

Feminist Epistemology
Feminism in Analytic Philosophy
Week One, MT 2012, Oxford

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?

The framing question of this reading group is: what can feminism contribute to analytic philosophy? But prior to this question lurks, we might think, a more fundamental question: why should we think that feminism has *anything* to contribute to analytic philosophy?

One might worry, after all, that the discourses of analytic philosophy and feminism are simply so different in aim that thinking one has something substantive to contribute to the other is to commit a sort of category error.

If feminism is merely the political project of alleviating women's oppression and exclusion, then what can feminism really offer philosophy? It can of course diagnose and make recommendations about the *practice* of philosophy, and thus make a *sociological* contribution to philosophy. And of course feminist concerns could also provide fodder to those areas of philosophy, like ethics and political philosophy, that are already concerned with issues of oppression and discrimination. But this wouldn't really constitute a feminist *perspective* contributing to philosophy itself.

But to understand feminism as I have described it – as the political project of alleviating women's oppression – is to not fully grasp it. For feminists don't merely advocate for women's equality in terms of life chances, but also for public recognition and inclusions of women's voices, perspectives and experiences. Or, put another way, feminism sees women's exclusion not merely as consisting in having worse life chances than men, but also in having had their voices, perspectives and experiences systematically denied, marginalised, undervalued, and vilified. Alleviation of discrimination of *this* sort results in much more than changes in how our societies and professional communities are organised. It changes how we think and talk and theorise about the world.

Which is to say, it changes how we do philosophy.

But this isn't to say that the relationship between feminism and analytic philosophy is not *vexed*. For there are some feminists who see the values and methods of analytic philosophy as being the mere tools of male oppression; these feminists think that philosophy is rotten at its core, irredeemable. As such, the

challenge for someone who considers herself or himself both an analytic philosopher and a feminist, is how to reconcile their feminism with the values and methods of analytic philosophy. In other words, how to make a feminist contribution to philosophy without thereby destroying philosophy.

The two main readings from today – Rae Langton’s “Exclusion and objectification” and Miranda Fricker’s “Pluralism without postmodernism” – address just this challenge. Both pieces endeavour to show that feminism can make a contribution to philosophy, and epistemology in particular, without destroying it. And both pieces do this first by offering examples of ways feminism can contribute to first-order questions in epistemology, and second by attempting to defuse common feminist critiques of epistemology – in Langton’s case, the feminist critique of *objectivity* as inevitably leading to *objectification*, and in Fricker’s case, the critique of *reason* as a mask for coercion.

I’m going to focus on how Langton and Fricker respond to these anti-epistemological critiques of objectivity and reason. But I’ve created a little taxonomy with examples of the ways they suggest that a feminist perspective can *unproblematically* contribute to first-order questions in epistemology. So, first, feminism can contribute to epistemology by creating new questions and concepts, second by offering novel answers to traditional questions, and thirdly by discrediting traditional answers by showing how they tacitly employ a gendered perspective.

While Langton and Fricker are happy with *these* kinds of feminist contributions to epistemology, they want to defend against the more *radical* feminist contribution which seeks to destroy or deconstruct epistemology. And they share a common strategy for defusing these anti-epistemological critiques. Langton argues that only *sometimes* does objectivity lead to objectification, and Fricker that only *sometimes* does reason mask coercion. Their motivation for so arguing is not merely their attachment to epistemology *qua* analytic philosophers, but also their view that the anti-epistemological stance of some feminists is in fact *unhelpful* for feminism. Feminism, they think, needs epistemology.

2. Langton on Objectivity and Objectification

Langton takes as her target the radical feminist view, exemplified by Catharine Mackinnon, that the practice of epistemic *objectivity* is itself ethically problematic:

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 *sometimes* lead to 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.

So, in situations of power differential, following the norms of objectivity can lead to objectification. So in these situations, the practice of objectivity is ethically problematic.

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 (more worked out in Fricker) 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).

There are two questions I would like to raise about Langton's argument. First, what justifies her claim that Assumed Objectivity is bad in some cases, e.g. when it comes to women, but not others, e.g. gardening?

The difference, according to Langton, is that when we follow the norms of Assumed Objectivity with regard to women, we re-inforce women's disempowered status and we end up with false beliefs about the naturalness of that disempowerment. But how are we meant to know this – and to know that this is not true of, say, plants? For it seems the only way we can know that a seemingly natural phenomenon, like women's submissiveness, is actually the result of self-fulfilling construction, is by *ceasing to engage in assumed objectivity* and seeing what happens. For example, to stop treating individuals – like women, or slaves, but equally perhaps children and animals, even plants – as objects, and to see what happens. But then we cannot decide *from the outset*, as Langton wants to do, which of our practices of objectivity are 'bad', i.e. likely to lead to objectification, and which of them are 'fine', like being objective about gardening. The only way we can figure *that* out is to see all instances of objectivity as potentially leading to objectification – which is to see the situation much as Mackinnon describes it, where *all* practices of objectivity are ethically suspect.

The second question I want to ask Langton is about her comments on the limits of pragmatism:

(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?

I'll return to this question in my discussion of Miranda Fricker's more extended argument that feminism needs epistemology.

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. Epistemology, as the study of knowledge and reason, has no place within feminism.

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. And thus appeals to reason are, by necessity, masked appeals to force.

Fricker’s proposal is to jettison the Kantian standard for the vindication of reason. Instead, she wants us to draw a commonsensical (Humean) distinction between authoritative and *authoritarian* appeals to reason. While power might be inescapable in human relations, Fricker argues that there *are* genuine appeals to reason. What we need to do is sort out those appeals to reason that are genuine and those that are coercive, on a case-by-case basis, rather than be suspicious of reason *in general*.

Fricker then argues 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 or 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)

I have two questions for Fricker:

(1) To what extent do we have an intuitive grasp of the authoritative/authoritarian distinction that is not boringly conservative? Is our commonsensical distinction really sufficient for a genuinely progressive politics?

(2) How successful is Fricker’s argument that feminism needs epistemology—which is to say, a realist understanding of reason?

This is a version of the same question I wanted to raise about the Langton reading. To say something about this I will turn, finally, to our third reading, Rorty's "Feminism and Pragmatism".

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

Both Langton and Fricker argue that the radical feminist critique of epistemology is bad for feminism: that, in an important sense, feminism *needs* a realist epistemology. Feminism *needs* universal reason and objectivity. But in what sense "needs"? Let's briefly canvas some options.

First, one might think that feminism *needs* epistemology in the sense that a discourse of epistemic realism is instrumentally useful, and perhaps necessary, for achieving political ends. So one is more likely to be able to get things to change if one talks about, say, "universal human rights" or "the demands of justice". While I think this is probably true, this cannot be the full extent of Langton and Fricker's claim. For Rorty is himself happy to acknowledge that feminists must sometimes speak in what he calls the "universalist vulgar". Something deeper seems to be at stake for Langton and Fricker when they claim that feminism needs epistemology.

Perhaps they mean that, as a psychological matter, feminists would be better off being epistemological realists. Fricker suggests that there is something psychologically difficult about being a feminist who is not also an epistemic realist. She writes:

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).

I find myself unconvinced by Fricker's claim. People who are committed to forms of postmodern or poststructural anti-realism seem perfectly capable of simultaneously advocating for real progressive change: just think for example of Catharine Mackinnon's longstanding advocacy against pornography and sexual harassment. And, as Rorty argues, it might even be the case that an anti-realist self-conception might be, as a psychological matter, *beneficial* to the political radical, for it can liberate one from the need to build up one's political programme from first principles or to embed it within a general theory of oppression or injustice.

A third way in which I think we can interpret the putative 'need' feminism has for epistemology is what I call the metaphysical or authoritative sense of 'need'. What is at stake for Fricker and Langton, it seems, is whether feminists have genuine *authority* on their sides, or whether they are just expressing dissatisfaction. If there is no universal reason and there is no objective standpoint, then feminism is just another outcry from just another perspective.

What does Rorty have to say to this worry? I take his main point to be this. He suggests that we must liberate ourselves from the myth that there are any authorities external to ourselves, any authorities which can be ‘on our side’ in the way that Fricker and Langton desire: whether that authority be God, or History, or Reason or Justice. But this does not mean that we have to collapse into the view that our normative claims are mere expressions of preference. For the alternative to external authority is not, on Rorty’s view, ‘mere’ expression of dissatisfaction, but rather creative, political prophecy.

Just as the artist does not worry about whether he has an external authority ‘on his side’ that justifies his creation, the political prophet need not worry about whether she has an external authority that justifies imagined Utopia. And to the extent that the artist or political prophet *does* have what we might call ‘authority’, it comes from the liveliness and force of their creation, not the relationship of that creation to something outside of it that validates or justifies it. Thus Rorty thinks that feminism, understood as a prophetic political movement, has no need of epistemology – and is indeed better off without it.

Langton and Fricker, I take it, would be quite unconvinced. For them, the relationship between feminism and epistemology is symbiotic: epistemology needs a feminist perspective as a corrective to its sometimes gendered tendencies, but equally, feminism needs epistemology to anchor and legitimate it.

Just what the relationship between feminism and epistemology is, or perhaps *should* be, is something I will now turn over to the group for discussion.

Feminism in Analytic Philosophy
MT Thursdays 10.30-12.30

Email

Affiliation
(BPhil, DPhil, etc.)