

Feminist epistemology and feminist ethics: Relevance and Limitations

Moumita Dey¹

Prof. Dr. Manoj Sharma²

Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, Sunrise University¹

Professor, Department of Philosophy, Sunrise University²

Abstract

Feminist theory is a misconceived topic in academia. Feminist theory is an intellectual movement that challenges the ways in which gender norms and values are sustained and the methodological and critical inquiry into the social and political structures that maintain them. It is through collaborative scholarship that feminist philosophers aim not only to understand the ways in which these norms subordinate women but also derive ways to overcome them. In essence, feminist theory repudiates traditional methods of philosophic inquiry that rely on detachment and distant engagement. Rather, feminist theory engages with various specialized fields of philosophy that recognizes the salience of the interconnected relationships that constitute our social, political, and ethical life. This essay will focus on the contributions that feminist theory has made in epistemology and ethical theory. Traditional epistemological and ethical theorizing has centered its focus on the norms, traditions, interests, activities, and customs the form the male perspective.

KeyWords: misconceived, epistemological, feminist

Introduction

Feminist theory is a misconceived topic in academia. Feminist theory is an intellectual movement that challenges the ways in which gender norms and values are sustained and the methodological and critical inquiry into the social and political structures that maintain them. It is through collaborative scholarship that feminist philosophers aim not only to understand the ways in which these norms subordinate women but also derive ways to overcome them. In essence, feminist theory repudiates traditional methods of philosophic inquiry that rely on detachment and distant engagement. Rather, feminist theory engages with various specialized fields of philosophy that recognizes the salience of the interconnected relationships that constitute our social, political, and ethical life.

Hence, the centralized theme of feminist investigation is narrative: Feminist theory compels us to critically analyze previous paradigms of epistemic theorizing and ethical conduct. The prevailing assumptions and presuppositions of both paradigms are male-centered; the centrality of male norms, activities, and interests in both disciplines exclude women's interests and experiences and thus preserve institutional dominance. Feminist theory underlies the salience of gender in hopes of challenging and overturning norms, practices, and standards that have contributed to female subordination. Feminist theory is not a deconstructive enterprise; rather, its aim is to complement and revise traditional methods in hopes of interpreting women's experiences and ameliorating social and institutional subordination.

Although there is no canonical method of inquiry that legitimates a single perspective, it is our

advantage to explore the various works of feminist philosophes that critically address theoretical, ideological, and practical viewpoints of male philosophers. Indeed, the scholarly productions of male philosophers contribute to the various practices of female subjugation that persists today. Thus, the purpose of this essay is to critically analyze the dimensions of feminist epistemology and feminist ethics and contributions to both fields that address theoretical and practical shortcomings of previous inquiries. Both revisionist disciplines utilize reconstructive and complementary methodologies that aim to address oppression; feminist philosophers in both fields expose the flagrant shortcomings of previous philosophers that depreciate and devalue women's epistemic inquiries and moral experiences.

In order to understand where contemporary feminist epistemology makes its present contributions, we have to understand where we have come from. Section one of this essay will focus on the transition from traditional epistemology to Quine's project of naturalized epistemology. The aim of the traditional method was to aid the human subject in distinguishing true beliefs from false beliefs. Quine's project of naturalized epistemology, however, deems the Cartesian requirement of indubitable knowledge to be misleading in constructing an adequate epistemic framework. Quine's project seeks to use the empirical methods of the natural sciences in aiding our quest for epistemic success.

The second section of this essay will focus on traditional epistemology and the feminist critique of the traditional method. Feminist critiques of epistemology critically analyze methods of knowledge acquisition that are incomplete. Essentially, the traditional method of epistemic inquiry focuses on transcendence and objectivity. Feminist epistemology, however, focuses on the situated knower. In the previous tradition, the situated knower referred to the atomistic individual; it was believed that through reflective world. Feminist epistemology mounts an oppositional stance; feminist epistemology underscores the importance of social and political relations of human subjects and argues that knowledge acquisition is a result of the social locatedness of the oppressed subject. Feminist epistemology compels us to critically examine the edifice of epistemic theorizing from the viewpoint of the subjugated position; thus, the claims of standpoint theory will be addressed in order to understand the interconnected relationship between the social and political marginalization of women, and other disenfranchised groups.

Section three will focus on moral naturalism and feminist ethics. Traditional ethical theorizing centralizes its systematic inquiry on human conduct. The task of traditional ethics is to prescribe methods of conduct that could be universalized to distinguish right from wrong conduct. Feminist ethics challenges the values of traditional ethical theory. Feminist insight into ethical theory aims to illuminate and critically examine aspects of moral conduct that male philosophers tend to overvalue (universality, individualism, and rationality) and the aspects that are denigrated and repressed (particularity, community, and compassion). Moreover, feminist moral epistemology challenges the unquestioned biases of traditional ethics towards women and other marginalized groups by analyzing who can possess moral knowledge and who are legitimate members of the moral community. Hence, since men and women have historically been assigned different social roles, feminist philosophers argue that they face different moral problems and hence have different moral experiences.¹ The aspirations of feminist ethics are to reformulate traditional thinking about ethics and complement the traditional paradigm. Furthermore, feminist theorists support expanding the scope of moral concern to subordinated and marginalized groups. Thus, we will examine Margaret Urban Walker's analysis of naturalism

and feminist ethics as well as Allison Jaggar's critique of traditional ethical theory to further guide our discussion.

Naturalized Epistemology: An Improvement from the Traditional Method

Let us begin by reviewing the methods of traditional epistemology. The traditional method of epistemology concerned itself with justification, the epistemic worth of evidence, and an indubitable structure that could aid us in our endeavor for epistemic legitimacy given the fallibility of our biological inheritance. A viable framework would make it possible to construct and derive from self-evident propositions a foundation for the rest of our beliefs. As Susan Haack explains:

The epistemological project ... might be described as foundationalist; it is foundationalist, in fact in two distinct senses. First, the hope is to develop an account of the structure of empirical knowledge which mirrors the structure of the logicist reconstruction of mathematical knowledge ... so beliefs about one's immediate sensory experience are to form the basis on which the superstructure of empirical knowledge is to be erected by definition and induction ... But, second, this rational reconstruction of empirical knowledge is supposed to constitute an a priori legitimation of the bona fides of our presumed knowledge of the world. It is foundationalist, in the sense that it conceives of epistemology as a discipline the task of which is to establish, a priori, the legitimacy of empirical science. (Haack 1993, p. 338)

The critique of the traditional method rests on the insufficiency of its axiomatic principles in guiding our empirical conclusions and the infinite regression of foundational claims. If knowledge is grounded in foundational claims that were self-evident, it stands to reason that those claims would need further justification, ultimately terminating in an infinite regression. Furthermore, reflective deliberation on self-evident truths was considered an inefficient endeavor, as science is our best enterprise in obtaining knowledge. If one proceeds to utilize the Cartesian method of inquiry, one would never attain its goal of epistemic certainty. As Quine observes:

The Cartesian quest for certainty had been the remote motivation of epistemology, both on its conceptual and doctrinal side; but that quest was seen as a lost cause. To endow the truths of nature with the full authority of immediate experience was as forlorn a hope as hoping to endow the truths of mathematics with the potential obviousness of elementary logic. (Quine 1969, p. 74)

Quine's project of naturalized epistemology replaces the traditional method of epistemological theorizing by utilizing scientific methods. Rather than depending on self-evident propositions and axiomatic proofs, Quine's methodological approach to epistemic investigation seeks to use knowledge that was already present. Quine's endorsement of methodological naturalism (the viewpoint that the knowledge available to us should be knowledge from the methods of the natural sciences) was the primary model of epistemic theorizing. His model represents a shift from the foundationalist model to replacement naturalism. Hence, empirical psychology is the proposed science that would best explain how we acquire knowledge.

Naturalized epistemology further distinguishes itself from the traditional a priori method because

of its continuity with the natural sciences and its emphasis on the substantive claims of science. Furthermore, naturalized epistemology seeks analytic and methodological continuity with the scientific enterprise. Epistemic theorizing does not stand outside the realm of science but, rather, takes place within the context of natural science. Hence, instead of applying a priori methods to common sense, naturalized epistemology utilizes the a posteriori evidential status of science. Thus, “claims of evidence are not elevated to a special status but rather rely on the best methods from our best psychological and scientific theories.” 2

As previously stated, replacement naturalism does not simply dismiss antiquated First Philosophy. Instead, it recommends that we find a new approach for epistemic adequacy. Quine rejects First Philosophy because the requirement for indubitable knowledge is impossible. Quine’s naturalized epistemology shifts away from intuitive understandings of our epistemic predicaments. It focuses instead on observational and experimental investigations. Although his replacement naturalism has few supporters, Quine’s recommendation for epistemic inquiry is to account for how the subject’s sensory simulations produce a theory about the observable world. As Quine explains, epistemology will become a branch of empirical psychology:

Epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of hence of natural science. It studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject. This human subject is accorded a certain experimentally controlled input – certain patterns of irradiation in assorted frequencies, for instance – and in the fullness of time the subject delivers as output a description of the three-dimensional external world and its history. The relation between the meager input and the torrential output is a relation that we are prompted to study for somewhat the same reasons that always prompted epistemology; namely, in order to see how evidence relates to theory, and in what ways one’s theory of nature transcends any available evidence... Our very epistemological enterprise, therefore, and the psychology wherein it is a component chapter, and the whole of natural science wherein psychology is a component – all this is our construction or projection from stimulations like those we were meting out to our epistemological project. (Quine 1969, p. 82)

One critique of naturalized epistemology is the problem of normativity. As traditional epistemology is a normative enterprise governing how we ought to arrive at our beliefs, critics observe that naturalized epistemology merely gives a description of how one forms beliefs. Moreover, the traditional method was primarily concerned with justification and warrant, and the epistemic support of these notions relies on the same evidence that support our beliefs if and only if it is deducible from that evidence. As Quine illustrates the circularity of the traditional method, skeptics counter with the circularity of science: How is science to be justified in aiding our epistemic predicament? Hilary Kornblith, one of Quine’s supporters, answers the skeptic. He writes:

Philosophers have long asked: how is knowledge possible? This question has been understood as a request for a response to the skeptic, and the result has been the various attempts to work out the details of the foundationalist program ... If the question about the possibility of knowledge is interpreted as a request to the respond to the skeptic on his or her own terms, then any question is doomed to failure... It is through the rise of science that we were first led to question the limits and possibility of knowledge ... the question naturally arose as to whether the beliefs we arrive at, even under the best conditions, are likely to be true ... Insofar as this question arises from

within science, we may call on the resources of science to answer it. Far from making epistemology a necessary prerequisite to doing science, this makes epistemology continuous with the scientific enterprise. (Kornblith 1993, p.4)

Although naturalized epistemology represents a radical shift from the traditional method of epistemic inquiry, it has, nonetheless, preserved the continuity of the natural sciences in aiding our epistemic predicament. Naturalized epistemology aims to evaluate and improve our epistemic situation by taking into consideration our best knowledge about ourselves and the external world. This knowledge will surely include whatever we can learn about the implications of our fallible predispositions from empirical psychology regarding the reliability of our science. The next section of this essay will discuss the criticisms of epistemology as well as recommendations as to how it can be improved.

Feminist Epistemology: A Complement to Naturalized Epistemology and the Natural Sciences

Thus far, we have examined the transition from traditional epistemology to Quine's project of naturalizing epistemology. Naturalized epistemology has its critics who offer a variety of criticisms of Quine's radical project. This section of this essay will examine feminist scholars who have offered constructive and critical responses to the epistemological and scientific enterprise.

Feminist philosophers argue that the lack of diversity in the sciences is not representative of its practitioners. Furthermore, feminist philosophers argue that flawed and biased science that underrepresent women in epistemic and scientific inquiry often favors masculine styles of thought and inquiry (abstraction, rationality, quantitative measurements). These masculine styles of thinking reinforce antiquated notions of women as being irrational and emotional. Feminist critique, as previously mentioned, is concerned primarily with the situated knower. Hence, feminist epistemology aims at answering questions such as: How do women compartmentalize their experiences in a male-dominated world? Has the historical subordination of women hindered epistemic and scientific progress? Is there an advantage to epistemic inquiry conducted from a subjugated social position? We will examine these questions that feminist epistemologists have posed as well as critically review the claims of feminist standpoint theory.

To begin our discussion, let us review what feminist epistemology is not. Feminist epistemology is not an academic attack on the works of male practitioners nor is it the desire to completely deconstruct the edifice of academic work produced by traditional epistemology. As Helen E. Longino writes:

First, I should note what feminist epistemology is not. It is not the study or defence of feminine intuition, of 'women's ways of knowing,' of subjectivism; it is not an embrace of irrationality or Protagorean relativism ... Feminist epistemology has both critical and constructive dimensions. Critical dimensions include the demonstration of forms of masculine bias at the heart of philosophical analyses of such topics as objectivity, reason, knowledge, and rationality. Constructive dimensions include carving out a space for specifically feminist programs of inquiry, identifying or defending epistemic guidelines of feminist inquiry. (Longino 1997, pp.19

-20)

Feminist epistemology is a complementary and inclusive enterprise; it underlies the salience of gender in epistemic theorizing and illuminates the social and political position of the situated knower. In addition, one of the primary concerns of feminist epistemology is the sociality of knowledge; knowledge is an interconnected product of values, beliefs, and judgments. Thus, feminist epistemology directs its focus on the community; knowledge is not created in an abstract void but is situated in a sociopolitical environment.

Indeed, feminists argue that knowledge is produced in a social context and that the traditional paradigm has had no substantive, discursive response to the needs of women. Furthermore, women are forced to internalize the practices, norms, and ideals of malecentered epistemic theorizing that conceives of knowledge as abstract, universal, and transcendent. Lorraine Code claims that feminist critiques aim to expose the complicity of epistemology in sustaining structures of inequality:

Feminists are engaged, albeit from diverse theoretical positions, in demonstrating how epistemologies – often tacitly- carry within them a potential either to sustain a social-political status quo or to promote emancipatory ends. Tracing the effects of theories of knowledge in the world where knowledge is sought and made, feminist and other critiques of epistemology have demonstrated that epistemic agendas and social-political commitments are inextricably intertwined and mutually constitutive. (Code 1996, p. 1)

In answering our first question, we can begin by describing the aim of feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemology offers emancipatory methods that revise traditional theorizing. They support theorizing that serves the needs of women and other underrepresented groups. In uncovering and discovering biases and oppressive institutional structures, feminist philosophers seek to redefine a concept of naturalized epistemology that includes the social factors of knowledge production. Elizabeth Anderson argues, in her defense of feminist epistemology, that feminist epistemology should critically investigate how knowledge changes in social situations. Hence, feminist epistemology should fall under an umbrella study of social epistemology. The empirical study of social epistemology compels us to critically examine the social and historical significance of the systematic exclusion of inquiry conducted by women. Anderson writes:

Social epistemology is the branch of naturalized epistemology that investigates the influences of specifically social factors on knowledge production: who gets to participate in theoretical inquiry, who listens to whom, the relative prestige of different styles and fields of research, the political and economic conditions in which inquirers conduct their investigations, the social settings in which they interact with the subjects of study, their ideological commitments, the availability of models and narrative forms in the culture that can be used to structure scientific observation and explain phenomena, and so forth. (Anderson 1995, p. 54)

To further expand our discussion, let us turn to discuss some of Phyllis Rooney's work. In her study of cognition and gender, Rooney illuminates the salience of gender and cognition and the situated notion of cognition in particular social and cultural relations. Rooney describes studies of cognition that produced biased experimental results that favor males' cognitive processes over women's. Gender, as a social construct, carries within its definition a conception of social

practices and institutions that shape male and female behavioral patterns in particular social and cultural contexts. In Rooney's example, she describes an experiment in which women performed as well as men when the spatial dimension of the task was de-emphasized. She notes that the conclusions of authors indicating that men performed better than women in these tasks begs for reconsideration on the grounds that "the diminished motivational capacity of women in sociocultural contexts where they are subject to 'implicit sociocultural stereotyping' that can promote 'the negative feelings of women toward spatial cognitive capacities that may violate culturally mediated feminine self-concepts.3'" (Quoted in: Rooney 1995, p. 297) In illuminating this example, Rooney describes the epistemic dimensions of social situatedness and the theoretical shortcomings that do not take seriously the complexity of the interconnections of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that affect the individual, and the social worlds of men and women.

As previously mentioned, feminist epistemology repudiates the core notions of masculine theorizing such as abstraction, rationality, and quantitative measurements. To begin to answer our third question let us look at Allison Jaggar's essay on feminist epistemology. Many epistemological theories have little to no regard for emotions; they view emotions as nonrational forces that must be suppressed and rejected in order for real knowledge to be obtained. Allison Jaggar's essay contributes to our understanding of the role of emotions in shaping values, norms, and valuations. Emotional attitudes shapes perceptions and reinforce embedded cultural understandings about appropriate emotional responses. Although she observes that there is no singular definition of emotions, she rejects the conception of emotions as solely a product of our biological reflexes:

We tend to experience our emotions as involuntary individual responses to situations, responses that are often (though, significantly, not always) private in the sense that they are not perceived as directly and immediately by other people as they are by the subject of the experience. The apparently individual and involuntary character of our emotional experience often is taken as evidence that emotions are presocial, instinctive responses, determined by our biological constitution. This inference, however, is quite mistaken ... Rather they are ways in which we engage actively and even construct the world. They have both "mental" and "physical" aspects, each of which conditions the other; in some respects, they are chosen, but in others they are involuntary; they presuppose language and a social order. Thus, they can be... engaged in the ongoing activity of social life. (Jaggar 1997, p. 389)

In Jaggar's essay, she espouses an epistemological model that centralizes the importance of emotions (as social constructs) and their ability to compartmentalize and conceptualize our perception of the world. Her model compels us to self-reflectively examine the social world in which we are culturally embedded, as well as the personal actions, values, perceptions, and emotions that we have internalized from our sociocultural structure. In essence, Jaggar rejects the notions of objective, dispassionate inquiry that traditional epistemology espouses. She argues that this epistemological stance reinforces the epistemic dependency of subordinated groups and legitimates the political and social power of the dominant groups. She writes:

Just as appropriate emotions may contribute to the development of knowledge, so the growth of knowledge may contribute to the development of appropriate emotions. For instance, the powerful insights of feminist theory often stimulate new emotional responses to past and present situations... The new emotions evoked by feminist insights are likely in turn to stimulate further

feminist observations and insights, and these may generate new directions in both theory and political practice. There is a continuous feedback loop between our emotional constitution and our theorizing such that each continually modifies the other and is in principle inseparable from it... We can only start from where we are- beings who have been created in a cruelly racist, capitalist, and male-dominated society that has shaped our bodies, and our minds, our perceptions, our values and our emotions, our language and our systems of knowledge. (Jaggar 1997, p. 399)

We are now in position to critically engage the concept of feminist standpoint theory and its principal claims that will aid in our understanding of the contributions of feminist epistemology. Feminist standpoint theory makes three distinct claims: (1) Knowledge is socially situated, (2) Marginalized groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalized, and (3) Research (particularly that focused on power relations) should begin with the lives of the marginalized.

Feminist standpoint theory utilizes this notion of the social activity of knowledge acquisition. It is the view that marginalized groups (in this particular instance, women) are in better position to give a more objective account of the world from their subjugated position. Indeed, Sandra Harding provides us with a description:

Women's distinctive social activities provide the possibility for more complete and less perverse human understanding- but only the possibility. Feminism provides the theory and motivation for inquiry, and the direction of political struggle through which increasingly more adequate descriptions are produced of the underlying causal tendencies of male domination. Only through feminist inquiry and struggle can the perspective of women be transformed into a feminist standpoint – a morally and scientifically preferable site from which to observe, explain, and design social life. (Harding 2000, p. 432)

As feminist standpoint centralizes its focus on the social locatedness of the subject, we are now in position to answer the third question. According to feminist standpoint theories, the process of knowledge acquisition begins when standpoints emerge. The salience of standpoints is to challenge the objectivity of knowledge, as philosophers neglect social operations and the experience of subordinated groups. As for those who are in marginalized positions, they begin to construct an epistemic framework of the world, which is diametrically opposed to those that are epistemically privileged. Those in epistemically dominant positions know only of their own perspective; their values, beliefs, and judgments of the world go uncritically challenged. People in subjugated positions must cultivate familiarity with the norms and viewpoints of their oppressors (e.g. the enslaved native who forcibly learns the language of his/her master). It is through their oppressed position that the knower can gain access to multiple perspectives. These perspectives give them an epistemic advantage.

Feminist Ethics: Challenging the Traditional Method of Ethical Theorizing

Ethics refers to the systematizing, defending, and prescribing of concepts of right and wrong conduct. Morality refers to the collection of customs, beliefs, norms, and practices of cultures and societies. Traditional ethics, as mentioned above, centralizes its concerns on human conduct and provides prescriptions regarding how humans ought to act. For example, Immanuel Kant's

deontological ethics gives abstract rules that would best guide human behavior; these rules required the acceptance of basic axioms that would be able to derived conclusions deductively. In this sense, Kant's ethical system espouses notions of rationality, universality, and individualism that, if the moral agent practices effectively, could lead to a morally fulfilling life.

Feminist ethics, however, challenges these notions of traditional ethics. Feminist ethics reformulates the previously mentioned notion of morality; instead we are compelled to examine moral conduct from within the confines of our social environments and the institution of the family. Allison Jaggar critiques traditional ethics and explains how it excludes the experiences of women. Her alternative goal is to illuminate the real-life practices of moral inquiry conducted by women. Margaret Urban Walker invites us to reflect on the relationships we have constructed with others in maintaining human relationships. She then challenges us to look at the community of human relations we have developed in constructing our moral framework. Both Jaggar and Walker offer comprehensive and vital insights into moral life that have contributed greatly to our understanding of ethical theorizing.

Moral epistemology is the systematic study of how one obtains moral knowledge and engages in moral reasoning. As we have reviewed, naturalized epistemology emphasizes the use of the natural sciences in acquiring knowledge. As such, naturalized epistemology abandons the antiquated conception of knowledge (e.g. accessing the realm of pure reason) and instead focuses on using the available knowledge we already have. Jaggar espouses feminist naturalism that abandons the pure realm of reason and advocates a more inclusive input from multidisciplinary studies. Jaggar explains feminist moral philosophy as follows:

Feminist philosophy in general is distinguished by its basic commitment to uncovering and correcting whatever male biases exist in mainstream philosophical tradition. In moral philosophy, feminists seek out and challenge male bias within mainstream traditions of philosophical ethics, investigating ways in which these may have participated in subordinating women or in rationalizing their subordination. (Jaggar, 2000, p. 453)

In Jaggar's essay "Ethics Naturalized: Feminism's Contribution to Moral Epistemology," she explains what feminists have contributed to moral epistemology. Let us begin with Jaggar's critique of traditional ethics. Jaggar's critique of traditional ethics outlines five ways in which traditional ethics have denigrated women's moral experiences: (1) Traditional ethics has shown little to no concern for women as it does for men, (2) Traditional ethics dismisses women as morally uninteresting that is to say, traditional ethics regulates women's roles in ethics to the private sphere while men can practice ethics in the public sphere, (3) Traditional ethics claims women are not as rational as men, (4) Traditional ethics overvalues culturally masculine traits, and (5) Traditional ethics favors masculine ways to approach moral reasoning as opposed to women's moral reasoning.

Each of these five ways contributes to women's subordination and thus has reinforces masculine bias in moral philosophy. Points one and three reinforce the institutional bias of women's rationality (or lack thereof) compared to men's. Point two addresses the systemic social and political placement of women's roles that traditional ethicists deemed as unimportant and therefore ignored. Points four and five address the overvaluing of traditional ethical models that largely focused on rationality, abstraction, and universality rather than the social and cultural element of ethical deliberation. Jaggar's alternative framework suggests that women's moral

experiences should be a resource for rethinking moral rationality. She writes:

Most of the dominant voices in Western ethics have sought to transcend the changing world of the senses and the contingencies of historical situations by pursuing timeless and universal moral truths through practices of moral reason that also have been conceptualized as timeless and universal... Feminist observations of persistent male biases in Western ethics render implausible the conception of moral philosophy as an eternal conversation among minds whose greatness raises them far above the prejudices of their particular times and places. Instead, these observations encourage a naturalistic view of philosophy as a culturally specific set of texts and practices produced by individuals inhabiting particular social locations and laden with historically particular preoccupations and preconceptions. (Jaggar, 2000, pp. 457-458)

As we have reviewed above, Jaggar claims that emotions, as social constructs, are central in epistemic theorizing. In her advocacy of feminist naturalism, Jaggar aims to deconstruct the dichotomy between reason and emotion. The idealizing of rationality, as Jaggar explains, only misconstrues moral thinking in that moral agents “attempt to attain a universal standpoint that entirely transcends the particularities of his or her socially located perspective.”⁴

Although a rational process of deliberation is supposed to instantiate a proper system of justice, such abstract reasoning is impossible in practice. This is the case since “individuals’ perceptions, values, and modes of reasoning, their understanding of their own and others’ needs and interests, even their constructions of moral situations, vary both individually and systematically according to their particular social experiences and locations.” (Jaggar 2000, 462)

Let us now turn our attention to Margaret Urban Walker. In her essay, “Naturalizing, Normativity, and Using What ‘We’ Know in Ethics”, she explores the relationship of naturalism and moral epistemology. Before I continue, I would like to make note of a distinction between naturalizing ethics and naturalizing moral epistemology. To naturalize morals is to appeal to an understanding of the natural world in order to explain the most important features of the institution of morality and practice of moral judgment and evaluation. To naturalize moral epistemology, however, is to explain how moral knowledge is possible by appealing to an empirically based understanding of the natural world and our place within it. ⁵

Walker’s concern is to determine the extent to which an epistemology of science can be utilized for our understanding of morality. Can scientific inquiry provide insight into moral sentiments and how can we come to know them? Moreover, can moral properties, such as notions of what is “good”, “just,” “fair, be incorporated into the natural sciences and evaluated empirically? If moral knowledge is part of knowledge and all knowledge is to be explained within science, then moral knowledge itself must be explainable within science, and that would be possible, it would seem, only if moral properties were natural properties that we learn to identify empirically. Walker argues that any notion of moral epistemology ought to be rooted in our shared community with others. She writes:

I argue that the appropriate analogy is instead a holistic and reflexive epistemology of morality that helps itself to moral judgments and standards seen as answerable to the experience of the kinds of shared lives they make possible and necessary... In the spirit of naturalized epistemology, the importance of science to moral understanding is held subject to what else we

think we know, including what we know morally. (Walker 2000, p. 75)

Walker begins her essay by addressing the normative dimension of epistemology. Naturalized epistemology uses the available knowledge of science in constructing our epistemic frameworks. Science is a descriptive enterprise; it tells us of how the world actually operates. In constructing an empirical model that demonstrates science's role into our current edifice of general knowledge, Walker's model differs from its traditional predecessors that appeal to abstract or "non-natural", non-empirical knowledge to validate our moral knowledge; she, however, deflates the ideal of pure scientific naturalism. In addition, she suggests that any proposed moral knowledge should be reflective of human experiences and our social, historical, and cultural conditions of communal and social living rather than scientific knowledge only. Morality is the result of our daily interactions with others who occupy and roam a shared social and political terrain. She writes:

Some readers find it hard to see that I am saying that morality 'itself' – that which needs to be understood and reflectively tested – is always something people are actually doing together in their communities, societies, and ongoing relationships ... Without already knowing a good deal about (what we call) moral reasoning, moral rules, moral responsibility, and so on, we wouldn't know where to begin or what are we talking about. We're all in the same boat, epistemically, in this way.... What we know about social relations that embody our moral ones, and what we are inclined to identify as the subject matter of ethics, is likely to be directed to which places in our particular ways of life we occupy, and what the particulars of those ways of life. (Walker 2002, p. 175)

Walker's assessment here is to explicate how knowledge, with regards to our understanding of morals, have shaped moral traditions of the past and the present. As stated previously, knowledge is conceived from a systematic process of comprehension, abstraction, and analysis. Moral knowledge, in this manner, is also conceived in the following manner: Traditional ethical models and prescriptions ignore the cultural and human element of ethical deliberation. Irrespective of one's gender, race, class, and sexuality, morality is a shared process in which all parties are able to contribute. In her book, *Moral Understandings*, she advances four hypotheses that give power and depth to our moral investigations: (1) Morality consists of practices, not theories, (2) Moral practices are practices of responsibility, the socially enforced and thus mutually intelligible patterns of assigning, accepting, or deflecting responsibility for things open to human care and effort, (3) Morality is not socially modular, and (4) The quest for pure moral knowledge of an ideal moral order existing independently of how any group of people judges and lives should be given up.⁶

In concluding this section, Walker's ethical model is a collaborative enterprise that reveals various practices that express shared understandings about each other, how the world is, could be, and possible revisions that could be made to make it better. As a pragmatist, Walker's ethical model disintegrates the traditional desire of transcendental notions of right conduct and opts for the imperfect and actual social and cultural lives of real human beings. Walker compels us to engage our ethical lives and judgments with real human relations and the kind of social and cultural lives we strive to build. The expressive-collaborative model illustrates the shortcomings of previous models and illuminates the complexities of human lives in addressing and justifying our moral conduct. It is to the advantage of moral community to include the diverse voices of all

disenfranchised groups. We need these voices in order to sustain and enhance ethical discourse.

Conclusion

I end this essay with a short reflection. Initially I began composing this essay with little to no knowledge of feminist theory; I ended with an understanding of feminism as an intellectual movement that has an enriching history of contributions to philosophy. Furthermore, feminist theory continues to challenge dominant narratives and the status quo through its understanding of the nature of gender inequality. But the most important aspect of writing this essay is that I realized that issues regarding gender inequality are not and should not be the concerns only of women; they should be the concerns of all people. As we all inhabit the same social and political universe, I would argue that it is our responsibility to understand the views, arguments, and theories that continue to profoundly affect women and other minority groups. The extensive theoretical and philosophical discourse of feminist theory compels us to critically interrogate the relationship between power, economic structures, and the social traditions that persist today. Although the debates regarding women's oppression still rages today, it is our responsibility as reasonable persons and members of the human community to engage critically with these ideas and, ultimately, develop a deeper understanding of ourselves and our relationship with others.

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