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Feminist Epistemology: Coping with the Collapse of a Objective Value Free Epistemology

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Abstract:

The collapse of the ideal of a value free epistemology has been a central topic in Feminism. In response to this epistemological fall out, Feminism has developed both theoretical and ground level tools for exploring epistemological disagreements without the need for idealized deliberation or intentional communicative action. Neither the condition of epistemological reflexivity nor the heterogeneous relevance of values can alone justify a non-foundational method for the feminist epistemology. Instead, both reinforce and inform each other creating a stronger epistemological approach than either alone. I go on to argue that reflexivity must be expanded into a form of internal critique modeled on Patricia Hill Collins' "outsider within" and Gloria Anzaldúa's "world traveling". This model allows for value relevance being domain or world specific without value isolation. This is because different values overlap within domains and worlds. Values can be indexed as relevant or irrelevant by observing domain and value overlaps and disagreements. Instead of relying on foundationalist metaphors, I argue we can retain the contributions of feminist standpoint theory regarding epistemic privilege, so long as they are indexed to a particular domain of value discourse or a world. This allows for loving understanding and nurtures the possibility of epistemic coalition building to address oppression in all its forms. It actively allows for the inclusion of voices that have traditionally been excluded from philosophical discourse for no epistemic reason. Yet, the reflexive criteria for disambiguating the heterogeneous value discourse does allow for the exclusion of voices which propagate and encourage an epistemology of ignorance.

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In partial response to the emergence of the serious threat of epistemological nihilism, feminists have created a variety of methods to cope with epistemology formally as well as in our situated lived experiences. I believe this synthesis can foster epistemological discourse across seemingly incompatible and distinctly disparate domains of values or worlds.

Historically speaking the epistemologies of women of color have been marginalized from philosophy in general. One can also find historical examples of such epistemological exclusion from within the history of feminism itself. Patricia Hill Collins writes,

Black women's absence from organized feminist movements has been mistakenly attributed to a lack of feminist consciousness. In actuality, black feminists have possessed an ideological commitment to addressing interlocking oppression yet have been excluded from arenas that would have allowed them to do so.¹

In epistemology more generally, this is particularly troubling because it causes an epistemology of ignorance. The exclusion of the other not only hurts the other but also the party doing the excluding. This deprives all sides of the epistemological tools in various traditions. The history of white feminist epistemology can show us much about epistemological exclusion and the history of feminism more generally can offer solutions to long standing problems. I hope the synthesis of feminist viewpoints I offer here can foster trust and love for coalition building.

Section 1: A Very Brief History of Feminist Epistemology and Values

In her essay, "What is Distinctive About Feminist Epistemology at 25?", Phyllis Rooney argues that two features, among others, which are distinctive of feminist epistemology are situatedness and reflexivity.²

Feminist epistemologists hold that accounts of knowledge must be historically contextualized within the political values and interests of those who give such accounts.³

Feminist epistemology, like all epistemology, is itself historically and politically situated.⁴ Rather than foundationalist approaches that aim at “general, apolitical, ahistorical accounts and theories of knowledge”, feminist epistemologies tend to embrace the situated character of epistemology.⁵ Rooney writes,

Many feminist epistemologists pay particular attention to the claim that knowledge is situated, that knowledge reflects the interests, questions, and goals of individual knowers or communities of knowers that have particular social and cultural identities, locations, and histories.⁶ (349; cf. Nelson 122)

The type of claims which get made are a reflection of the values which orient different kinds of inquiry. Rooney relies on Mary and Jim Tiles who suggests our assumptions are framed by our traditions of values. These value assumptions “determine what counts as an issue, what counts as a decisive consideration, and what counts as a *relevant* consideration”.⁷

Section 2: Relevance and Value Assumptions in a Feminist Philosophy of Science

In more specific studies into the history of the philosophy of science it becomes very clear that social values, particularly androcentrism and sexism, drastically affect the methodology and direction of social research for even the greatest scientists.⁸ The work of Merchant and Keller has argued persuasively that early modern science was biased by aspects of colonialism and imperialism within the narratives of the scientific revolution.⁹ The work of Darwin has also been put under intense scrutiny by Hubbard and Gowaty, regarding his theories of sexual selection which were based exclusively on competition among males while females are passive to evolution.¹⁰ Other theorists, such as Tuana, Schibinger, Lawton, and Fausto-Sterling have focused their attention on how the history of embryology and reproductive theory have been extensively male biased regarding assumptions of women’s inherent inferiority and subordinate status.¹¹

A classic case of how these social values and pre-theoretical assumptions determine data can be seen in studies on stumptail macaques. This classic study was designed to investigate evolution of female orgasm in stumptail macaques. Yet, because of the pre-theoretical value assumption that the only relevant orgasms are those involving males, the data showed that female sexuality in non-human primates is tightly linked to reproduction. This, ironically, was conveniently built into the study itself. As Elizabeth Lloyd writes,

[T]he researcher described to me the clever way he had set up his equipment to record the female orgasms he wired up the heart rate of the *male* macaques as the signal to start recording the *female* orgasms. When I pointed out that the vast majority of female stumptail orgasms occurred during sex among the females alone, he replied that yes, he knew that, but he was only interested in the *important* orgasms.¹²

In this classic case, the pretheoretical social value assumption that female sexuality functions completely in the service of reproduction, led to a biased study of the female orgasm within the stump-tail macaques.

These studies indicate that value bias, either explicit or implicit, drastically affect the science of even historically exemplary scientists. Given these examples we can see, as Lorraine Code suggests, that one cannot simply separate the context of justification and the situatedness of discovery as logical positivists believed we could do.¹³ Our situatedness within our values has always already pervaded our epistemology even in hard sciences such as biology. So, the question then becomes, how might we become more cognizant of the values we are bringing to the table?

Section 3: Reflexivity

Reflexivity suggests that we should be aware of the situatedness of our knowledge and the context in which our values are orienting us. Rooney writes,

Feminist researchers argue that we are better researchers and knowers (“better in both political and epistemic senses”) when we are reflective about the ways in which the processes and products of our inquiries are shaped by the specific interests, questions, and social and political values that *we bring* to our research - or as the case may be, *fail* to bring you our research.¹⁴

Failing to be reflexive leads to what Charles Mills calls an “epistemology of ignorance”.¹⁵ Rooney suggests, that reflexivity reminds us that as epistemologists we “bring social and political interests, values, and awareness to [our] work”.¹⁶ Reflexivity, thus, attempts a form of self-consistency critique.

In summary, Rooney finds that feminists are committed to knowledge being situated and historically entrenched in cultural value assumptions.¹⁷ Her claim is not a transcendent foundational claim but is itself within the historical process and cultural assumptions of her time. The first step to addressing which political value interventions promote epistemic goals is to admit that epistemology is essentially a political endeavor contextualized by the historical and cultural values in which it is situated.¹⁸ Given this, it is then important to consider what values are relevant epistemologically.

Section 4: The Relevance of Value

In her article, “The Web of Valief: An Assessment of Feminist Radical Empiricism” [sic], Miriam Solomon claims that values are heterogeneous and that some values are *relevant* to particular domains and others are not.¹⁹ According to Solomon, all connections between beliefs on the Quinean model are equal and of the same in kind.²⁰

But, according to Solomon, beliefs and values function differently in different domains. We apply values differently in different areas and thus, we do not apply values as universals as a Quinian would argue.²¹ Values are not applied homogeneously; sometime values are applied which are relevant and sometimes they are not.²²

By combining Rooney's notion of reflexivity and Solomon's heterogeneous notion of values with an internal critique modeled on "the outsider within" from Black feminism and "world traveling" from Latina feminism we can gain some guide to relevance criteria for heterogeneous value applications within specific domains or worlds.

Section 4: Standpoint Theory

A large number of feminist standpoint theorists claim that different social positions and contexts can give one different perspectives on a topic.²³ One's social location or situatedness within a society allows for different perspectives on topics. Standpoint theory suggests that the vision of the subjugated is epistemologically better advantaged or privileged.²⁴ This claim in some theorists, such as Fuguson and Hartsock, manifests itself as Marxist or socialist feminism.²⁵ The claim is that the those at the social margins, united by shared struggle, have a privileged epistemic advantage or standpoint which is less distorted.²⁶ One main reason given is that those at the margins do not have a vested interest in maintaining systems which give privilege to the center.²⁷

There is an important insight in epistemic privilege, yet, like Alison Wylie, I do not accept what she calls *Automatic Epistemic Privilege*.²⁸ This idea suggests that just because one is marginalized one has epistemic privilege simply by being within that 'level' of a social hierarchy. Many opponents of standpoint theory have deeply criticized this point, but it is unclear whether any theorist has held this claim.²⁹ I think that Nancy Daukas, provides a way we can assuage such blatant claims is to talk about the *potential* of epistemic privilege.³⁰ Further, such potential only exists in relevant domains. Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the outsider within demonstrates such potential for epistemic privilege by thinking of standpoint epistemology as a methodology similar to internal critique which must remain domain specific.

Part of domain value specificity and reflexivity means that old foundationalist claims to universal and ahistorical applicability must be discarded. This moves away from classic standpoint theory in several ways. Firstly, we cannot make universal statement regarding values. We can no longer claim that feminist epistemology is "more objective" or "less distorted". We must adjust our language to reflect that epistemic claims are not transcendent or

foundational but are always already being addressed within one particular domain of value discourse. Within these heteronomous value discourses, what is to count as a relevant value depends on the context of disagreement between two standpoints.

This view maintains aspects of epistemological privilege regarding methodology, but such privilege must always be indexed reflexively to a particular domain of discourse. That may sound like terminological word salad but let me explain with an example. This means simply, that those methodologies that contain a value reflexive element have epistemic privilege over those that do not. However, this epistemic privilege only extends in the relevant domain. The methodologically reflexive standpoint of a black women, for example, gives them epistemic privilege in domains where that reflexivity is relevant. For example, being a black woman may not give one epistemic privilege in one domain, for example formal applied mathematics, while it may in another, for example analyzing patterns of anti-black racism and sexism in mathematics education.³¹

Historically feminism has suggested that we need to make our values explicit. For example, Linda Alcoff claims, “We must also interrogate the bearing of our location and context on what we are saying, and this should be an explicit part of every serious discursive practice in which we engage.”³² Some feminists have claimed, in a much more extreme position, that in order to maximize understanding between two different perspectives we should be *explicit* about *all* the values we have. Helen Longino suggest at points that we should make all values explicit.³³ Rosalind Gill, suggest that in order for reflexivity to give us accuracy we must be explicit about *all* our values.³⁴ I think claims such as these are too strong or set the bar too high. When two standpoints attempt a discourse, they do not need to be explicit about *all* their values and the historical contexts which constructed these values. This would be excessive and ineffective; discussion would never begin if one had to describe the socio-historical construction of one’s identity and values which, as Alcoff herself suggest, themselves are difficult to demarcate without context.³⁵ Instead, I suggest that the values that become *relevant* are dependent upon the parties and the domain of discourse. The values that become relevant can be different depending on which standpoint one is confronting. Where values or their implementation conflict, there we find relevancy.

Section 5. Patricia Hill Collins: Black Feminism and Outsider Within

In her essay, “Learning from the Outsider Within”, Patricia Hill Collins suggests that the outsider or the stranger has a privileged epistemic position in that they are far enough removed from the situation to see patterns

which are not detectable from within such a system.³⁶ Collins wishes to put forward a holistic theory of oppression which treats the interaction of multiple systems of identity and oppression such as race and sex.³⁷ Collins describes the insider as follows, “Insiders have undergone similar experiences, possess a common history, and share taken-for-granted knowledge that characterizes ‘thinking as usual’”.³⁸ This usually results in outsiders either leaving or suppressing differences and becoming insiders. Collins presents a third option. “In contrast to approaches that require submerging these dimensions of self in the process of becoming an allegedly unbiased, objective social scientist, outsiders within bring these ways of knowing back into the research process”.³⁹ Collins here has a crucially important idea which can help us determine relevance criteria for values.

One way to expand the horizons of understanding is to speak from within the perspectives of other standpoints. Internal critique is a methodology in which one must show an instability within the assumptions of another standpoint.

The outsider within strategy can motivate change through the expansion of the horizons of understanding. This suggests that by talking from within the already accepted values of a particular discourse one can expand the understanding within that discourse. In particular the understanding of which values should be adopted. Instead of demanding respect for “outsider” values from the beginning, “outsiders” can show that according to the views held by “insiders”, the values of those “insiders” should expand to include the values of the “outsiders”.

We can see how in Collins’ account of “the outsider within” approach to sociology she speaks *within* the values already accepted within sociology. One of sociology’s values is to identify anomalies in order to create a closer match between their theories and the world.⁴⁰ It is important to notice that she does not start arguing for the values she wishes sociology to embrace but instead suggests how sociology should *expand* its own conception of values. This is argued for from within the already accepted values of sociology. The fact that outsiders can be better at identifying anomalies shows the value of the outsider’s contribution to their value set. Internal critique can thus expand the horizons of understanding from within standpoints until overlap occurs. But how, we might ask, can we tell which values are relevant?

If we reject the notion that all our values and historical contexts must all be explicitly stated, then we need criteria of relevance to choose which values are important to disagreements between standpoints. The values which are relevant are those that concern the same domains but differ in the values they bring to them. In Collin’s article, how we identify the relevant values depends on the match or mismatch of standpoints. Both sociologists and black

feminists are concerned with black woman's family experiences.⁴¹ This is the domain they share. It is here we can isolate which values are relevant by which values clash in a domain. Sociology values the distancing of the researcher from the research topic while black feminists believe that all such distancing which does not take into account the functioning of interlocking structures of oppression in lived experience is less complete.⁴² The values are relevant because these values are different regarding the same domain.

Section 6: Anzaldúa and Lugones: Borderlands and World Traveling

Anzaldúa purposes that Mexican Americans live in the borderlands between worlds both geographically and metaphorically. They must become adept at switching “codes” through multiple identities and multiple worlds.⁴³ Women in these borderlands inhabit different world at the same time.⁴⁴ She writes, “Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes.”⁴⁵ This continual tension causes them to form what she calls “*La Facultad*”. Here she puts forward something like standpoint theory, but, like Collins, take into account multiple forms of oppression. Anzaldúa writes,

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface [...] Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized. [...] Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest - the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign.⁴⁶

Because life lead in the borderlands is always torn between “incompatible frames of reference” these world travelers must develop a tolerance for contradictions and ambiguity.⁴⁷ The ability to live in this state of continual ‘in-between’ has a lot to teach us about relevance and where world tensions are.⁴⁸ Latina Feminism can also teach us about resolving these tensions. Traveling into someone's world can be a condition for the possibility of understanding and love. Maria Lugones writes, “[T]raveling to each other's ‘worlds’ would enable us to *be* through loving each other”.⁴⁹ Rather than crossing into another world with an agonistic and arrogant project of assimilation and domination, Lugones suggest that world traveling may be modeled on loving playfulness.⁵⁰

Section 7: The Necessity of Abandoning Foundationalist Metaphors

Contextual relevance undermines universal claims to foundational objectivity and epistemic privilege. Knowledge claims must now become position, domain and world index sensitive. Knowledge claims of conflicting standpoints or worlds must be couched within their own terminology and values. This methodologically must exclude transcendent and foundationalist metaphors. Many feminists, including bell hooks, Sandra Harding, Londa Schiebinger, Helen Longino, and Evelyn Fox Keller have argued persuasively that metaphors of epistemology are

active sites of knowledge production.⁵¹ The metaphors used in standpoint epistemology are still too mired in the terminologies of the foundational systems they attempt to challenge. The language used suggests a meta-perspective of epistemic privilege which seems unnecessary. As Bat-Ami Bar On points out, this leads to the conclusion that the extent of the marginality of one's discourse is how the "most privileged" standpoint is decided.⁵² Iris Young has also argued against this type of metaphor because it turns difference into exclusion.⁵³ Her politics of difference emphasizes the ambiguous, relational, shifting character of group identity which has no clear border.⁵⁴ This implies that although there are relational differences between groups, the experiences of these groups overlap.⁵⁵ The application of world traveling at this point should be evident.

In conclusion, as feminists, we must abandon claims such as "less wrong" and "more complete" and embrace context dependent relational phrasing. Standpoint theory, then, can index epistemic privileges within certain domains through a methodology of internal critique modeled on the exceptional work being done in Black and Latina Feminism. Explanations of epistemic privilege must be indexed to the relevance of values within a certain domain or world. Thus, we abandon the idea that the oppressed have *immediate* epistemic privilege overall because such models rely on transcendent or foundationalist metaphors. This suggests that because of social location they have access to particular domains of knowledge and values which give them epistemic privilege. However, some positions promote what feminists and liberatory scholarship calls an epistemology of ignorance. That is, epistemologies that systemically exclude, suppress, and oppress through a form of arrogant perception.⁵⁶ We should engage in world traveling and try to understand the heterogeneous nature of our values through an either an outsider within model or a loving play model. World traveling provides the opportunity to develop appropriate epistemic humility and to build coalitions of resistance and to reinforce pathways to towards coalitions of trust and love.

Bio-note: William A. B. Parkhurst is a PhD Candidate at the University of South Florida. One of his areas of competency is feminism and this history of feminism. His dissertation research, however, focuses on historical Nietzsche scholarship. In this research he works with archival material such as annotations in Nietzsche's personal library, book seller receipts, publisher's page proofs and other historical source documentation to determine influence.

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³ Rooney, "What is Distinctive about Feminist Epistemology at 25?", 347.

⁴ Rooney, "What is Distinctive about Feminist Epistemology at 25?", 348.

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²¹ Solomon, "The Web of Valief", 445.

²² Solomon, "The Web of Valief", 446.

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- ²⁶ Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege", 85.
- ²⁷ Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege", 86; Harding, Sandra. *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives*. (NY: Cornell University Press. 1991), 59; Harding, Sandra. "Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: A Epistemology From/For Rainbow Coalition Politics". *Development and Change* 23 (1992): 186, 189.
- ²⁸ Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters", 28.
- ²⁹ Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters", 28.
- ³⁰ Daukas, Nancy. "All Together Now: A Virtue-Theoretic Approach to Pluralism in Feminist Epistemologies" *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*. Editor Heidi E. Grasswick. (Springer, Dordrecht, 2011). 62.
- ³¹ Cf. Maisie L. Gholson, author. "Clean Corners and Algebra: A Critical Examination of the Constructed Invisibility of Black Girls and Women in Mathematics." *The Journal of Negro Education*, no. 3, (2016): 290; Viveka, Borum and Erica Walker. "What Makes the Difference? Black Women's Undergraduate and Graduate Experiences in Mathematics." *The Journal of Negro Education*, no. 4, (2012): 366; Kenschaft, Patricia C. author. "Black Women in Mathematics in the United States." *The American Mathematical Monthly*, no. 8, (1981): 592.
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- ³³ Solomon, "The Web of Valief", 439.
- ³⁴ Gill, Rosalind. "Relativism, Reflexivity and Politics: Interrogating Discourse Analysis from a Feminist Perspective" *Feminism and Discourse: Psychological Perspectives*. eds Celia Kitzinger & Sue Wilkinson. (CA: Sage Publications. 1995), 182.
- ³⁵ Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others", 79.
- ³⁶ Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within", 104.
- ³⁷ Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within", 110.
- ³⁸ Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within", 117.
- ³⁹ Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within", 122.
- ⁴⁰ Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within", 118, 119.
- ⁴¹ Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within", 121.
- ⁴² Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within", 121, 122.
- ⁴³ Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. 4th ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books. 2012), Preface.
- ⁴⁴ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 42.
- ⁴⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 59.
- ⁴⁶ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 60.
- ⁴⁷ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*, 100.
- ⁴⁸ Cf. Ortega, Mariana. *In-Between: Latina Feminist Phenomenology, Multiplicity, and the Self*. (NY: Suny Press. 2016).
- ⁴⁹ Lugones, Maria. *Pilgrimages/ Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 2003), 86.
- ⁵⁰ Lugones, *Pilgrimages/ Peregrinajes*, 95-96.
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- ⁵² Bar On, "Marginality and Epistemic Privilege", 89. Examples: Frye, Marilyn. "To be and Be Seen: Politics of Reality" in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. (NY Crossing. 1983), 152-153; Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" *Theorizing Feminism: A Reader*. Eds. Hackett, Elizabeth and Sally Haslanger. (NY: Oxford University Press. 2006), 551; Hooks, Bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. (NY: Routledge. 2015).
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- ⁵⁴ Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 171.

⁵⁵ Young makes the strong claim that different groups *always* have experience which overlap (Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 171). Such a strong claim may be likely but is not necessary. The likelihood that some values or domain overlap in most cases does seem to be high.

⁵⁶ While beyond the scope of this essay, I strongly recommend the articles within volume 21 no 3 of *Hypatia* on this topic (Feminist Epistemologies of Ignorance. *Hypatia*, vol. 21, no. 3. (summer 2006)).