

Feminism in Analytic Philosophy
Week One, MT 2012: Epistemology
Presented by Amia Srinivasan

Readings:

1. Langton, Rae, "Feminism in epistemology: Exclusion and objectification"
2. Fricker, Miranda, "Feminism in epistemology: Pluralism without postmodernism"
3. Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism"

1. How can feminism contribute to philosophy?

- A. New questions and concepts.** Thinking about the history of women's exclusion and oppression can raise new questions about, and introduce new concepts related to, knowledge. (e.g. Miranda Fricker on 'epistemic injustice'; Langton's on how KK failures can result from lack of subjective authority).
- B. New answers to old questions.** When women's voices are introduced novel answers to traditional questions will come up: "a life led at the sharp end of any given set of power relations provides for a critical understanding...where a life cushioned by the possession of power does not" (Fricker, 147). (e.g. the claim that self-knowledge isn't automatic or guaranteed for competent adults, but requires particular conceptual and linguistic conditions sometimes unavailable: Betty Friedan on the 'problem that has no name')
- C. Discrediting old answers.** Thinking about women's exclusion can make us re-think traditional biases and prejudices in analytic epistemology, (e.g. the emphasis on propositional knowledge (*know-that*) over non-propositional knowledge (*know-how*) as a result of a valorisation of men's work over women's work.)

Langton and Fricker are happy with feminist contributions of type (A) – (C) to epistemology, but want to defend against the more radical feminist contribution that seeks, in effect, to *destroy* epistemology. Thus Langton wants to defuse the radical challenge that objectivity necessarily leads to objectification, and Fricker the challenge that appeals to reason are necessarily coercive.

Each does so by advancing two claims:

- (i) Positive Claim: A line can be drawn between good and bad appeals to *objectivity* and *reason*; not *all* such appeals are necessarily pernicious.
- (ii) Negative Claim: The radical critique of objectivity and reason, respectively, is in fact *bad* for feminism, i.e. feminism needs epistemology.

2. Langton on Objectivity and Objectification

Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it (Mackinnon, as quoted in Langton, 135).

Langton, largely rehearsing an argument made by Sally Haslanger, argues that what is correct in Mackinnon's claim is that the epistemological norm of "assumed objectivity" can, in certain cases, lead to ethically problematic *objectification*.

The **Norm of Assumed Objectivity** tells us (roughly) to count observed regularities in an object (e.g. a planet, an animal, a person) as genuine regularities stemming from the *nature* of the object, and to constrain our action to accommodate the nature of that object.

One **objectifies** an object (e.g. a planet, an animal, a person) when one (roughly) views it as an object for the satisfaction of one's desire, when one forces it to have the properties one desires of it, and one believes that it has those properties by nature. E.g. a man objectifies a woman when he desires and believes her to be submissive by her very nature, and forces her to behave submissively.

The norm of **Assumed Objectivity** leads to **objectification**, Langton and Haslanger argue, in situations of extreme power differential. In such situations, what the powerful desire of the disempowered they typically believe is true (since the powerful tend to believe that the world is as they desire it to be), and what they believe of the disempowered *because of their self-fulfilling belief* becomes true. E.g. if (powerful) men desire that (disempowered) women be submissive, they will come to believe it, and then because they believe it, women will in turn *behave submissively*. If a man (or woman) then follows the **norm of assumed objectivity**, he will come to believe (truly) that women are submissive and (falsely) that they are so by nature. They will also accommodate their actions to the 'submissive' nature of women, thereby *making* women behave more submissively.

But this is not to say, Langton argues, that objectivity *always* leads to objectification:

[O]ne can be objective without being an objectifier. Following the norm of Assumed Objectivity in other everyday activities – gardening, for instance – will have no untoward results (Langton 142)

Langton ends with the suggestion that the radical feminist view that would jettison all of epistemology is in fact bad for feminism, leaving a mere "pragmatic critique":

The feminist critique is a practical one: Assumed Objectivity has bad consequences for women. **A merely pragmatic critique has its shortcomings, though.** For one thing, if feminists use pragmatic arguments, we can hardly complain when others do. Objectified women may complain, it's bad for us; and objectifiers may respond, yes, but it's good for us. We can add to this pragmatic critique a philosophical one: the norm of Assumed Objectivity is not just bad for women, it is simply *bad*. Applied in conditions of gender hierarchy, although it leads some objectifiers to self-fulfilling *true* beliefs, it also reliably leads them to *false* beliefs (Langton 142, emphasis added).

Two questions about Langton's argument:

- (1) What justifies Langton's claim that Assumed Objectivity is bad in some cases, e.g. when it comes to women, but not others, e.g. gardening?
- (2) Why isn't the pragmatic argument – that the Norm of Assumed Objectivity can “hurt women” – sufficient for feminism? Why does feminism need to argue against objectivity on “philosophical” grounds as well, i.e. by showing that it can lead to false beliefs?

3. Fricker on pluralism without postmodernism

Fricker addresses the postmodern feminist claim that *knowledge* and *reason* are both metaphysically and politically suspect concepts: that they are social constructions designed by the powerful to reinforce their power.

Fricker resists this claim by arguing that it presupposes a Kantian understanding of the conditions for the vindication of reason as a genuine source of authority. On a Kantian view, reason requires freedom: either of the robust metaphysical kind or (according to a constructivist reading of Kant) of a political kind. On the latter interpretation, what is genuinely *reasonable* is what is acceptable to everyone in an ideal discursive situation in which no “alien authorities” inhibit participation or expression of dissent. But if one believes with Foucault that *all* discursive situations are constituted by power relations, then there can be no discursive situations that are genuinely free.

Fricker's proposal is to jettison the Kantian standard for the vindication of reason. We can draw a distinction between authoritative and authoritarian uses of reason in a *Humean* fashion. Just as Hume said that the alternative to freedom isn't causal determination but mere *constraint*, thus vindicating free will, Fricker proposes to distinguish reason not from the use of power, but from *authoritarian* uses of power.

Fricker then argues at length that the postmodern suspicion of reason *per se* is in fact detrimental for feminism:

Any political inadequacy we may suspect of postmodernism is likely to flow from an epistemological source. That source is now in view. The insistence on the localness of all norms of judgement renders postmodernism incapable of sustaining ordinary judgements, such as the judgement that some forms of social organization are plain unjust, or that some beliefs are plain false. The question whether any particular critical judgement is reasonable cannot depend on the 'agreement' of those who happen to be one's interlocutors – their interests may be served very nicely by the discursive *status quo*... Suppose someone protests 'Equal pay for equal work!', or 'Slavery is wrong!'. And suppose the protest is met with a shrug of cynical insouciance from the powers that be. Postmodernism is unfit to characterize that response as unreasonable, or unjustified, or even inappropriate, for who is to say which 'language game' the authorities may priviosionally have 'agreed' to play? Of course, no other epistemological view can guarantee that dissenting voices are given their due... What is at issue is the authority of the critical thoughts we may voice and of others' response to them (150)

If the powerful are merely *expressing* themselves when they tell others how the world is, then so too are the powerless – only in the case of the powerless nobody is listening. The problem with the postmodernist charge of terrorism (or imperialism, or authoritarianism) against a practice of reason is that it is hopelessly indiscriminate (151)

Two questions for Fricker:

- (1) To what extent do we have an intuitive grasp of the authoritative/authoritarian distinction that is not conservative, i.e. capable of grounding a genuinely progressive politics?
- (2) How successful is Fricker's argument that feminism needs epistemology—which is to say, a realist understanding of reason?

3. Does feminism need epistemology? Rorty vs. Langton and Fricker

In what sense might feminism *need* epistemology?

- (i) Instrumental/political need
- (ii) Psychological need

We may well doubt our prospects for psychological health in a life where we cannot quite take 'seriously' even our most deeply held beliefs and values (Fricker 152).

- (iii) Metaphysical/Authoritative need