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Book Review: Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge

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***Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, ed
2011. Heidi E. Grasswick. Springer, Dordrecht; New York, 268 p., index, price for
hardcover copy \$ 189.00**

Reviewed by Susanne Pohlmann¹

This anthology is a collection of 12 essays on various topics of feminist epistemology and philosophy of science. The articles are grouped into three different parts. The first part is titled 'Intersections: Feminism, Epistemology, and Science Studies' and combines five very diverse approaches to the field. The first article of Phyllis Rooney is a meta-epistemological analysis of the precarious position of feminist epistemology within the general discipline. According to Rooney, feminist epistemology is still marginalized as 'epistemology not proper' despite numerous thematic intersections with other epistemological strands such as social epistemology, pragmatism and virtue epistemology. Mechanisms of exclusion and demarcation cause a dichotomy that ignores both, the variety of feminist epistemological approaches and the diversity of mainstream epistemology. The perpetuation of this false dichotomy reveals philosophy's history of sexism and racism where women and non-whites are not capable of philosophical inquiry.

How feminist epistemology, actually, is engaged in critical debate with other epistemological strands is exemplified by Kristina Rolin. Rolin takes up non-feminist criticism of Helen Longino's concept of critical contextual empiricism. This criticism refers to methodological dogmatism, lack of empirical evidence that inquiry conducted in the framework of contextual empiricism is conducive to scientific success, and relativism with regard to moral and social values. In her counterarguments, Rolin draws on the concept of a default and challenge structure of epistemic justification which holds that epistemic claims are to be adopted with a defense commitment. She combines this concept with an adherence to the four norms of Longino's contextual empiricism, namely public venues, uptake of criticism, public standards and tempered equality of intellectual authority. Adherence to these norms, Rolin argues, not only avoids dogmatism and relativism but also guarantees a degree of responsibility that justifies scientific practices beyond their conduciveness to scientific success.

Whereas Rolin's contribution is a defense of feminist values with regard to scientific practices, Daukas' argumentation centers on the question how to reconcile and advance the two core concepts of feminist epistemology, namely feminist standpoint theory and contextual empiricism. Daukas combines contextual communal knowing with the epistemically privileged position of the marginalized to develop her key concept: epistemic trustworthiness as oppositional agency against those epistemic practices that dismiss the testimony of marginalized people.

The fourth essay by Samantha Frost draws on the research of feminist new materialism on the agency of matter and biology to generate new epistemological insights. Feminist new materialism challenges the concept of the constructedness of nature. It understands nature and culture as co-constructed by multiply interdependent

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processes. According to Frost, our main problem with properly understanding this interdependency is a flawed concept of causation that casts the relations of cause and effect in simple linear terms whereas, actually, these relations are complex, recursive and multi-linear.

Frost's essay contributes to relaunching a debate that - due to essentialist misconceptions - has long been a minefield for feminist inquiry. Similarly thought provoking is Sandra Harding's analysis of the analogy of dichotomies like male/female, public/private and tradition/modernity. According to Harding, gender stereotypes of male public life and female domesticity together with the exclusive application of modern science and technology on public activities established a gendered hierarchy between tradition and modernity. Harding's main argument is that the domestic realm is not *per se* a field of marginalization but that the application of modern science and technology should be reconnected and associated with domesticity. Harding, thus, combines gender analysis with a critical stance towards science. She calls for a re-conceptualization of science and its harnessing for modern lives beyond gendered and/or social conflicts.

Part II is titled 'Democracy and Diversity in Knowledge Practices'. It consists of three articles. Kristen Intemann's article explores the risks and advantages of those scientific practices that adhere to the value of diversity and equality of background assumptions. Her central argument is that value-neutrality does not meet feminist scientific needs because it does not allow value judgments against sexist science, criticism of sexist science on the ground of values and value judgments in favor of feminist goals. Instead, Intemann argues, scientific practices should be subjected to social and ethical values in accordance with feminist goals. Her claim is that these values will also improve the epistemic results of scientific inquiry.

The other two articles take another direction of analysis. They investigate the concept of diversity in academia and its impact on representation and employment equity of marginalized groups. Carla Fehr introduces the distinction of 'diversity free riding' versus 'diversity development work'. 'Diversity free riding' is a form of exploiting the additional insights of diversity workers without granting them the benefits of inclusion, whereas 'diversity development work' is the credible effort to nurture a culture where dissenting perspectives can be explored and developed. Fehr goes on to analyze the cultural factors that may block epistemic diversity with respect to gender such as biased hiring and promotion decisions that prevent women's dissent from getting uptake, isolation or exclusion from networking opportunities that inhibit women to offer dissent and the positioning at low ranks or in solo or minority status where faculty tend to adopt an extra high measure of conformity.

Alison Wylie, in her discussion of diversity and representation, draws on feminist standpoint theory. Equally to Fehr, Wylie is concerned with the ongoing marginalization of women in academia in the post civil rights era. Privileged insights, she argues, not only offer an understanding of the patterns of epistemic injustice. They also have an impact on hermeneutic resources due to scientific conventions that ban privileged insights by framing them as idiosyncrasy. This circumstance has been so far not properly acknowledged by equity activists. Thus, research on workplace environment can also refine standpoint theory by calling into action a more critical analysis of these conventions.

The third and last part of the anthology is titled: 'Contexts of Oppression:

Accountability of Knowing'. It consists of four contributions. The first article by Nancy Arden McHugh takes up the issue of how to conduct science that is both, epistemically and morally sound. In 2004, McHugh visited a peace village in Vietnam where victims of Agent Orange live. Agent Orange is a defoliant containing dioxin that the US used during the Vietnam war. Whereas international agencies estimate that three million Vietnamese suffer from severe and life-endangering side effects of Agent Orange, scientific research conducted in the US denies a causal line between the defoliant and health problems. McHugh tries to fill the gap between the outcomes of scientific research and the experiences of the victims by offering the concept of situated methodology. Instead of relying on clinical trials and laboratory research, science should study the concreteness of human life at a certain time and place. The situated methodology approach poses questions like: How long were the members of a particular community exposed to Agent Orange? How long would Agent Orange exist in this particular ecosystem? Or: What community practices as, for example, food preparation, child nursing, bathing etc. are conducive to the exposure to dioxin?

The last three contributions to the anthology focus on the ethical pitfalls of everyday practices of knowing. Lorraine Code explores the limitations of mutual understanding that are set within hierarchical relations. Whereas the marginalized is forced to adopt the stance of a lay anthropologist, the oppressor is unable to understand why taken-for-granted taxonomies, distinctions and assumptions do not work in the other's world. Active recognition of alterity, however, is an epistemological prerequisite for countering inequitable social practices. Code calls for an epistemological pluralism as well as for humility to overcome being ignorant of one's own ignorance.

Gaile Pohlhaus corroborates the limitation to mutual understanding in hierarchical relations. Moreover, she argues, asking for understanding from the more powerful position may be ethically flawed because it may undermine the epistemic and non-epistemic agency of the oppressed. Sometimes, asking persons to understand prevents them from calling attention to patterns and practices of power relations because the understanding only makes sense within these very patterns. Public debates about, for example, race equality incorporates racist details that are actively suppressed and/or deemed insignificant. Strategic refusals not to understand brings the background commitments of these debates into focus.

The last article, written by Heidi Grasswick, explores norms of knowledge sharing and criteria to assess whether these norms are good or harmful according to the goals of liberatory epistemology. Whereas withholding knowledge often figures in oppressive practices, also increased knowledge sharing sometimes threatens those in oppressed positions or prevents particular forms of knowledge from being generated. Grasswick supports her argument with the case of knowledge sharing expectations from health insurances, the controversy about governmental wiretapping or the strategy of playing dumb thus refusing to conform to the dominant group's expectation.

The articles of this anthology all adhere to high standards of argumentation. They are relevant in raising new questions to feminist and non-feminists epistemology and philosophy of science and in offering innovative solutions to major problems of the field. Many of them, especially those related to scientific practices, require background knowledge of the core concepts of feminist epistemology, such as contextual empiricism, feminist standpoint theory or situated knowledge. The editor's instructive introduction is

helpful for a first clarification of these concepts and a good guide for further reading. Thus, the anthology is suitable even for newcomers to the field provided that they supplement their reading with some canonical texts.

The order and grouping of articles is a bit confusing. For example, one could have expected that those articles that deal with the criticism or advancement of scientific practices (e. g. Rolin, Intemann, and McHugh), would have been allocated under one heading, whereas for other articles as those of Rooney, Frost or Harding it is hard to see how they can be grouped at all. This, however, is surely a marginal problem. Besides, a carefully compiled index helps tracing thematic intersections and references.