

Feminism in epistemology Exclusion and objectification

Introduction

Philosophy leaves everything as it is, or so it has been said.¹ Feminists do not leave everything as it is. We are always interfering, always fighting for something, always wanting things to be otherwise and better – even in philosophy itself. But if philosophy leaves everything as it is, shouldn't feminists leave philosophy as it is? If philosophy leaves everything as it is, then it cannot hurt women, and it cannot help women. To be sure, if philosophy leaves everything as it is, it leaves oppression as it is, but one should no more hope otherwise than one should hope for the stones to cry out for justice. Shouldn't feminists let philosophy be? Well, not everyone agrees with the one who said philosophy leaves everything as it is. Someone else began his meditations thus:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again . . .

He thought that philosophy can shore up prejudice – but can also uproot it, 'demolish everything completely', destroy 'the habit of holding on to old opinions'.² Descartes has been a villain of the story for many feminists, but on this question at least – on the question of philosophy's passivity or power – we are perhaps on the same side.

Many a woman has experienced vividly at first hand that demolition, that shaking of established belief, which Descartes thought necessary for the acquisition of knowledge – and it has happened not because she is a philosopher, retreating to a room of her own, but because she is a woman in the wide world. At some, usually early, point in her life, the news of women's oppression arrives as a shock, a sudden discovery that things are

not as they had seemed to be. The discovery can be an exhilarating one for someone to whom the world had seemed gloomy. Life had seemed to offer little opportunity and adventure, no future fate but keeping house and raising babies, and then all of a sudden something – a friendship made, a scholarship won, a mountain scaled – reveals the perception of fate to be an artifact of oppression. Things are much better than they had seemed to be. The same discovery can also be a depressing one for someone to whom the world had seemed rosy. Life had seemed to offer a level playing field, full of opportunity and adventure, and then all of a sudden something – exclusion from the team, rape, unexpected pregnancy – reveals that the cards are stacked. Things are much worse than they had seemed to be. Foundations in either case are shaken, not by reflections on demons and sensory delusion, but by a life under inequality or oppression – a life which suddenly reveals for what they are those many falsehoods one had accepted as true. If doxastic shock is supposed to have the therapeutic effect Descartes ascribed to it, one might expect women to have an antecedent advantage as knowers. Perhaps oppression is a help to knowledge.³

The questioning of prejudice, and the philosophical method itself, have seemed to some feminists to go hand in hand. Mary Astell, writing in 1700, confronted the ‘error’ underpinning women’s oppression, the ‘*Natural Inferiority* of our Sex, which our Masters lay down as . . . Self-Evident and Fundamental’, and presented with typical eloquence the philosophical remedy for it.

Error, be it as antient as it may, [cannot] ever plead Prescription against Truth. And since the only way to remove all Doubts, to answer all Objections, and to give the Mind entire Satisfaction, is not by *Affirming*, but by *Proving*, so that every one may see with their own Eyes, and Judge according to the best of their own Understandings, [the author] hopes it is no presumption to insist on this Natural Right of Judging for her self . . . Allow us then as many Glasses as you please to help our Sight, and as many good Arguments as you can afford to Convince our Understandings: but don’t exact of us we beseech you, to affirm that we see such things as are only the Discovery of Men who have quicker Senses; or that we understand and Know what we have by Hearsay only; for to be so excessively Complaisant is neither to see nor to understand.⁴

More recently Michèle Le Dœuff has said that “thinking philosophically” and “being a feminist” appear as one and the same attitude: a desire to judge by and for oneself.⁵ These are feminists who see that an insistence on judging for oneself can be a powerful tool against prejudice, whether of the sort challenged by foundational philosophy or the sort challenged by feminism.⁶ Viewed this way, epistemology is a friend to feminism, in its

ability to uproot 'the habit of holding on to old opinions', and to reveal women as rational knowers. The discovery of one's ability to judge for oneself – and the subsequent discovery that one is a thinking thing – can be at the same time a discovery that women are not made for servitude. Astell drew a feminist moral from her own Cartesian reflections, and drew it with her usual irreverence:

[A] Rational Mind is too noble a Being to be Made for the Sake and Service of any Creature. The Service [a woman] at any time becomes oblig'd to pay to a Man, is only a Business by the Bye. Just as it may be any Man's Business and Duty to keep Hogs . . .⁷

The duties a woman might owe to a man are like the duties of a swineherd to his charges, a 'Business by the Bye', and not what she is made for. Astell is not simply a feminist who happens to be a philosopher, or a philosopher who happens to be a feminist: her feminism and her philosophy are allies. When what stands between oppression and liberty is 'the habit of holding on to old opinions', especially when the opinion that women are incapable of rational thought is an old one, rationalist methodology can be revolutionary. Given the non-accidental connection between her epistemology and her feminism, it would be churlish to deny that Astell is doing one sort of feminist epistemology.

If relations between feminism and epistemology were entirely friendly, then feminism's contribution to the subject would be to point this out, as Astell did. 'Feminist epistemology' would be epistemology aware of its own feminist implications. But there is more to the story than this, and there are many ways in which relations have not been entirely friendly. One central strand of the feminist contribution to epistemology has been to show how, when it comes to knowledge, women get left out. Another has been to show how, when it comes to knowledge, women get hurt. These partly overlap, since women may be hurt by being left out, but may be hurt in other ways too. To say that women get left out when it comes to knowledge is to say something vague, to say something that does duty for many things – which suggests already that we have here not so much a strand, but a rope, whose strands tend in the same direction; or not a rope, but a web, whose strands tend in different directions. Likewise for the second claim: to say that when it comes to knowledge women get hurt is to say something vague, something that does duty for many things. In what follows, these two claims – that women get left out, and that women get hurt – form the topics of the following two sections.

Knowledge and how women might be left out

A first way in which women might be left out is that women might *fail to be known*. Women might get left out, as objects of knowledge, in its various institutionalized branches. Women's lives may be rendered invisible by particular bodies of knowledge, such as history, economics, medicine and philosophy itself.⁸ When historians chronicle only kings and dates and battles, women are left out. When economists analyse the relations between capital and labour, ignoring unpaid labour in the home, women are left out. When scientists study heart disease using male-only samples, women are left out. When philosophers define human beings as rational animals, assuming all the while that women are not rational, women are left out. To the extent that these things happen, women remain a kind of *terra incognita*.

This status of *terra incognita* has sometimes been viewed as distinctive of, even essential to, one's being as a woman. On this way of thinking it will appear no accident that women are unknown, for women appear as unknowable. Simone de Beauvoir wrote that of all myths about women,

none is more firmly anchored in masculine hearts than that of the feminine 'mystery'. It has numerous advantages. And first of all it permits an easy explanation of all that appears inexplicable; the man who 'does not understand' a woman is happy to substitute an objective resistance for a subjective deficiency of mind; instead of admitting his ignorance, he perceives the presence of a 'mystery' outside himself: an alibi, indeed, that flatters laziness and vanity at once . . . [I]n the company of a living enigma man remains alone . . . [This] is for many a more attractive experience than an authentic relationship with a human being.⁹

When women are not known, there is ignorance on the part of men – 'a subjective deficiency of mind', as de Beauvoir puts it. The lazy way out is to say that the ignorance is not the fault of the ignorant subject, but of the unknown object: woman is a living enigma. If women are *terra incognita*, that is not the fault of ignorant men, but of unknowable women. An objective resistance is substituted for a subjective deficiency, and women's absence from the objects of knowledge appears to be an inevitability. De Beauvoir describes this as a kind of solipsism. The bridge to other minds – the bridge to women's minds – remains unbuilt. Solipsism is not simply a problem in epistemology, but a political problem: in the company of a living enigma, man remains alone.

A second way that women might get left out is by *failing to be knowers*: women might get left out as subjects of knowledge, rather than as objects of it. Here are some ways this might happen.

Women might fail to be knowers because they are deprived of the knowledge men have. From the earliest days of feminism it has been eloquently argued that women's subordination is constituted in part by barriers to the knowledge to which men have access. Here is Astell once again:

Boys have much Time and Pains, Care and Cost bestow'd on their Education, Girls have little or none. The former are early initiated in the Sciences, are made acquainted with Antient and Modern Discoveries, they Study Books and Men, have all imaginable encouragement . . . The latter are restrain'd, frown'd upon, and beat, not for but from the Muses; Laughter and Ridicule that never-failing Scare-Crow is set up to drive them from the Tree of Knowledge. But if in spite of all Difficulties Nature prevails, and they can't be kept so ignorant as their Masters wou'd have them, they are star'd upon as Monsters . . .¹⁰

If some of us are more fortunate today, the complaint will remain that many women still lack knowledge: that women are deprived of the epistemological resources of the written word through lack of the requisite language, literacy, time, power, or economic resources; or that women are excluded, overtly or covertly, from particular fields of knowledge such as medicine or physics; or (more subtly) that a woman's under-confidence – her lack of what we might call subjective authority – means that even when she apparently knows, she does not know she knows, and therefore (given a certain principle about knowledge) does not really know.¹¹ The remedy for the complaint that women lack knowledge would be to remove the barriers to knowledge, whatever they may be. It would mean working for women's literacy and education, and removing the overt and covert discrimination which excludes women from particular fields of knowledge. It would mean creating the conditions that allow women to gain confidence, to gain the subjective authority required for knowledge, so that they can indeed 'see with their own Eyes, and Judge according to the best of their own Understandings', as Astell put it. A special role has been ascribed by some feminists to this claiming of subjective authority, with Marilyn Frye going so far as to call it 'the first and most fundamental act of our own emancipation'.¹²

Women may be left out both as subjects and as objects of knowledge if they are deprived of knowledge of themselves. One important strand in feminist thinking has been an argument that women lack knowledge of their own lives and experiences as women – precisely the knowledge one might antecedently expect to be the most accessible. Here the deprivation is not a lack of what men already have, for men lack it too. It is a lack of what women should be the first to have. Thus Betty Friedan wrote of an

amorphous and gnawing 'problem that has no name'. She wrote of the desperation of women who felt the problem obscurely, though lacked the conceptual resources to bring it to full awareness – until, that is, they learned to communicate with one another and learned to name the hitherto nameless.¹³

Opinions about the appropriate remedy to this problem differ; opinions differ as to how one can come to name the hitherto nameless. Part of the solution will be the achievement of the confidence and authority just alluded to. But to the extent that there are conceptual constraints on what women can know, more will be needed. Some feminists suppose that women's ignorance of their own lives and experiences can be remedied by the ordinary talk that takes place among women at a grass-roots level, the sort that sometimes goes by the name of 'consciousness raising'. Others think that the conceptual resources for such knowledge will only become available with radical reforms of language, or with radical reforms of the symbolic order of the imagination. They say that if the words we use, or the symbols with which we think, come from a 'man-made' language, or a 'language of the fathers', then that will be a bar to women's knowledge of themselves as women. At this point feminist questions in epistemology will overlap with their cousins in philosophy of language and psychoanalysis.¹⁴

These are ways in which women get left out as subjects of knowledge because they really fail to be knowers. But women may be left out as subjects not by failing to be knowers, but by *failing to be counted as knowers*, even when they do know. Here are some of the ways in which women may fail to be counted as knowers.

Women may fail to be counted as knowers because of a lack of credibility – a lack of what we might call intersubjective authority. Because of this lack, even when women are knowers, they are not known by others to be knowers. Some philosophers say that credibility is of more than incidental interest to an account of knowledge as such. Miranda Fricker argues that the notion of credibility is crucial to the concept of a knower, properly understood.¹⁵ Once one acknowledges that where there are unequal distributions of social power, the distribution of credibility is likely to be distorted, one sees that an understanding of social power is crucial to a proper understanding of the concept of a knower. This in turn enables one to identify a phenomenon of epistemic injustice, which can arise from an unjust distribution of credibility, and which could serve to exclude women from the class of those who fully function as knowers.¹⁶ The remedy for this problem is not to remove barriers to women's knowledge, but to remove the barriers to credibility.¹⁷

Women may fail to be counted as knowers in a different way – because

of a spurious universality ascribed to a merely partial story of the world as told by men, which means that even when women know, they are not known by men to know. Women are left out, because women's perspectives on the world are left out. Marilyn Frye says,

Imagine that a single individual had written up an exhaustive description of a sedated elephant as observed from one spot for one hour and then, with delighted self-satisfaction, had heralded that achievement as a complete, accurate and profound account of The Elephant.

That story of the elephant is, she says, like the traditional story of the world.

The androcentrism of the accumulated philosophy and science of the 'western' world is like that. A few, a few men, have with a like satisfaction told the story of the world and human experience – have created what pretends to be progressively a more and more complete, accurate and profound account of what they call 'Man and his World'.¹⁸

What women know about the world fails to enter this official story about life, the universe, and everything, and the incompleteness and partiality of the story goes unnoticed. So even when women do achieve knowledge – do break free from the various material and conceptual constraints on knowledge described above – their knowledge may fail to look like knowledge to men, so that women, again, fail to be counted as knowers. Seen this way, one goal of feminism is to correct the partiality of existing knowledge:

The project of feminist theory is to write a new Encyclopaedia. Its title: The World, According to Women.¹⁹

There is yet a different way in which women may fail to be counted as knowers, which has not so much to do with women, or with the incompleteness of knowledge, but with a conception of knowledge itself. Women may fail to be counted as knowers because there is something wrong with traditional conceptions, or traditional ideals, of knowledge. Something about knowledge, as it is traditionally understood, is mistaken, and it is this mistake – not women's ignorance, or women's lack of credibility, or the omission of women's perspectives on the world – which prevents women from counting as the knowers they really are. Just what the mistake is will depend on what the traditional conception is interpreted to be, and the remedy likewise. It is at this point that feminist critique of reason becomes more radical, and – sometimes questioning the uncritical use of notions of truth, knowledge, and reason, with which early feminists like Astell argued for liberation – advocates reform, supplementation, or outright rejection of the epistemological status quo. To take one example, made famous by Carol Gilligan, it may be that moral knowledge is defined

by some theorists in such a way that women and girls are made to seem ignorant or immature, and the remedy might not be to change women, but to change the conception of knowledge. Once it is recognized that women have a 'different voice' when it comes to moral knowledge, which speaks in an idiom of care rather than justice, and that this voice is as good as if not better than its male counterpart, then women and girls will be recognized for the moral knowers they are.²⁰ Or, to take an example discussed by Vrinda Dalmeyer and Linda Alcoff, it may be that assumptions about the propositional character of knowledge have served to discredit the knowledge of illiterate midwives whose knowledge is more a matter of knowing how than knowing that.²¹

What have these claims to do with the idea that when it comes to knowledge, women get hurt? To the extent that women are left out in any of the ways just described, women are also hurt. If women are left out as objects of knowledge, whether in the history books or in medical research, that is one of the ways in which women are hurt; and if women are viewed as essentially mysterious and unknowable, then that too is a way in which women get hurt. In addition there will be the hurts arising from these, when ignorance of women is acted upon. If women get left out as subjects of knowledge – whether because they lack the knowledge men have, or because they lack knowledge of themselves as women, or because they lack credibility, or because their perspectives on the world are omitted, or because they are excluded by a mistaken traditional conception of knowledge – these are all ways in which women get hurt. In addition there will be the hurts arising from these, when women's exclusion as subjects of knowledge has consequences for their wider social lives – for example when lack of knowledge, or of credibility, undermines their status and their job prospects. In so far as the problem is one of women being left out (and of the consequences of being left out) the sin looks to be a sin of omission, whose remedy is simple: let women in. Let women into the stories of those who are known – let women into the history books, and the rest. Let women in to the treasures of knowledge, let women in to the club of the credible, let women's knowledge count as the knowledge it is.

However, there might be hurts that accrue to someone which go beyond the hurt of being left out, and its consequences. Perhaps there could be something about knowledge – as traditionally pursued, under patriarchal conditions – that does not merely leave women out, but hurts women in a more active way. Some feminist writers have claimed that some traditional norms of knowledge objectify women. If this is so, we have here not a sin of omission, but a sin of commission which cannot be remedied simply by letting women in.

Knowledge and how women might be hurt

The thought that some traditional ideals of knowledge objectify women finds one expression in the work of Catharine MacKinnon.

The stance of the 'knower' . . . is . . . the neutral posture, which I will be calling objectivity – that is, the nonsituated distanced standpoint . . . [This] is the male standpoint socially . . . [The] relationship between objectivity as the stance from which the world is known and the world that is apprehended in this way is the relationship of objectification. Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it.²²

MacKinnon says there is something wrong with knowledge as it is traditionally pursued or understood, and to that extent her complaint belongs with those just discussed. But there is more, for her complaint is also that women are actively hurt. Objectivity, she says, is the stance of the traditional male knower; and objectivity objectifies. Now MacKinnon's point may be overstated, but there is something right about it, and it is worth thinking about how an assumption of objectivity might help to objectify women.²³ To do this we would need a clearer sense of what might be meant by objectivity, and what might be meant by objectification. Sally Haslanger has suggested an interpretation of MacKinnon which offers a more detailed grasp of each of these, which she puts to use in defending MacKinnon's claim.²⁴

Objectivity – that 'non-situated distanced standpoint' – can be thought of as an epistemological norm that has its place in a familiar picture of the world, says Haslanger. Things in the world are independent of us, and their behaviour is constrained and determined by their natures. We can best discover those natures by looking for the regularities that reveal them in normal circumstances. In abnormal circumstances things may be distorted, and the regularities we see may not reveal their natures. But the usual circumstances are the normal circumstances, so we should infer the natures of things from how things usually are. When it comes to practical matters, our actions will of course need to accommodate the natures of things, if we are to achieve our practical goals.

Thus understood, objectivity seems to be an innocuous enough collection of epistemic and practical norms governing one's reasoning about the world and how to get about in it. In so far as it has any distinctive feature, it is the default assumption that one's epistemic circumstances are normal – which is why Haslanger dubs it 'Assumed Objectivity'. The collection of norms, she says, consists of these:

- (i) epistemic neutrality: take a genuine regularity in the behaviour of something to be a consequence of its nature;
- (ii) practical neutrality: constrain your decision making and action to accommodate things' natures;
- (iii) absolute aperspectivity: count observed regularities as genuine regularities just in case the observations occur under normal circumstances;
- (iv) assumed aperspectivity: if a regularity is observed, assume that circumstances are normal.²⁵

Attending to the notion of 'normal circumstances' that appears in conditions (iii) and (iv), we can note that there are many ways in which observational circumstances could fail to be normal, an important one among them being that the regularities observed fail to be independent of the observer – that they are an artifact, created by, or conditioned by, the observer or the process of observation. The observer may render the circumstances abnormal in a variety of different ways: the properties of the observed items may be altered by the observer's sheer physical presence; by his social features, for example his power or rank; by his propositional attitudes, his beliefs and desires. So when the norm directs one to assume, among other things, the observer-independence of what is observed, it directs one to assume that the observer is not rendering the circumstances abnormal in any of these ways.

The norm of Assumed Objectivity directs an observer to assume that circumstances are normal. But if an observer's *beliefs* can render observational circumstances abnormal by helping to alter the properties of the observed, then implicit in the norm is an assumption about *direction of fit*: that one's belief about perceived regularities conforms to the world. By that I do not mean simply that the belief corresponds to how the world is – for short, that it is true. For there are two ways in which a belief could correspond to how the world is: the belief might conform to the world; or the world might conform to the belief. A believer might believe that *p* because *p* is the case – her belief thus conforming to the world; or *p* might be the case because the believer believes it – the world thus conforming to her belief. In the latter situation there would be something self-fulfilling about the belief: there would be a belief whose direction of fit was the reverse of the normal case, 'normal' in a sense to be considered in a moment.

Elizabeth Anscombe used a nice example to explain the notion of what has come to be called direction of fit. Imagine a shopper, filling his trolley with the things on his shopping list, and a detective following him, writing

a list of the things in the trolley. The shopper's list and the detective's list both match the things exactly, but there is a difference in direction of fit.²⁶ If the things in the trolley fail to correspond to the shopper's list, the mistake is in his performance: he ought to make the world fit his list. If the things in the trolley fail to correspond to the detective's list, the mistake is in the list: he ought to make his list fit the world. Assuming there are no mistakes, the things in the trolley conform to the shopper's list; and the detective's list conforms to the things in the trolley. Another difference: the shopper's list is a list of the things he *wants* to be there; the detective's list is a list of the things he *believes* are there. These latter differences are no accident: a difference in direction of fit is widely thought to be constitutive of the difference between belief and desire. Belief aims to fit the world; desire aims for the world to fit it. There is an assumption in epistemology generally – and in the norm of Assumed Objectivity in particular – that the knowing subject is like the detective, moulding his list to the way the world is, and not like the shopper, moulding the world to the way his list is. And that makes sense, because the subject matter of epistemology is not desire, but belief, and whether or not belief is true and justified. The norm of Assumed Objectivity directs one to assume, among other things, that one's observations about the world have the normal direction of fit – which is to say, the direction of fit that beliefs aim to have.

But even if beliefs do aim to fit the world, beliefs sometimes fail to fit the world, sometimes for the ordinary reason that they are false, as when the detective makes a mistake; and sometimes for the more complicated reason that they have an anomalous direction of fit – perhaps the belief has come to fit something other than the world, or perhaps the world has come to fit the belief, or perhaps both. Here are the sorts of anomalies I have in mind.

Sometimes beliefs arrange themselves to fit desires. I want to believe I can jump across a crevasse, and gritting my teeth, come to believe it.²⁷ Pascal wants to believe there is a God, goes to church, and ends up believing it. I want to believe that every day, in every way, I am getting better and better, and – with the help of some New Age motivational tapes – talk myself into believing it. There is something odd about these examples, because of belief's 'normal' direction of fit: if belief aims to fit the world, how can it be produced by desire rather than by perception of the world? Such cases tend to be relegated to the margins of epistemology, where they are discussed, if at all, under the heading of wishful thinking and self-deception.

Sometimes the world arranges itself to fit beliefs. I believe I can jump across the river, and, freshly emboldened, do indeed jump across the river. I believe that every day, in every way, I am getting better and better, and – with luck, and with the help again of my New Age motivational tapes – do

indeed get better and better. There is something odd about these examples too, again because of belief's 'normal' direction of fit: if belief aims to fit the world, how can there be a belief whose direction of fit has the pattern distinctive of desire – how can there be a belief which alters the world, so as to make the world fit the belief? Such cases again tend to be relegated to the margins of epistemology, and discussed, if at all, under the heading of the psychology of self-fulfilling belief.

The ordinary reason for failure of fit in a belief – namely outright falsehood – receives plenty of attention in epistemology; these more complicated anomalies receive less. But it is these which will be of special interest to anyone who wants to think about how an assumption of objectivity may help to objectify women.

If objectivity is about how mind conforms to world, objectification is about the opposite: objectification is, roughly, about some of the ways in which world conforms to mind. Objectification is a process in which the social world comes to be shaped by perception, desire and belief: a process in which women, for example, are made objects because of men's perceptions and desires and beliefs. To say that women are made objects is to speak in metaphors, albeit familiar ones; but, to make a start, it has something to do with how some men see women. MacKinnon says,

Men treat women as who they see women as being . . . Men's power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be.²⁸

Marilyn Frye describes something similar, and calls it 'The Arrogant Eye'.

The arrogant perceiver . . . coerces the objects of his perception into satisfying the conditions his perception imposes . . . He manipulates the environment, perception and judgment of her whom he perceives, so that her recognized options are limited, and the course she chooses will be such as coheres with his purposes. The seer is himself an element of her environment. The structures of his perception are as solid a fact in her situation as are the structures of a chair which seats her too low or of gestures which threaten. How one sees another and how one expects the other to behave are in tight interdependence, and how one expects the other to behave is a large factor in determining how the other does behave.²⁹

MacKinnon and Frye describe a sort of perception that works to objectify women, where seeing women as subordinate makes women subordinate: a kind of self-fulfilling perception, where seeing it as so makes it so, when it is backed up by power. The perception does not work in isolation from other things. It is there because of what men believe, and in that sense it is a theory-laden perception. And to the extent that the perception is self-fulfilling, the underlying belief is too. MacKinnon says,

[The] beliefs of the powerful become [proven], in part because the world actually arranges itself to affirm what the powerful want to see. If you perceive this as a process, you might call it force, or at least pressure or socialization or what money can buy. If it is imperceptible as a process, you may consider it voluntary or consensual or free will or human nature, or just the way things are. Beneath this, though, the world is not entirely the way the powerful say it is or want to believe it is.³⁰

The world 'arranges itself' – at least in part – to fit what the powerful believe. Believing women to be subordinate can make women subordinate: thinking so can make it so, when it is backed up by power.

Such beliefs have an anomalous direction of fit, anomalous in both of the ways considered earlier. Instead of belief arranging itself to fit the world, it arranges itself to fit desire. On MacKinnon's description, when the powerful desire that *p*, they come to believe that *p* – in the manner of the wishful thinker. And instead of belief arranging itself to fit the world, the world arranges itself to fit belief. When the powerful believe that *p*, things alter to make it the case that *p*. Unlike most examples of wishful thinking, the result here is not mere projection accompanied by self-deception, for there is a sense in which the wishfully thought beliefs become *true*. The powerful are described as doing what the unusually fortunate wishful thinker does: for example, the crevasse-leaper of William James's example, who desires that *p*, consequently believes that *p*, consequently makes it the case that *p*.

This difference between objectification and ordinary wishful thinking is an important one, for it explains what would otherwise be inexplicable: how an objectifier's beliefs can have the direction of fit constitutive of belief – how they can aim to fit the world. This task of explanation is often left aside by feminists who think the self-interest of the objectifier a sufficient motive. But philosophers think that self-interest is not, in general, a sufficient motive for belief, and they are surely right: you cannot get me to believe I am Elvis by offering me twenty, or even twenty million pounds.³¹ But if there is a self-fulfilling aspect to the belief in question, that makes an important difference. The wishful thinker whose belief is outright false – the wishful thinker whose belief is *mere* projection – must keep turning a blind eye to the evidence, which is what makes it difficult to see how it can even *aim* to fit the world, and hence how it can even be a belief at all. But to the extent that an objectifier's belief is self-fulfillingly true, he need turn no blind eye: since the evidence will, for the most part, confirm the belief, the belief can aim to fit the world. The objectifier's self-fulfilling belief will be rational – or at any rate, more rational than the beliefs of the ordinary wishful thinker.

How does the world 'arrange itself' to conform to what is seen or believed? Men *treat* women as who they see women as being, says MacKinnon. How men treat women is affected by men's perceptions, desires and beliefs about women. Part of the treatment will just be a matter of making known one's beliefs – making known one's expectations. Those expectations can exert the sort of pressure that Frye described so vividly in the passage quoted above, so that how women are will come to fit what is believed about women – what is expected of women. Part of the treatment will be a matter of what men *say* to women and about women. This brings us to questions about language, thus to questions beyond our present project, but a brief glance in their direction suggests that here again one would discover the same anomalous direction of fit: that saying so can, in conditions of oppression, make it so.³²

Described this way, objectification is a process of projection supplemented by force, whose result is that women are made subordinate. The projection involves desire, belief and perception all working together: men desire certain qualities in women, believe women have them, see women as having them. But this projection, says MacKinnon, 'is not just an illusion or a fantasy or a mistake. It becomes embodied because it is enforced'.³³ Women really come to have at least some of the qualities that are projected onto them. Haslanger draws on these ideas in MacKinnon's work to reach a general view of what it is to objectify someone or something. One objectifies a thing or person when one satisfies these conditions:

- (i) One views it and treats it as an object for the satisfaction of one's desire;
- (ii) where one desires it to have some property, one forces it to have that property;
- (iii) one believes that it has that property;
- (iv) one believes that it has that property by nature.³⁴

For example, men objectify women if they view and treat them as objects of male sexual desire; they desire them to be submissive, and force them to submit; they believe that women are in fact submissive; and they believe that they are submissive by nature. The belief of the final condition – namely the belief that women are submissive by nature – is quite illusory. But there is something interesting about the belief of the third condition. Under conditions of oppression, that belief – the belief that women are submissive – will be a true belief, an accurate descriptive belief. That belief is, as MacKinnon says, 'not just an illusion or a fantasy or a mistake': it is a belief that corresponds to the world. It is not, though, a belief that conforms to the world: it is a belief to which the world has conformed. The

belief of the third condition is part of the force of the second condition. Thinking that women are so has – suitably supplemented by power – made women so.

MacKinnon says that objectivity and objectification go hand in hand: to look at the world objectively is to objectify it. Well, we can see now that there is something right about this: to look at the world objectively can certainly *help* one to objectify it. For suppose a man were to look at the social world objectively: that is, suppose he were to follow the norm of Assumed Objectivity in his dealings with the social world. Suppose it is a world in which gender hierarchy exists. Such a man will observe that women appear, in general, to be sexually submissive. Following (iv), the norm of assumed aperspectivity, he assumes that circumstances are normal. Following (iii), the norm of absolute aperspectivity, he concludes that this is a genuine regularity. Following (i), the norm of epistemic neutrality, he attributes the regularity to the workings of the nature of women. Following (ii), the norm of practical neutrality, he structures social arrangements to accommodate those natures, and, for example, dominates women in sexual encounters. Will this help him objectify women? Yes – to a degree. If he is an objectifier, following the norm of Assumed Objectivity will help to make him a more successful one. His interpretations of the regularities he encounters will lead him to the sorts of beliefs possessed by the objectifier: he will satisfy the third and fourth conditions that the objectifier satisfies, because he will believe that women are submissive, and believe that women are submissive by nature. Moreover, acting on those beliefs will help him satisfy the second condition: acting on the beliefs that women are submissive by nature, he will make women submissive. In acting on the assumption that his mind conforms to an independent world, he will play his part in making that world conform to his mind – and to the minds of other objectifiers. Being objective helps to make him a successful objectifier.

When objectification is going on, in place of a world-sensitive observer there is an observer-sensitive world: a social world distorted by the physical, social and mental properties of those who are doing the observing. When that social world is distorted by the beliefs of the observers to the extent that the world comes to fit the observers' beliefs, the knowing subject is less like the detective of Anscombe's example, moulding his mind (his mental 'list') to the way the world is, and more like the shopper, moulding the world to the way his mind is. And Assumed Objectivity masks all this: it allows the observer to rest secure in an assumption that his beliefs are a mirror, not a template.

The conclusion that objectivity can help the objectifier is more modest than MacKinnon's, as Haslanger points out: although being objective can

help one be an objectifier, one can be objective without being an objectifier. Following the norm of Assumed Objectivity in other everyday activities – gardening, for instance – will have no untoward results.³⁵ But if being objective can even help one be an objectifier, surely that is bad enough. We have grounds, surely, for a political critique of a certain epistemological norm: when men follow it under conditions of oppression, women get hurt.

Understood this way, the feminist critique is a practical one: Assumed Objectivity has bad consequences for women. A merely pragmatic critique has its shortcomings, though. For one thing, if feminists use pragmatic arguments, we can hardly complain when others do. Objectified women may complain, it's bad for us; and objectifiers may respond, yes, but it's good for us. We can add to this pragmatic critique a philosophical one: the norm of Assumed Objectivity is not just bad for women, it is simply *bad*. Applied in conditions of gender hierarchy, although it leads some objectifiers to self-fulfillingly *true* beliefs, it also reliably leads them to *false* beliefs. As MacKinnon says, 'the world is not entirely the way the powerful say it is or want to believe it is'. It is only in part that 'the world actually arranges itself to affirm what the powerful want to see'. Something about the world is different to what the powerful say and believe.

Some of their ordinary beliefs *about women* are false. Guided by Assumed Objectivity, objectifiers believe falsely that women possess by *nature* the properties they acquire through objectification.³⁶ For example, they believe falsely that women are submissive by nature. That is one way in which their beliefs fail to fit the world. Moreover, some of their more complex beliefs are false: some of their beliefs *about their beliefs* are false. Guided by Assumed Objectivity, objectifiers believe that their true beliefs have come to fit the world, when in fact it is the world that has come to fit their beliefs. For example, while they believe truly that women are submissive, their belief about that belief is false. They believe they believe it because women are submissive. Wrong: they do not believe it because women are submissive; women are submissive because they believe it. Believing so, with the aid of structures and practices of power, has made it so. That is another way in which their beliefs fail to fit the world. Assumed Objectivity has led them away from the truth – the truth about women, and the truth about their own beliefs.

Armed now with two critiques, a practical and a philosophical, we can say that the epistemological norm of Assumed Objectivity is a bad one: it hurts women, and it gets in the way of *knowledge*. To say that it is bad because it gets in the way of knowledge is to suppose knowledge to be a good thing – just as Mary Astell supposed when she argued so eloquently

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against the ancient error, and for the truth. Is this to fall prey once again to an uncritical allegiance to knowledge, of the sort that feminists are supposed to question? I hope not. Astell is right: what has hurt women is not knowledge but ignorance masked as knowledge. What has hurt women is not objectivity after all, but pretended objectivity. The hurt is in the complacent assumption, and not, surely, in the ambition.

NOTES

- 1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §124, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).
- 2 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 12, 34, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
- 3 This thought motivates feminist standpoint epistemology: see Miranda Fricker's and Diemut Bubeck's chapters in this volume.
- 4 Mary Astell, *Reflections Upon Marriage* (London: John Nutt, 1700), reprinted in *Astell's Political Writings*, ed. Patricia Springborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 9, 10.
- 5 Michèle Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, trans. Trista Selous (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 9, also discussed by Linda Martin Alcoff, in 'Is the Feminist Critique of Reason Rational?', in Sally Haslanger, ed., *Feminist Perspectives on Language, Knowledge and Reality*, special issue of *Philosophical Topics* 23:2 (1995), 1.
- 6 See also Louise Antony, 'Sisters, Please, I'd Rather Do it Myself: a Defense of Individualism in Feminist Epistemology', in Haslanger, ed., *Feminist Perspectives*, pp. 59-94.
- 7 *Reflections*, p. 11. The passage continues: 'he was not Made for this, but if he hires himself out to such an Employment, he ought conscientiously to perform it'. Astell took the Cartesian meditations to reveal women as essentially thinking things – and hence as beings entitled to an education. On feminism and Cartesian rationalism see Margaret Atherton, 'Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason', in Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt, eds., *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity* (Boulder, CO, and Oxford: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 19-34.
- 8 See for example Dale Spender's *Women of Ideas and What Men Have Done to Them* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982).
- 9 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949; reprint, London: Pan, 1988) pp. 285-6. See also Le Dœuff, *Hipparchia's Choice*, pp. 52, 102; Langton, 'Love and Solipsism', in Roger Lamb, ed., *Love Analyzed* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press 1996), and 'Sexual Solipsism', in Haslanger, ed., *Feminist Perspectives*, pp. 149-87.
- 10 *Reflections*, p. 28.
- 11 According to the so called KK Principle you know something only if you know that you know it.
- 12 'For feminist thinkers of the present era the first and most fundamental act of our own emancipation was granting ourselves authority as perceivers', 'The Possibility of Feminist Theory', reprinted in Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall,

- eds., *Women, Knowledge and Reality* (2nd edition, London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 34–47 (quotation from p. 35).
- 13 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Dell, 1964).
- 14 See in this volume the chapters by Jennifer Hornsby, Susan James and Sarah Richmond.
- 15 'Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1998), 159–77.
- 16 Fricker draws on Edward Craig's *Knowledge and the State of Nature: An Essay in Conceptual Synthesis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) in arguing that being a participant in the spread of knowledge is central to our conception of knowledge, and uses this framework to develop her notion of epistemic injustice. See also Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983), especially, 'In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love'.
- 17 Louise Antony suggests a kind of epistemic affirmative action as a remedy, 'Sisters, Please, I'd Rather Do It Myself', p. 89.
- 18 Frye, 'Feminist Theory', p. 34.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 20 Carol Gilligan, 'In a Different Voice: Women's Conceptions of Self and of Morality', in Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine, eds., *The Future of Difference* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1980), pp. 247–317.
- 21 Vrinda Dalmeyer and Linda Alcoff, 'Are "Old Wives"' Tales Justified?', in Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 217–44; the authors draw on work by Lorraine Code, e.g. in 'Taking Subjectivity into Account', *ibid.*, pp. 15–48.
- 22 *Feminism Unmodified* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 50.
- 23 The argument of this section draws on Langton, 'Beyond a Pragmatic Critique of Reason', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71 (1993), 364–84.
- 24 Haslanger, 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified', in Antony and Witt, eds., *Mind of One's Own*, pp. 85–125.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 107. I have abbreviated and slightly paraphrased the conditions. Haslanger adds to the notion of normal circumstances what I take to be included in that notion, namely that the observations are not conditioned by the observer's social position, and that the observer has not influenced the behaviour of the items under observation.
- 26 Elizabeth Anscombe, *Intention* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1957), p. 56. See also Lloyd Humberstone, 'Direction of Fit', *Mind* 101 (1992), 59–83.
- 27 The example is from William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (London: Longman's and Green, 1891).
- 28 MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 172.
- 29 Frye, 'In and Out of Harm's Way', p. 67.
- 30 MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, pp. 58–9. I follow Haslanger in substituting 'proven' for 'proof'.
- 31 Non-voluntarism about belief, with its implications for feminist critiques of reason, is a topic of Langton, 'Beyond a Pragmatic Critique of Reason'.
- 32 Many speech acts have a direction of fit which is the reverse of the 'normal' direction associated with assertion – e.g. imperatives, exercitives, and (sometimes) verdictives – altering the world in different ways, some causal, others not.

See Langton, 'Subordination, Silence and Pornography's Authority', in Robert Post, ed., *Censorship and Silencing* (New York: Getty Center and Oxford University Press, 1998), 'Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts', *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 22 (1993), 305-30. Cf. Frye, 'The voice of the men's world story is the voice of the speaker who does not have to fit his words to the truth, because the truth will fit his words', *Feminist Theory*, p. 44. See also MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 131.

33 *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 119.

34 Haslanger, 'On Being Objective', pp. 100-4, 109. Again, I have paraphrased her analysis, and drawn on an earlier version seen in manuscript.

35 Haslanger also suggests that following the norm could help one be a collaborator in, rather than an initiator of objectification. For example, a woman following the norm would observe the same regularities about women, and interpret women's subordination as natural and inevitable, without herself desiring it or forcing it to be that way (*ibid.*, pp. 109-10).

36 Haslanger identifies this as the major illusion generated by the norm, *ibid.*, pp. 103-4.