. Bare assessments of implausibility tend to give voice merely to our professional training...but what is entrenched need not be true. Nor need it be able fair-mindedly to assess fundamental challenges or alternatives to itself (2006, 5).

The absence of any mention of feminist epistemology in his volume establishes Hetherington's concerns as quite real and justified. As we have seen, mainstream

²⁰ Brian Leiter's edited volume, *The Future for Philosophy* (2004) foregrounds this futuristic trend. As Leiter notes: 'Meta-philosophical questions, i.e. questions about what philosophy is, its proper concerns, methods, and limitations, and its rightful ambitions are inevitably on the table in any consideration of philosophy's future... Philosophy today – especially, though not only, in the English-speaking countries – is not a monolith, but a pluralism of methods and topics' (2004, 1).

²¹ Hendricks and Pritchard's 2008 volume, *New Waves in Epistemology*, also presents a range of new directions in the field, but, again, feminist epistemology is not recognized among them.

assessments of ‘implausible’ feminist work often have less to do with feminist work than with the inability of mainstream perspectives ‘fair-mindedly to assess fundamental challenges or alternatives’ to ‘entrenched’ understandings of what epistemology is, and, more importantly, what epistemology can or ought to be. But such assessments also establish the necessity of feminist work for moving beyond those same ‘narrow or misleading’ understandings and moving toward ‘an improved epistemological future.’

I do not claim that my examinations above exhaust the possibilities for advantageous feminist metaepistemological intervention and insight. In addition, the interventions outlined intersect and connect in ways that suggest developments that go beyond the scope of this paper. (I examine some of these specific metaepistemic advantages in more detail in Rooney (forthcoming)). They do, however, help to establish specific findings about feminist epistemology and its relationship to a supposed epistemology ‘proper.’ First, the effort to contain feminist epistemology (as one distinct, circumscribed project, or as a subarea within a more ‘mainstream’ area or approach in epistemology) is misguided, and has been for some time. Second, the positing of a contrasted epistemology ‘proper’ reveals more about the lingering effects of philosophy’s history of sexism and racism than it reveals about some supposed unified, coherent area of inquiry in philosophy. Third, feminist epistemology (as encompassing a range of epistemological projects informed and linked by efforts to uncover the political and epistemological fallout of the epistemic disenfranchisement of women and other ‘others’) proceeds in fruitful conversation with a range of approaches or directions in epistemology, and it is unique in this kind of epistemological flexibility. Fourth, in part because of this flexibility, feminist epistemology provides fruitful ground for new metaepistemological reflections about how epistemology is defined, about what its core concepts, questions, and directions are, or, more to the point, ought to be in an improved epistemology future. These reflections inspire nothing less than a recovery of epistemology as a central philosophical discipline attuned to worlds of moral and political complexity, including worlds that have been informed by Western epistemology’s own moral and political history.²²

I don’t recall how I responded to my two discussants (mentioned at the beginning) who wanted to know what feminist epistemology is. I may well have responded to their puzzlement with an equally puzzled look of my own, a kind of counter-puzzlement! To the extent that this paper is an answer to their question I suspect it contains a lot more than they were bargaining for, and not just because of its length. Then again, if they were to read it (that’s the catch, of course), I think that doing so would make them better epistemologists, and not just because they would know some additional things about what some fellow epistemologists are up to.

²²In her paper ‘How is Epistemology Political?’ Alcoff has argued that epistemology cannot but be political in quite specific ways. Among other things, it has distinct discursive effects in philosophy and in broader social and political arenas – it can ‘[influence] whose arguments are considered plausible enough to be given consideration ...[it can] authorize or disauthorize certain kinds of voices, certain kinds of discourses’ (Alcoff 1993, 69, 73).

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Laura Kramer for helpful comments on an early draft of this paper and Heidi Grasswick for her encouragement and support with its development.

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