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The Bias Paradox

I. Introduction

There is a need for a feminist epistemology. This need, understood as a demand for an epistemology informed by feminist insight, is independent of the possible content of the various theories feminists may develop. Their motivations can lead to the discovery of forms of partiality that have distorted the truth and relevant evidence. Disagreement in views, interests and critiques is expected and, for some feminist philosophers, desirable. In order to address many specific questions that appear as a result of feminist analysis, a conceptual transformation of the current epistemological framework is not necessarily needed. From this point the view, Louise Antony disagrees with many feminist philosophers.

“There is an approach to the study of knowledge that promises enormous aid and comfort to feminists attempting to expose and dismantle the oppressive intellectual ideology of a patriarchal, racist, class-stratified society, and it is an approach that lies squarely within the analytic tradition.” (Louise Antony, *Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalized Epistemology*, 187 p.)

That is Quine’s epistemology with recommendation of a naturalized approach to knowledge. The concept of feminist epistemology and the concept of naturalized epistemology are complementary.

“More important, it aims to demonstrate that by joining them it is possible to provide a coherent and politically useful account of the objectivity of value.”

(Richmond Campbell, *Illusions of Paradox*, 1p.)

II. “The Bias Paradox”

An important issue in feminist philosophy is the problem of how properly to conceptualize bias. The notion of bias and partiality are often a base for feminist critiques. The ability of some theory to provide a solution for the problem could place that theory as a feminist epistemology.

What is bias? It is prejudice, partiality, possession of belief prior to investigation. How do feminists consider bias?

“Feminists generally concur that patriarchal bias in a variety of disciplines has distorted, rather than facilitated, the development of an adequate understanding of ourselves and our world, even as they disparage traditional epistemology’s commitment to impartiality as an ideal.”
(Louise Antony, *Sisters, Please, I’d Rather Do It Myself: A Defense of Individualism in Feminist Epistemology*, 82 p.)

On the one hand there is a strong strain in feminist theory to expose male biases in philosophy and science. Feminist theorists try to show that the concept of objectivity is based on a masculine viewpoint. Some of them think that objective confirmation doesn’t have to eliminate sexism in science because of the way theories are generated. The whole set of options can be biased. For those feminist science is androcentric in outlook and often sexist in methodology.

On the other hand, there are feminists who emphasize the value of partiality and reject the ideal of impartiality. There are principled reasons for rejecting the ideal of complete impartiality i.e. like evolutionary reasons. Knowledge in the sense human beings have it would be impossible. Otherwise, we could not even begin to know anything about the world around us.

Any empirical investigation is influenced by the values in the social context of the inquiry. If a researcher is able to imagine an alternative explanation it could turn on his /her own values. In this case a demand for impartiality, i.e., call for ignoring these values may result in a

less trustworthy inquiry and a narrow interpretation of the evidence. For feminists, it means there is a possibility for impartiality to be sexist because of the lack of compelling evidence. Some feminists think that treating impartiality as a value by its nature expresses a masculine and patriarchal point of view.

These two claims are in tension with one another. The first is a view that the male biases that exist within traditional epistemology are objectionable. Second, is a view that a complete absence of bias is also objectionable. Applying the first kind of critique to the second view, a paradox arises as a question:

“If we don’t think it’s good to be impartial, then how can we object to men’s being partial?” (Louise Antony, Quine as Feminist, 189 p.)

The problem with impartiality is that it results in bias, so biases are not desirable. From this it follows that impartiality is better, so, impartiality is and is not desirable.

“The ideal of impartiality thus appears itself to be biased, implying paradoxically that impartiality is unacceptable as an ideal because it fails to be impartial.”

(Richmond Campbell, *ibid.* 223 p.)

Feminists are in the position of rejecting impartiality as a general epistemic ideal but at the same time they want to reject gender bias because it fails to measure up to the ideal of impartiality.

Antony sees, within analytic epistemology, some useful points for development of a good feminist epistemology. Analytic philosophers like Quine, Hempel and Putnam argued against a certain conception of objectivity as an ideal of epistemic practice. They share the rationalist idea that biases are not always bad, an idea accepted by many feminist theorists. And a question that appears is:

How do we differentiate good biases from bad biases? Analytic philosophy offers some chance of a solution.

III. Naturalized epistemology

The ideal of objectivity as impartiality can be challenged in two ways. First, we can prove the impossibility of satisfying this ideal. Secondly, we can demonstrate the undesirability of satisfying the ideal.

The first strategy leads to the ubiquity of bias. The fact that all knowers start from some particular position doesn't reject the ideal of objectivity. This ideal also is not rejected by a lack of possibility to achieve it. Finally in criticizing a society in which science serves the interest of one dominant group, one can't avoid an appeal to impartiality and that leads to the bias paradox. This strategy is unapt to achieve its goal.

"... If biases are distorting, and if we're all biased in one way or another, then it seems there could be no such thing as an undistorted search for knowledge. So what are we complaining about?" (Louise Antony, *ibid.* 210 p.)

The second strategy involves the utility of bias. Thinking about the value of the epistemic ideal we are in the area of naturalized epistemology. This is a view that the study of knowledge should be treated as the empirical investigation of knowers. Empiricists were wrong about the human mind. They missed the value of partiality for knowers, the value appreciated by rationalists. We could never reach such a rich system of knowledge in a short time we do, if our mind is *tabula rasa*, open and unbiased.

"Naturalized epistemology eschews the ideal of neutrality and gives us empirical norms by which to differentiate good from bad biases, that is, those biases that lead to rather than away

from truth.” (Ann Garry, *Analytic Philosophy and Feminism: A Minimally Decent Philosophical Method*, 7 p.)

How does naturalized epistemology do that in the communities where we live?

In stratified societies, the view of a dominant group becomes an “objective” one, “what ‘everybody’ knows”. (Louise Antony, *Quine as Feminist*, 213 p.)

The members of dominant groups don’t question their assumptions. Their view can be a powerful tool for excluding the promotion of all others’ opinions marked as “non-objective”.

Thomas Kuhn, called by Richmond Campbell, “the feminist epistemologist”, pointed out that all matters from the context of discovery are usually influenced by social, political and religious factors. In his view science does not progress during a period when there is no consensus about fundamental principles. When a science is in its mature period marked by a paradigm, it progresses. Important empirical controversies and methodological issues, disputable in principle, are decided by a paradigm that “...relieves its adherents of the considerable burden of having constantly to dispute them”. (Louise Antony, *ibid.* 212 p.) This stage is beneficial to the development of science according to Kuhn, but it shows how certain tenets closed to debate can become “facts”.

Naturalized epistemology can’t approach these facts condemning the members of the dominant group for their “bias”. Doing that, it would endorse the norm of neutral objectivity, discredited by naturalized epistemology. What can offer naturalized epistemology?

It suggests moving our discussions about objectivity in sciences and theories to talk about truth and falsity. This includes the discovering of how knowledge is constructed that many feminists insist on.

“The recipe for radical epistemological action then becomes simple: Tell the truth and get enough power so that people have to listen”. (Louise Antony, *ibid.* 214p.)

This approach to knowledge rejects neutrality as an epistemic ideal and requires us to take a different attitude toward bias. Human knowledge needs biases. Biases are not good or bad by themselves and there is no a priori guarantee that our biases lead into the right direction. We must evaluate empirically the effects of different kinds of bias by evaluating the theories to which they contributed. The goodness or badness of particular biases should be treated as an empirical question. If biases lead us to good theories, to the truth and knowledge, they are good. When they lead to bad theories, they are bad.

From this, follows a direct implication for feminist criticism against rational and Kantian theories devised by men and based on male experience exclusively. This new approach doesn't allow that partiality in general compromises theories. By requiring that all claims are subjects to evaluation, naturalized epistemology does not allow the existence of privileged set of epistemic standards. We can't say that some "particular forms of partiality will inevitably and systematically influence the outcome of an investigation". (Louise Antony, *ibid.* 215 p.) Instead of such a claim, we must treat it as an empirical question, subject to investigation.

IV. Conclusion

Naturalized epistemology offers a possibility of an empirical theory of different kinds of biases, native and acquired. The result of such an investigation can be a principled sorting into good and bad biases or, more likely, a knowledge that a decision, bad/good bias, depends on the circumstances. We can't eliminate biases but we can be aware of unconscious biases behind some research and theories, and thus criticize them.

“The naturalized approach can therefore vindicate all of the insights feminist theory has produced regarding the ideological functions of the concept of objectivity without undercutting the critical purpose of exposing androcentric and other objectionable forms of bias, when they produce oppressive falsehoods”.

(Louise Antony, *ibid.* 218p.)

Louise Antony gave a radical proposal. Her formulation of the problem called the bias paradox probably is not compatible with some feminists' views.

Antony certainly does not want to equate being feminist with support of all projects done or led by feminists. For her, a call for feminist epistemology is not a call for any particular feminist epistemology but for doing epistemology. In spite of the fact that there is no consensus position among feminists in epistemology, there is one conclusion that almost all of them share – the existing epistemology is unsuited to the needs of feminist epistemology. It was a real challenge for Antony, to find and defend that the naturalized epistemology “promises enormous aid and comfort to feminists attempting to expose and dismantle the oppressive intellectual ideology of a patriarchal, racist, class-stratified society...”.

(Louise Antony, *ibid.*187p.)

Antony thinks that philosophy should be a positive contribution to the creation of a more human and nurturing world than we have now. She wants to have feminists doing fruitful philosophical work. Just because feminists are progressive her call has a chance for success.