

Chapter 5

Taking Subjectivity into Account*

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The Problem

Suppose epistemologists should succeed in determining a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for justifying claims that “*S* knows that *p*” across a range of “typical” instances. Suppose, further, that these conditions could silence the skeptic who denies that human beings can have certain knowledge of the world. Would the epistemological project then be completed? I shall maintain that it would not.

There is no doubt that a discovery of necessary and sufficient conditions that offered a response to the skeptic would count as a major epistemological breakthrough, if such conditions could be found. But once one seriously entertains the hypothesis that knowledge is a *construct* produced by cognitive agents within social practices and acknowledges the variability of agents and practices across social groups, the possible scope even of “definitive” justificatory strategies for “*S*-knows-that-*p*” claims reveals itself to be very narrow indeed. My argument here is directed, in part, against the breadth of scope that many epistemologists accord to such claims. I am suggesting that necessary and sufficient conditions in the “received” sense – by which I mean conditions that hold for any knower, regardless of her or his identity, interests, and circumstances: i.e., of her or his subjectivity – could conceivably be discovered only for a narrow range of artificially isolated and purified empirical knowledge claims, which might be paradigmatic by fiat, but are unlikely to be so “in fact.”

In this essay, I focus on “*S*-knows-that-*p*” claims and refer to “*S*-knows-that-*p* epistemologies” because of the emblematic nature of such claims in Anglo-American

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epistemology. My suggestion is not that discerning necessary and sufficient conditions for the justification of such claims is the sole, or even the central, epistemological preoccupation. Rather, I use this label, “*S*-knows-that-*p*,” as a trope that permits easy reference to the epistemologies of the mainstream. I use it for three principal reasons. First, I want to mark the positivist–empiricist orientation of these epistemologies, which is both generated and enforced by appeals to such paradigms. Second, I want to show that these paradigms prompt and sustain a belief that universally necessary and sufficient conditions can indeed be found. Third – and perhaps most importantly – I want to distance my discussion from analyses that privilege scientific knowledge, as “*S*-knows-that-*p*” epistemologies implicitly, and often explicitly, do, and hence to locate it within an “epistemology of everyday lives.”

Coincidentally – but only, I think, coincidentally – the dominant epistemologies of modernity, with their Enlightenment legacy and later infusion with positivist–empiricist principles, have defined themselves around ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality. These ideals are best suited to govern evaluations of the knowledge of knowers who can be considered capable of achieving a “view from nowhere”¹ that allows them, through the autonomous exercise of their reason, to transcend particularity and contingency. The ideals presuppose a universal, homogeneous, and essential human nature that allows knowers to be substitutable for one another. Indeed, for “*S*-knows-that-*p*” epistemologies, knowers worthy of that title can act as “surrogate knowers” who are able to put themselves in anyone else’s place and know her or his circumstances and interests in just the same way as she or he would know them.² Hence, those circumstances and interests are deemed epistemologically irrelevant. Moreover, by virtue of their professed disinterestedness, these ideals erase the possibility of analyzing the interplay between emotion and reason and obscure connections between knowledge and power. Hence, they lend support to the conviction that cognitive products are as neutral – as politically innocent – as the processes that allegedly produce them. Such epistemologies implicitly assert that if one cannot see “from nowhere” (or equivalently, from an ideal observation position that could be anywhere and everywhere) – if one cannot take up an epistemological position that mirrors the “original position” of “the moral point of view” – then one cannot *know* anything at all. If one cannot transcend subjectivity and the particularities of its “locations,” then there is no knowledge worth analyzing.

The strong prescriptions and proscriptions that I have highlighted reveal that “*S*-knows-that-*p*” epistemologies work with a closely specified kind of knowing. That knowledge is by no means representative of “human knowledge,” or “knowledge in general” (if such terms retain a legitimate reference in these postmodern times), either diachronically (across recorded history) or synchronically (across the late twentieth-century epistemic terrain). Nor have *theories* of knowledge throughout the history of philosophy developed uniformly around these same exclusions and inclusions. Not Plato, Spinoza, nor Hume, for example, would have denied that

¹ I allude here to the title of Thomas Nagel’s (1986) book, *The View From Nowhere*.

² I owe the phrase “surrogate knower” to Naomi Scheman (1990).

there are interconnections between reason and “the passions”; not stoics, Marxists, phenomenologists, pragmatists, nor followers of the later Wittgenstein would represent knowledge-seeking as a disinterested pursuit, disconnected from everyday concerns. And these are but a few exceptions to the “rule” that has come to govern the epistemology of the Anglo-American mainstream.

The *positivism* of positivist–empiricist epistemologies has been instrumental in ensuring the paradigmatic status of “*S*-knows-that-*p*” claims, and all that is believed to follow from them.³ For positivist 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, inert items in the observational knowledge-gathering process. Findings are presented in *propositions* (*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, though the belief is that *his* cognitive efforts are replicable by any other individual knower in the same circumstances. The aim of knowledge-seeking is to achieve the capacity to predict, manipulate, and control the behavior of the objects known.

The fact/value distinction that informs present-day epistemology owes its strictest formulation to the positivist legacy. For positivists, value statements are not verifiable and hence are meaningless; they must not be permitted to distort the facts. And it is in the writings of the logical positivists and their heirs that one finds the most definitive modern articulations of the supremacy of scientific knowledge (for which read the knowledge attainable in physics). Hence, for example, Karl Popper (1972) writes: “Epistemology I take to be the theory of *scientific knowledge*” (p. 108, emphasis in original).

From a positivistically derived conception of scientific knowledge comes the ideal objectivity that is alleged to be achievable by any knower who deserves the label. Physical science is represented as the site of ideal, controlled, and objective knowing at its best; its practitioners as knowers par excellence. The positivistic separation of the contexts of discovery and justification produces the conclusion that even though information-gathering (discovery) may sometimes be contaminated by the circumstantial peculiarities of everyday life, justificatory procedures can effectively purify the final cognitive product – the knowledge – from any such taint. Under the aegis of positivism, attempts to give epistemological weight to the provenance of knowledge claims – to grant justificatory or explanatory significance to social- or personal-historical situations, for example – risk committing the “genetic fallacy.” More specifically, claims that there is epistemological insight to be gained from understanding the psychology of knowers, or analyzing their socio-cultural locations, invite dismissal either as “psychologism” or as projects belonging to the sociology of knowledge. For epistemological purists, many of these pursuits can provide anecdotal information, but none contributes to the real business of epistemology.

³For an account of the central tenets of logical positivism, a representative selection of articles, and an extensive bibliography, see Ayer (1959).

In this sketch, I have represented the positivist credo at its starkest because it is these stringent aspects of its program that have trickled down not just to produce the tacit ideals of the epistemological orthodoxy but to inform even well-educated laypersons' conceptions of what it means to be objective, and of the authoritative status of modern science.⁴ Given the spectacular successes of science and technology, it is no wonder that scientific method should appear to offer the best available route to reliable, objective knowledge not just of matters scientific, but of everything one could want to know, from what makes a car run, to what makes a person happy. It is no wonder that reports to the effect that "Science has proved..." carry an immediate presumption of truth. Furthermore, the positivist program offered a methodology that would extend not just across the natural sciences, but to the human/social sciences as well. All scientific inquiry – including inquiry in the human sciences – was to be conducted on the model of natural scientific inquiry, especially as it is practiced in physics.⁵ Knowing people, too, could be scientific to the extent that it could be based in empirical observations of predictable, manipulable patterns of behavior.

I have focused on features of mainstream epistemology that tend to sustain the belief that a discovery of necessary and sufficient conditions for justifying "*S*-knows-that-*p*" claims could count as the last milestone on the epistemological journey. Such claims are distilled, simplified observational knowledge claims, objectively derived, propositionally formulable, and empirically testable. The detail of the role they play varies according to whether the position they figure in is foundational or coherentist; whether it is externalist or internalist. My intent is not to suggest that "*S*-knows-that-*p*" formulations capture the essence of these disparate epistemic orientations, nor reduce them to one common principle. Rather, I am contending that certain reasonably constant features of their diverse functions across a range of inquiries – features that derive at least indirectly from the residual prestige of positivism and its veneration of an idealized scientific methodology – produce epistemologies for which the places *S* and *p* can be indiscriminately filled across an inexhaustible range of subject matters. The legislated (not "found") context-independence of the model generates the conclusion that knowledge worthy of the name must transcend the particularities of experience to achieve objective purity and value neutrality. Within this model the issue of taking subjectivity into account simply does not arise.

Yet despite the disclaimers, hidden subjectivities produce these epistemologies, and sustain their hegemony in a curiously circular process. It is true that, in selecting examples, the context in which *S* knows or *p* occurs is rarely considered relevant, for

⁴Mary Hesse (1980) advisedly notes that philosophers of science would now more readily assert than they would have done in the heyday of positivism that facts in both the natural and social sciences are "value-laden" (pp. 172–173). I am claiming, however, that everyday conceptions of scientific authority are still significantly informed by a residual positivistic faith.

⁵For classic statements of this aspect of the positivistic program, see, for example, Rudolf Carnap, "Psychology in Physical Language," and Otto Neurath, "Sociology and Physicalism" in A. J. Ayer (Ed.), *Logical Positivism*.

the assumption is that only in abstraction from contextual confusion can clear, unequivocal knowledge claims be submitted for analysis. Yet those examples tend to be selected – whether by chance or by design – from the experiences of a privileged group of people, then to be presented as paradigmatic for knowledge as such. Hence, a certain range of contexts is, in effect, presupposed. Historically, the philosopher arrogated that privilege to himself, maintaining that an investigation of his mental processes could reveal the workings of human thought. In Baconian and later positivist–empiricist thought, as I have suggested, paradigmatic privilege belongs more specifically to standardized, faceless observers or to scientists (The latter, at least, have usually been white and male). Their ordinary observational experiences provide the “simples” of which knowledge is comprised: observational simples caused, almost invariably, by medium-sized physical objects such as apples, envelopes, coins, sticks, and colored patches. The tacit assumption is that such objects are part of the basic experiences of every putative knower, and that more complex knowledge – or scientific knowledge – consists in elaborated or scientifically controlled versions of such experiences. Rarely in the literature, either historical or modern, is there more than a passing reference to knowing other people, except occasionally to a recognition (observational information) that this is a man – whereas that is a door, or a robot. Neither with respect to material objects, nor to other people, is there any sense of how these “knowns” figure in a person’s life.

Not only do these epistemic restrictions suppress the context in which objects are known, they also account for the fact that, apart from simple objects – and even there it is questionable – one cannot, on this model, know anything well enough to do very much with it. One can only *perceive* it, usually at a distance. In consequence, most of the more complex, contentious, and locationally variable aspects of cognitive practice are excluded from epistemological analysis. Hence the knowledge that epistemologists analyze is not of concrete or unique aspects of the physical/social world. It is of *instances* rather than particulars; the norms of formal sameness obscure practical and experiential differences to produce a picture of a homogeneous epistemic community, comprised of discrete individuals with uniform access to the stuff of which knowledge is made.

The project of remapping the epistemic terrain that I envisage is subversive, even anarchistic, in challenging and seeking to displace some of the most sacred principles of standard Anglo-American epistemologies. It abandons the search for – denies the possibility of – the disinterested and dislocated view from nowhere. More subversively, it asserts the political investedness of most knowledge-producing activity and insists upon the accountability – the epistemic responsibilities – of knowing subjects to the community, not just to the evidence.⁶

Because my engagement in the project is prompted, specifically, by a conviction that *gender* must be put in place as a primary analytic category, I start by assuming that it is impossible to sustain the presumption of gender neutrality that is central to standard epistemologies: the presumption that gender has nothing to do with

⁶I discuss such responsibilities in my *Epistemic Responsibility* (1987).

knowledge, that the mind has no sex, that reason is alike in all men, and “man” embraces “woman.”⁷ But gender is not an enclosed category for it is interwoven, always, with such other sociopolitical-historical locations as class, race, and ethnicity, to mention only a few. It is experienced differently and plays differently into structures of power and dominance at its diverse intersections with other specificities. From these multiply describable locations, the world looks quite different from the way it might look “from nowhere.” Homogenizing those differences under a range of standard or “typical” instances always invites the question “standard or typical for whom?”⁸ Answers to that question must, necessarily, take subjectivity into account.

My thesis, then, is that a “variable construction” hypothesis requires epistemologists to pay as much attention to the nature and situation – the location – of *S* as they commonly pay to the content of *p*; that a constructivist reorientation requires epistemologists to take subjective factors – factors that pertain to the circumstances of the subject, *S* – centrally into account in evaluative and justificatory procedures. Yet the socially located, critically dialogical nature of this reoriented epistemological project preserves a realist commitment which ensures that it will not slide into subjectivism. This caveat is vitally important, as it is my contention that realism and relativism are by no means incompatible. Hence, although I argue the need to excise the positivist side of the positivist–empiricist couple, I retain a modified commitment to the empiricist side, for several reasons.

I have suggested that the stark conception of objectivity that characterizes much contemporary epistemology derives from the infusion of empiricism with positivistic values. Jettison those values, and an empiricist core remains that urges the survival- and emancipatory significance of achieving reliable knowledge of the physical and social world.⁹ People need to be able to explain the world and their circumstances as part of it; hence they need to be able to assume its “reality” in some minimal sense. The fact of the world’s intractability to intervention and wishful thinking is

⁷ See Joan Scott (1989) for an elaboration of what it means to see gender as an analytic category.

⁸ Paul Moser in his review of *Epistemic Responsibility* takes me to task for not announcing “the necessary and sufficient conditions for one’s being epistemically responsible.” He argues that even if, as I claim, epistemic responsibility does not lend itself to analysis in those terms, “we might still provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the wide range of typical instances, and then handle the wayward cases independently” (Paul Moser, Review of *Epistemic Responsibility*, p. 155). Yet it is precisely their “typicality” that I contest. Moser’s review is a salient example of the tendency of dominant epistemologies to claim as their own even positions that reject their central premises.

⁹ These aims are continuous with some of the aims of recent projects to naturalize epistemology by drawing on the resources of cognitive psychology. See especially Quine (1969), Kornblith (1990, 1994), and Goldman (1986). Feminist epistemologists who are developing this line of inquiry are Jane Duran (1991) and Lynn Hankinson Nelson (1990). Feminists who find a resource in this work have to contend with the fact that the cognitive psychology that informs it presupposes a constancy in “human nature,” exemplified in “representative selves” who have commonly been white, male, and middle class. They have also to remember the extent to which appeals to “nature” have oppressed women and other marginal groups.

the strongest evidence of its independence from human knowers. Earthquakes, trees, disease, attitudes, and social arrangements are *there*, requiring different kinds of reaction, and (sometimes) intervention. People cannot hope to transform their circumstances and hence to realize emancipatory goals if their explanations cannot at once account for the intractable dimensions of the world, and engage appropriately with its patently malleable features. Hence it is necessary to achieve some match between knowledge and “reality,” even when the reality at issue consists primarily in social productions, such as racism or tolerance, oppression or equality of opportunity. A reconstructed epistemological project has to retain an empirical-realist core that can negotiate the fixities and less stable constructs of the physical-social world, while refusing to endorse the objectivism of the positivist legacy or the subjectivism of radical relativism.

Subjects and Objects

Feminist critiques of epistemology, of the philosophy of science, and of social science have demonstrated that the ideals of the autonomous reasoner – the dislocated, disinterested observer – and the epistemologies they inform are the artifacts of a small, privileged group of educated, usually prosperous, white men.¹⁰ Their circumstances enable them to believe that they are materially and even affectively autonomous, and to imagine that they are nowhere or everywhere, even as they occupy an unmarked position of privilege. Moreover, the ideals of rationality and objectivity that have guided and inspired theorists of knowledge throughout the history of western philosophy have been constructed through processes of suppressing the attributes and experiences commonly associated with femaleness and underclass social status: emotion, connection, practicality, sensitivity, idiosyncrasy.¹¹ These systematic excisions of “otherness” attest to a presumed – and willed – belief in the stability of a social order that the presumers have good reasons to believe that they can ensure, because they occupy the positions that determine the norms of conduct and inquiry. Yet all that these convictions demonstrate is that ideal objectivity is a tacit generalization from the *subjectivity* of quite a small social group, albeit a group that has the power, security, and prestige to believe that its experiences and normative ideals hold generally across the social order, thus producing a group of like-minded practitioners (“we”) and dismissing “others” as deviant, aberrant (“they”). These groupings are generated more as a by-product of systematically ignoring concrete experiences, of working with an idealized conception of experience “in general,” so

¹⁰ For an extensive bibliography of such critiques up to 1989, see Wylie et al. (1990).

¹¹ For an analysis of the androcentricity, the “masculinity” of these ideals, and their “feminine” exclusions in theories of knowledge, see Genevieve Lloyd (1993) and Susan Bordo (1987). For discussions of the scientific context, see Evelyn Fox Keller (1985), Sandra Harding (1986), and Nancy Tuana (1989).

to speak, than as a conscious and intentional practice of reifying experiences that are specifically *theirs*. The experiences that epistemologists tend to draw upon are usually no more “experiential” than the “individuals” whose experiences they allegedly are, are individuated. These are the generic experiences of generic epistemic subjects. But the end result is to focus philosophical analysis on examples that draw upon the commonplaces of privileged white male lives and to assume that everyone else’s lives will, unquestionably, be like theirs.

...

Naming ourselves as “we” empowers us, but it always risks disempowering others. The “we-saying,” then, of assumed or negotiated solidarity must always be submitted to critical analysis. Now, it is neither surprising nor outrageous that epistemologies should derive out of specific human interests. Indeed, it is much less plausible to contend that they do not; human cognitive agents, after all, have made them. Why would they not bear the marks of their makers? Nor does the implication of human interests in theories of knowledge, *prima facie*, invite censure. It does alert epistemologists to the need for case-by-case analysis and critique of the sources out of which claims to objectivity and neutrality are made.¹² More pointedly, it forces the conclusion that if the ideal of objectivity cannot pretend to have been established in accordance with its own demands, then it has no right to the theoretical hegemony to which it lays claim.

Central to the program of taking subjectivity into account that feminist epistemological inquiry demands, then, is a critical analysis of that very politics of “we-saying” that objectivist epistemologies conceal from view. Whenever an “*S*-knows-that-*p*” claim is declared paradigmatic, the first task is to analyze the constitution of the group(s) by whom and for whom it is accorded that status.

...

My contention that subjectivity has to be taken into account takes issue with the belief that epistemologists need only to understand the conditions for propositional, observationally derived knowledge, and all the rest will follow. It challenges the concomitant belief that epistemologists need only to understand how such knowledge claims are made and justified by individual, autonomous, self-reliant reasoners, and they will understand all the rest. Such beliefs derive from conceptions of detached and faceless cognitive agency that mask the variability of the experiences and practices from which knowledge is constructed.

Even if necessary and sufficient conditions cannot yet be established, say in the form of unassailable foundations or seamless coherence, there are urgent questions for epistemologists to address. They bear not primarily upon criteria of evidence, justification, and warrantability, but upon the “nature” of inquirers: upon their interests in the inquiry, their emotional involvement and background assumptions, their character; upon their material, historical, cultural circumstances. Answers to such questions will rarely offer definitive assessments of knowledge claims and hence are not ordinarily

¹²I borrow the idea, if not the detail, of the potential of case-by-case analysis from Roger Shiner (1984).

open to the charge that they commit the genetic fallacy; but they can be instructive in debates about the worth of such claims. I am thinking of questions about how credibility is established, about connections between knowledge and power, about political agendas and epistemic responsibilities, and about the place of knowledge in ethical and aesthetic judgments. These questions are less concerned with individual, monologic cognitive projects than with the workings of epistemic communities as they are manifested in structures of authority and expertise and in the processes through which knowledge comes to inform public opinion. Such issues will occupy a central place in reconstructed epistemological projects that eschew formalism in order to engage with cognitive practices and to promote emancipatory goals.

The epistemic and moral-political ideals that govern inquiry in technological, capitalist, free-enterprise western societies are an amalgam of liberal-utilitarian moral values and the empirical-positivist intellectual values that I have been discussing in this essay. These ideals and values shape both the intellectual enterprises that the society legitimates and the language of liberal individualism that maps out the rhetorical spaces where those enterprises are carried out. The ideal of tolerance, openness, is believed to be the right attitude from which, initially, to approach truth claims. It combines with the assumptions that objectivity and value-neutrality govern the rational conduct of scientific and social-scientific research to produce the philosophical commonplaces of late-twentieth-century Anglo-American societies, not just in “the academy” but in the public perception – the “common sense,” in Gramsci’s terms – that prevails about the academy and the scientific community.¹³ (For Richard Rorty, tolerance is to ensure that post-epistemological societies will sustain productive conversations.) I have noted that a conversational item introduced with the phrase “Science has proved...” carries a presumption in favor of its reliability *because of* its objectivity and value-neutrality – a presumption that these facts can stand up to scrutiny *because* they are products of an objective, disinterested process of inquiry. (It is ironic that this patently “genetic” appeal – i.e., to the genesis of cognitive products in a certain kind of process – is normally cited to discredit other genetic accounts!) Open and fair-minded consumers of science will recognize its claims to disinterested, tolerant consideration.

I want to suggest that these ideals are inadequate to guide epistemological debates about contentious issues and hence that it is deceptive and dangerous to ignore questions about subjectivity in the name of objectivity and value-neutrality. (Again, this is why simple observational paradigms are so misleading.) To do so, I turn to an example that is now notorious, at least in Canada.

Psychologist Philippe Rushton claims to have demonstrated that “Orientals as a group are more intelligent, more family-oriented, more law-abiding and less sexually promiscuous than whites, and that whites are superior to blacks in all the same respects” (Platiel and Strauss 1989, p. A6).¹⁴ Presented as “facts” that “science

¹³ See Antonio Gramsci (1971).

¹⁴ I cite the newspaper report because the media produce the public impact that concerns me here. I discuss neither the quality of Rushton’s research practice nor the questions his theories and pedagogical practice pose about academic freedom. My concern is with how structures of knowledge, power, and prejudice grant him an epistemic place.

[i.e., an allegedly scientific psychology] has proved..." using an objective, statistical methodology, Rushton's findings carry a presumption in favor of their reliability *because* they are products of objective research.¹⁵ The "Science has proved..." rhetoric creates a public presumption in favor of taking them at face value, believing them true until they are proven false. It erects a screen, a blind, behind which the researcher, like any other occupant of the *S* place, can abdicate accountability to anything but "the facts"; can present himself as a neutral, infinitely replicable vehicle through which data pass *en route* to becoming knowledge. He can claim to have fulfilled his epistemic obligations if, "withdraw[ing] to... [his] professional self,"¹⁶ he can argue that he has been "objective," detached, disinterested in his research. The rhetoric of objectivity and value-neutrality places the burden of proof on the challenger rather than the fact-finder and judges her guilty of intolerance, dogmatism, or ideological excess if she cannot make her challenge good. That same rhetoric generates a conception of knowledge-for-its-own-sake that at once effaces accountability requirements and threatens the dissolution of viable intellectual and moral community.

I have noted that the "Science has proved..." rhetoric derives from the sociopolitical influence of the philosophies of science that incorporate and are underwritten by "*S*-knows-that-*p*" epistemologies. Presented as the findings of a purely neutral observer who "discovered" facts about racial inferiority and superiority in controlled observation conditions, so that he could not, rationally, withhold assent, Rushton's results ask the community to be equally objective and neutral in assessing them. These requirements are at once reasonable and troubling. They are reasonable because the empiricist–realist component that, I have urged, is vital to any emancipatory epistemology makes it a mark of competent, responsible inquiry to approach even the most unsavory truth claims seriously, albeit critically. But the requirements are troubling in their implicit appeal to a doxastic involuntarism that becomes an escape hatch from the demands of subjective accountability. The implicit claim is that empirical inquiry is not only a neutral and impersonal process but also an inexorable one: it is compelling, even coercive, in what it turns up, to the extent that a rational inquirer *cannot*, rationally, withhold assent. He has no choice but to believe that *p*, however unpalatable it may be. The individualism and presumed disinterestedness of the paradigm reinforces this claim.

It is difficult, however, to believe in the *coincidence* of Rushton's discoveries, and they could only be compelling in that strong sense if they could be shown to be purely coincidental – brute fact – something he came upon as he might bump into a wall. Talk about his impartial reading of the data assumes such hard facticity: the facticity of a blizzard or a hot sunny day. "Data" is the problematic term here, suggesting that facts presented themselves neutrally to Rushton's observing eye as

¹⁵ Commenting on the psychology of occupational assessment, Wendy Hollway (1984) observes: "That psychology is a science and that psychological assessment is therefore objective is a belief which continues to be fostered in organizations" (p. 35). She notes: "The legacy of psychology as science is the belief that the individual can be understood through measurement" (p. 55).

¹⁶ The phrase is Richard Schmitt's (1990, p. 71). I am grateful to Richard Schmitt for helping me to think about the issues I discuss in this section.

though they were literally given, not sought or made. Yet it is not easy, with Rushton, to conceive of his “data” in perfect independence from ongoing debates about race, sex, and class.

These difficulties are compounded when Rushton’s research is juxtaposed against analogous projects in other places and times. In her book *Sexual Science*, Cynthia Russett (1989) documents the intellectual climate of the nineteenth century, when claims for racial and sexual equality were threatening upheavals in the social order.¹⁷ She notes that, just at that time, there was a concerted effort among scientists to produce studies that would demonstrate the “natural” sources of racial and sexual inequality. Given its aptness to the climate of the times, it is hard to believe that this research was “dislocated,” prompted by a disinterested spirit of objective, neutral fact-finding. It is equally implausible, at a time when racial and sexual unrest is again threatening the complacency of the liberal dream – and meeting with strong conservative efforts to contain it – that it could be purely by coincidence that Rushton reaches the conclusions he does. Consider Rushton’s contention that, evolutionarily, as the brain increases in size, the genitals shrink; blacks have larger genitals, ergo . . . Leaving elementary logical fallacies aside, it is impossible not to hear echoes with nineteenth-century medical science’s “proofs” that, for women, excessive mental activity interferes with the proper functioning of the uterus; hence, permitting women to engage in higher intellectual activity impedes performance of their proper reproductive roles.

The connections Rushton draws between genital and brain size, and conformity to idealized patterns of good liberal democratic citizenship, trade upon analogous normative assumptions. The rhetoric of stable, conformist family structure as the site of controlled, utilitarian sexual expression is commonly enlisted to sort the “normal” from the “deviant” and to promote conservative conceptions of the self-image a society should have of itself.¹⁸ The idea that the dissolution of “the family” (=the nuclear, two-parent, patriarchal family) threatens the destruction of civilized society has been deployed to perpetuate white male privilege and compulsory heterosexuality, especially for women. It has been invoked to preserve homogeneous WASP values from disruption by “unruly” (=not law-abiding; sexually promiscuous) elements. Rushton’s contention that “naturally occurring” correlations can explain the demographic distribution of tendencies to unruliness leaves scant room for doubt about the appropriate route for a society concerned about its self-image to take: suppress unruliness. As Julian Henriques (1984) puts a similar point, by a neat reversal, the “black person becomes the cause of racism whereas the white person’s prejudice is seen as a natural effect of the information-processing mechanisms” (p. 74). The “facts” that Rushton produces are simply presented to the scholarly and lay communities so that they allegedly “speak for themselves” on two levels: both roughly, as data, and in more formal garb, as research findings.

¹⁷ In this connection, see also Lynda Birke (1986) and Janet Sayers (1982).

¹⁸ The best-known contemporary discussion of utilitarian-controlled sexuality is in Michel Foucault (1976/1980), *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*. Sexuality, in Foucault’s analysis, is utilitarian both in reproducing the population and in cementing the family bond.

What urgently demands analysis is the process by which these “facts” are inserted into a public arena that is prepared to receive them, with the result that inquiry stops right where it should begin.¹⁹

My point is that it is not enough just to be more rigorously empirical in adjudicating such controversial knowledge claims with the expectation that biases that may have infected the “context of discovery” will be eradicated in the purifying processes of justification. Rather, the scope of epistemological investigation has to expand to merge with moral-political inquiry, acknowledging that “facts” are always infused with values and that both facts and values are open to ongoing critical debate. It would be necessary to demonstrate the innocence of descriptions (their derivation from pure data) and to show the perfect congruence of descriptions with “the described” in order to argue that descriptive theories have no normative force. Their assumed innocence licenses an evasion of the accountability that socially concerned communities have to demand of their producers of knowledge. Only the most starkly positivistic epistemology merged with the instrumental rationality it presupposes could presume that inquirers are accountable only to the evidence. Evidence is *selected*, not found, and selection procedures are open to scrutiny. Nor can critical analysis stop there, for the funding and institutions that enable inquirers to pursue certain projects and not others explicitly legitimize the work.²⁰ So the lines of accountability are long and interwoven; only a genealogy of their multiple strands can begin to unravel the issues.

What, then, should occur within epistemic communities to ensure that scientists and other knowers cannot conceal bias and prejudice, cannot claim *a right not to know* about their background assumptions, and the significance of their locations?

The crux of my argument is that the phenomenon of the disinterested inquirer is the exception rather than the rule; that there are no dislocated truths, and that some facts about the locations and interests at the source of inquiry are always pertinent to questions about freedom and accountability. Hence, I am arguing, in agreement with Naomi Scheman (1989), that:

Feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science *along with others who have been the objects of knowledge-as-control* [have to] understand and ... pose alternatives to the epistemology of modernity. As it has been central to this epistemology to guard its products from contamination by connection to the particularities of its producers, it must be central to the work of its critics and to those who would create genuine alternatives to remember those connections.... (p. 42, emphasis in original)

¹⁹ Clifford Geertz (1989) comments: “It is not...the validity of the sciences, real or would-be, that is at issue. What concerns me, and should concern us all, are the axes that, with an increasing determination bordering on the evangelical, are being busily ground with their assistance” (p. 20).

²⁰ Philippe Rushton has received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Guggenheim Foundation in the USA: agencies whose status, in the North American intellectual community, confers authority and credibility. He has also received funding from the Pioneer Fund, an organization with explicit white supremacist commitments.

There can be no doubt that research is – often imperceptibly – shaped by presuppositions and interests external to the inquiry itself, which cannot be filtered out by standard, objective, disinterested epistemological techniques.²¹

In seeking to explain what makes Rushton possible,²² the point cannot be to exonerate him as a mere product of his circumstances and times. Rushton accepts grants and academic honors in his own name, speaks “for himself” in interviews with the press, and claims credit where credit is to be had. He upholds the validity of his findings. Moreover, he participates fully in the rhetoric of the autonomous, objective inquirer. Yet, although Rushton is plainly accountable for the sources and motivations of his projects, he is not singly responsible. Such research is legitimated by the community and speaks in a discursive space that is available, prepared for it. So, scrutinizing Rushton’s “scientific” knowledge claims demands an examination of the moral and intellectual health of a community that is infected by racial and sexual injustices at every level. Rushton may have had reasons to believe that his results would be welcomed.

Equally central, then, to an epistemological program of taking subjectivity into account are case-by-case analyses of the political and other structural circumstances that generate projects and lines of inquiry. Feminist critique – with critiques that center on other marginalizing structures – needs to act as an “experimental control” in epistemic practice so that every inquiry, assumption, and discovery is analyzed for its place in, and implications for, the prevailing sex/gender system, in its intersections with the systems that sustain racism, homophobia, ethnocentrism.²³ The burden of proof falls upon inquirers who claim neutrality. The positions and power relations of gendered, and otherwise located, subjectivity have to be submitted to scrutiny, piece by piece, and differently according to the field of research, in all “objective” inquiry. The task is intricate, because the subjectivity of the inquirer is always also implicated, and has to be taken into account. Hence, the inquiry is at once critical and self-critical. But this is no monologic, self-sufficient enterprise. Conclusions are reached, immoderate subjective omissions and commissions become visible, in dialogic processes among inquirers and – in social science – between inquirers and the subjects of their research.

It emerges from this analysis that although the ideal objectivity of the universal knower is neither possible nor desirable, a realistic commitment to achieving empirical adequacy that engages in situated analyses of the subjectivities of both the knower and (where appropriate) the known is both desirable and possible. This exercise in

²¹ Helen Longino (1990) observes: “...how one determines evidential relevance, why one takes some state of affairs as evidence for one hypothesis rather than for another, depends on one’s other beliefs, which we can call background beliefs or assumptions” (p. 43). And “When, for instance, background assumptions are shared by all members of a community, they acquire an invisibility that renders them unavailable for criticism” (p. 80).

²² Here I am borrowing a turn of phrase from Michel Foucault (1966/1971), when he writes, in quite a different context: “And it was this network that made possible the individuals we term Hobbes, Berkeley, Hume, or Condillac” (p. 63).

²³ I owe this point to the Biology and Gender Study Group (1989, p. 173).

supposing that the places in the “*S*-knows-that-*p*” formula could be filled by asserting “Rushton knows that blacks are inferior” shows that simple, propositional knowledge claims that represent inquirers as purely neutral observers of unignorable data cannot be permitted to count as paradigms of knowledge. Objectivity *requires* taking subjectivity into account.

...

Conclusion

The project I am proposing, then, requires a new *geography* of the epistemic terrain: one that is no longer primarily a physical geography but a population geography that develops qualitative analyses of subjective positions and identities and the social-political structures that produce them. Because differing social positions generate variable constructions of reality and afford different perspectives on the world, the revisionary stages of this project will consist in case-by-case analyses of the knowledge produced in specific social positions. These analyses derive from a recognition that knowers are always *somewhere* – and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations.²⁴ It is an interpretive project, alert to the possibility of finding generalities, commonalities within particulars – hence of the explanatory potential that opens up when such commonalities can be delineated. But it is wary of the reductivism that results when commonalities are presupposed or forced. It has no ultimate foundation, but neither does it float free, for it is grounded in experiences and practices, in the efficacy of dialogic negotiation and of action.

My argument in this essay points to the conclusion that necessary and sufficient conditions for establishing empirical knowledge claims cannot be found, at least where experientially significant knowledge is at issue.

...

I have exposed some ways in which “*S*-knows-that-*p*” epistemologies are dangerous and have proposed one route toward facing and disarming those dangers: taking subjectivity into account. The solutions that route affords, and the further dangers it reveals, will indicate the directions that the next stages of this inquiry must take.²⁵

²⁴ Here I borrow a phrase from Susan Bordo (1990, p. 145).

²⁵ Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the American Philosophical Association conference at Los Angeles and to the Departments of Philosophy at McMaster University and McGill University. I am grateful to participants in those discussions – especially to Susan Dwyer, Hilary Kornblith, and Doug Odegard – for their comments and to Linda Alcoff and Libby Potter for their editorial suggestions.

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