

Rethinking the Binary of Pure Objectivity and Relativistic Chaos

ABSTRACT: This paper seeks to refute some of the common presuppositions of traditional Western epistemologies, which center on the claim that subjectivity cannot be as truth-yielding as "objectivity." This paper argues that aspects of the subjective can effectively be utilized in a valid epistemology attempting to approach an understanding of the truth of lived human experience—i.e. that subjectivity can in certain circumstances be as truth-yielding as, or even more so than, the epistemic ideal of objectivity. Ultimately, this paper concludes that the objective-subjective epistemic binary is artificial and disadvantageous in that neither pure objectivity nor absolute relativity are possible.



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Perhaps the most ubiquitous epistemic convention in the West, an entrenched remnant of Enlightenment science and philosophy, is the oppositional duality of objectivity and subjectivity (traditionally associated with reason and affect, respectively). These two faculties/properties of the human disposition are tacitly assumed to be mutually

exclusive in most epistemic endeavors, and any pursuit that involves emotions in any way is seen as epistemically less valuable or less "true." This epistemic assumption is made manifest in the separation and hierarchization of the natural sciences and the social sciences and humanities.¹ It seems to be a mainstream assumption that the social and humanistic pursuits in academia have

less of a right to claims to truth than the natural sciences, specifically because subjective experience and interpretation purportedly play a more central role in their methodologies. Indeed, "Anything too tightly associated with emotion and desire, it turns out, is metaphysically a second-class citizen."² Just what is it that the West fears in attributing truth to subjective experiences and emotions? Why is "objectivity" more epistemically valid for truth claims than "subjectivity"?³ And is "objectivity" truly objective; are objectivity and subjectivity mutually exclusive? And if not, why would this be a problem? Can anything epistemically relevant be found in subjectivity? It is the goal of this paper to explore these epistemological issues by critically reviewing conventional valuations of 'objectivity,' as well as to provide a feminist epistemological critique of the hierarchical separation of objectivity and subjectivity. I will defend the role of the subjective—as both an aspect of methodology and as a "truth-yielding" object of study—in a valid and equitable epistemology that seeks to approach the truth of lived human experience.

I think it would be fair to say that the ultimate reason there exists such an avoidance of the subjective in Western epistemology is because of apprehension concerning relativistic chaos. Since objectivity and subjectivity are so diametrically

opposed, just the hint of subjective experience in any intellectual pursuit immediately threatens that pursuit's capacity to make any claim to the truth about "reality-as-such." The conventional foundationalist and positivist viewpoints that have dominated philosophy of science until recently seem to conceive of truth as that which is universally valid or derived inductively therefrom.⁴ Therefore, it is implicitly claimed that introducing the personal invalidates a proposition's stake in the claim of universal validity, and thus truth. The concern is that the introduction of the personal (into methodology, interpretation, etc.) will ultimately effect an epistemic reduction to absolute relativism, and no claims to the truth can be made at such point by any epistemically valid methodology. It is a blanket assumption that all claims to truth must be divested as best as possible of any personal vestige of the claimant—including gender. Noting that the primary claim of feminist epistemologists is that the category of gender influences *all* of our knowledge-pursuing and -producing activities, this is clearly a problem.

Given the rigorous demands to objectivity typical of positivist science—such as those proposed by the Vienna Circle or philosophers following them, e.g. A.J. Ayer⁵—it is reasonable

1. These pursuits have conventionally been described as the "hard" and "soft" sciences, respectively—a division that carries gendered associations with 'harder' masculine and 'softer' feminine physiques. See Elizabeth Anderson, "Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense," *Hypatia* 10.3 (Summer 1995): 64.

2. Margaret Olivia Little, "Seeing and Caring: The Role of Affect in Feminist Moral Epistemology," *Hypatia* 10.3 (Summer 1995): 130.

3. To clarify my terminology, objectivity is commonly conceived in the West as: (a) truth-claims that have universal validity, which are (b) expressed free from the influence of personal bias and (c) put forth by a detached, rational knowledge-claimant—the Enlightenment ideal of the detached, rational observer. Subjectivity as dealt with in this paper has two significant meanings: first, the personal (affective, experiential, social, etc.) aspects of the researcher's life and work; second, and more importantly for the social sciences, the personal aspects of the lives of the subjects of study. Both forms of subjectivity will be defended in this paper.

4. For a case for strong foundationalism, see Roderick M. Chisholm, *Theory of Knowledge* (Edgewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1966). He puts forth perhaps the best argument for a strong foundationalism founded in basic beliefs that are either self-evident or incorrigible.

5. For further information concerning logical positivism, please see A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (New York: Dover Publications, 1952), particularly "Truth and Probability."



to ask: is "objectivity" as practiced (assumed?) in the natural sciences actually devoid of any trace of the individual pursuing these studies? Sandra Harding's work on this question is particularly elucidating here. She is right to ask,

If gender is a variable in the most formal structures of beliefs about the boundaries between nature and culture, or the fundamental constituents of socially constructed realities, why should we assume that the formal structures of natural science belief are immune?"⁶

To begin, the very ideal of completely detached and impartial objectivity may itself be a gendered presupposition. An obsession with the quantitative and a devaluation of the qualitative may simply be a manifestation of the preference of "objective" reason over the "subjective" affect. Since qualitative judgment seems necessarily to involve a degree of subjective interpretation, it is not seen as "purely" objective as quantitative measurement is assumed to be.⁷

Even if we were to humor this assumption—that the ideal of objectivity is sound, desirable, and unbiased—natural science will still inevitably run into instances of subjective influence. No matter how abstracted from our subjective experience numbers, theories, and measurements may be, we as the *collectors* of numbers, the *formulators* of theories, and the *makers* of measurements are subjective beings. The questions we ask, the forms of knowledge we value, the theories we validate with the evidence we collect, what

kind of evidence constitutes legitimate data, and so on, will all be affected by our social situation—not least of which are our race, class, sexual orientation, gender, and nationality, all of which have associated sociocultural values and expectations. What we define as problematic, or more broadly as intellectually interesting, is necessarily affected by our cultural context.⁸ The pursuit of biomedical engineering projects that attempt to improve, say, the versatility of prosthetic limbs would be *logically inconceivable* if we did not live in a culture where some people are missing limbs and where this is seen as a problem that demands a solution. Likewise, to use a more gender-specific example, we would not be pursuing medical "remedies" to symptoms of PMS if we did not already view the physiological changes that women undergo before and during their menstrual cycles as *problematic*.⁹ "Objectivity," then, is not as objective in the natural sciences as it is made out to be.

What can be done to change this—to approach the truth more 'directly' by becoming aware of subjective bias in our "objective" pursuits? Since the natural sciences have been constructed (allegedly) to utilize a self-correcting empirical methodology, what is needed is a feminist epistemological critique that functions *within* the accepted methodology of the sciences. Enter feminist epistemology as defined by Elizabeth Anderson, the role of which she argues is both to proffer feminist critiques of sexist scientific praxis and to legitimate feminist scientific practices.¹⁰ "Feminist epistemology can be regarded as the branch of social epistemology that investigates the influence of *socially constructed*

conceptions and norms of gender-specific interests and experiences on the production of knowledge."¹¹ She argues that feminist epistemology is committed to both 'modest empiricism'—"the view... that observation provides the least defeasible evidence we have about the world"—and 'rationality as reflective endorsability,' or the conscious and systematic evaluation of our "reason for having any attitude or engaging in any practice of inquiry."¹²

As such, feminist epistemology raises issues within the pre-established methodology of scientific inquiry: empirical studies and reflective self-correction. The contentions that feminist epistemology make cannot responsibly be ignored by scientists who claim to follow sound scientific methodology. In this way, Anderson models feminist epistemological critique on the formation of placebo-controlled, double-blind, multi-center pharmaceutical trials. This method of experimentation arose through the critical work of naturalized epistemology and the evaluation of potential biases in scientific praxis; feminist epistemology, she holds, would function in much the same fashion, except with an emphasis on the influence of gender and other social categories on the biasing of scientific pursuits.¹³

What exactly can feminist epistemology reveal about the natural sciences? Anderson breaks down the focus of feminist epistemology into four categories: investigations of gender structures in

the division of scientific labor, evaluations of gender symbolism in the representation and modeling of inanimate or nonhuman phenomena, exposures of androcentrism in the pursuit of scientific inquiry, and criticisms of sexism in either the content or application of scientific theory.¹⁴ Each of these categories provides a critique of science that works on the basis of science's self-correcting methodology; consequently, these claims cannot be ignored by scientists. Apparently, no matter how much we may try to convince ourselves otherwise, our subjective personal and social situation has a noticeable effect on our 'objective' pursuits.

Nonetheless, one might argue that this is simply a reason why we need to *correct* constantly for the influence of subjectivity on our "objective" pursuits. The underlying assumption in the foregoing argument is that, regardless, objectivity is to be valued epistemologically over subjectivity; our subjectivity will only detract from our ability to comprehend the truth. While I definitely would not want to be taken to insinuate that I think that gender biases should be acceptable in scientific endeavors—far be it from the truth—I still see problematic traces of the devaluation of subjectivity in this argument. Is the subjective really as universally epistemically invalidating as this analysis would suggest? The next half of this paper will argue that in *certain* studies, the subjective (or personal) may not only aid, but also be *necessary* to our effective approximation of the truth.¹⁵

6. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), 84-5.

7. See *ibid.*, 90-3.

8. See *ibid.*, 102-4.

9. I take this example from Anderson.

10. Anderson, 51.

11. *Ibid.*, 54. Emphasis in the original.

12. *Ibid.*, 51; 53.

13. See *ibid.*, 55.

14. See the remainder of Anderson for a detailed exploration of some of the contributions of feminist epistemology in each of these four categories.

15. While I would argue that the subjective can be epistemically valuable for both the social and the natural sciences, it is more immediately evident in the case of the former, and hence the social sciences will be the focus of this claim. For an example of how subjective experience can lead effectively to valid truth-claims in the natural sciences, see Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). Keller's discussion of the work of the geneticist Barbara McClintock describes an instance wherein subjective investment in a knowledge pursuit in the natural sciences assisted the search for truth.



Indeed, the value of subjective experience in feminist theory is of central significance: "One of the challenges for feminist theory is to begin to document the *culturally specific ways* that gender subordination is imposed."¹⁶ I would argue further that any social science must take the subjective experiences of its subjects—who constitute the social sciences' "objects" of inquiry—into consideration.¹⁷ The epistemic value of subjective experience in my evaluation extends well beyond just feminist theory and the social sciences, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.¹⁸ Suffice it to say that subjective experience *can* be a viable, if not always necessary, epistemological means to ascertaining the truth.

To make this more evident, I offer an example: Aida Hurtado clearly demonstrates that one of the major problems with the '60s and '70s American feminist and Civil Rights movements was the fact that they did not take the *full range of personal experience of all members of the group* into complete consideration. Women of Color fell in terms of personal identity into both groups, yet neither group took their experience as both women *and* racial minorities concomitantly as a basis for political and social thought, action, and change. Given the exigencies of the situation, women of Color allied themselves with the Civil Rights movement more so than with the feminist movement due to the vital importance of racial solidarity. "[B]reaking

ranks [with men of Color] when they were so severely under attack by powerful institutions and repressive organizations such as the FBI and the local police" could have subverted the entire Civil Rights movement.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Civil Rights movement they aided did not regard their lived experience as women of Color.

While this may not seem like an epistemic issue on the surface, the oversight can be understood as one of epistemic ignorance. The leaders of the feminist movement (white women) and the leaders of the Civil Rights movement (men of Color) both assumed that the particular category of oppression that they put at the forefront of their movement—gender and race respectively—was the primarily salient issue; they failed to take into account the effect(s) other categories of oppression—*with which they were not personally familiar*—had on the oppression of women of Color. In other words, like an example from Hurtado's work, when a white feminist woman looked at a woman of Color, she saw first and foremost a *woman*; likewise, when a male Civil Rights activist of Color looked at a woman of Color, he saw first and foremost a *person of Color*. The category of oppression that was most salient to their lives became, in their minds, *the* category of oppression: they generalized from their experience to the experience of women of Color and failed to take into

account any changes that differences of race or gender might bear on their oppression. What the situation of women of Color called for was a process of "entering her 'world'—a process very different from accessing other minds through analogical inference", or generalizing to an 'understanding' of the other's experience through analogy to one's own.²⁰ Including more viewpoints in the discursive subject position of the theorizer/knowledge-claimant does more than "correct" inaccurate perceptions of how some individuals understand and experience the world; it also changes and expands how the theorizer/knowledge-claimant her/himself understands the world. By overlooking the specific personal experience—the subjectivity—of women of Color, these groups both failed to approximate a truthful understanding of their situation that would have benefited the overall cause of their respective movements by creating a more comprehensive view of mechanisms of oppression. Hence, the failure can be considered epistemic.

The importance of the personal has one further implication for epistemology that Hurtado explores: the structure of discourse about knowledge. Hurtado notes that "the broadening of the paradigm of how gender is conceptualized also requires that other materials besides conventional academic production be used to theorize about women of Color."²¹ Traditional academic work normally entails writing papers for scholarly journals, presenting lectures, discussion panels at

universities, and so forth. When the object of academia is women of Color from the lower classes, for instance, ironically the very people being studied are excluded from the production of knowledge, let alone access to the intellectual products of this process. This means that scholars are generating knowledge *without even taking into consideration the firsthand accounts of the experience of their subjects*. Granted, it is not possible in many cases to do so (e.g. the study of infants or of historical peoples). Nevertheless, whenever access to the direct account of the experience of one's subjects is possible, one should have an epistemic duty, as Hurtado implies, to try to obtain such knowledge if one wants to represent accurately the lived experience of one's subjects. With a concept as relative to personal experience as gender, it is necessary to broaden our definitions of what constitutes effective knowledge production.

However, I do not wish to advocate a total shift to the personal, since (certain forms of) the personal will not *always* be relevant to knowledge production. Toril Moi demonstrates this in her *Sex, Gender, and the Body*. Certain aspects of the personal, whether it is the personal experience of a subject or the personal experience of the inquirer, simply have no bearing on the knowledge being sought. The fact that the author of a certain study is having a bad hair day when she writes the study probably has no bearing on the content, methodology, or interpretation of her study. Similarly for the subjects of a study: it is doubtful that their musical preferences will

16. Hurtado, 45. Emphasis added.

17. For example, the misunderstandings of Western anthropological studies of Igbo society described in Nkiru Nzegwu's *Family Matters: Feminist Concepts in African Philosophy of Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) resulted primarily from overlooking the subjective experiences of women, an epistemic error that resulted from the assumption that the men could describe the culture 'better,' and therefore that women's narratives were unimportant to knowledge of the culture.

18. For instance, Little's work shows the centrality of one's subjective experience of one's own emotions in effective moral epistemology and subsequent action based on moral knowledge. Affect provides us a way of seeing the world that yields insight into morality that we would not have from reason alone.

19. Aida Hurtado, *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 103.

20. Vrinda Dalmiya, "Why Should a Knower Care?," *Hypatia* 17.1 (Winter 2002): 36-7. See this essay for a convincing argument regarding the importance of caring in an effective epistemology. Her analysis of how 'care' works and what it entails is quite nuanced and worth reading.

21. Hurtado, 47.



have any bearing on that which is being studied (unless, of course, the object of inquiry is their musical preferences). To say that the personal is often relevant to knowledge production is not to say that *everything* personal is *categorically* relevant to knowledge production.

It is the same situation for the communication of said knowledge. The use of certain obscure theoretical language can be distancing... to *some* crowds. If I were to give a presentation to a crowd of art historians, I would expect them to know what *trompe l'oeil* and *chiaroscuro* are; the same cannot be said for a group of kindergarteners visiting their local museum for the first time. In the same fashion, the use of personal information in the communication of knowledge *can be as distancing or as expedient as the use of technical and obscure terminology can be*. If a scholar were presenting her findings on domestic abuse to a crowd of survivors of abuse, sharing her personal experience of abuse may help establish a sense of connection between herself and her audience that may in turn allow for a greater degree of trust. If she were to deliver the same story at a sociology conference, more than likely the situation will become awkward and no one will feel comfortable criticizing her findings for fear of belittling her experience: hence all effective intellectual dialogue is stopped. "Explicitly autobiographical and emotional writing can be genuinely open and revealing or just as "silencing"—just as closed off to engagement from others—as

the most arrogantly impersonal prose."²² When considering the language and style of knowledge communication, "It is impossible to assess the effects of a theoretical style without asking who the theory is addressed to, and what it is actually about."²³ To clarify this point, to make a blanket assumption about the general applicability of the personal is as epistemically dubious as making a blanket assumption about the impartiality, and hence truth-yielding potentiality, of "objective" natural sciences. In a valid epistemology, the context of knowledge dissemination should be considered as well as the social context of the knowledge producer.

It may still be claimed by some that the introduction of the personal and the subjective immediately reduces knowledge to relativism. Even many feminist epistemologists seem to treat relativism as a "necessary evil."²⁴ Similar to Moi, Sharyn Clough argues, based on the linguistic philosophy of Donald Davidson, that "Our beliefs have no content unless we have established a common convergence between ourselves, another speaker (or speakers), and a shared environmental stimulus."²⁵ No disagreement is possible without agreeing on a certain set of background beliefs—or as Wittgenstein would say, we must be playing the same language game in order for any agreement or disagreement to be possible. "In the skeptic's world, the fear that the metaphysical separation between us and the world makes coherent the worry that we are, *in principle*, unable to speak with confidence about the causal links between

our representations and the world represented."²⁶ However, relativity to a particular conceptual scheme does not necessarily entail absolute relativism, and hence does not entail the inability to stake a truth-claim. Personal or political values can themselves have verifiable "empirical content that can, in turn, provide *good evidential reasons* for rejecting" or accepting certain truth-claims.²⁷ "The hope of agreement constitutes the aspiration towards the universal."²⁸ To assume automatically that the introduction of the personal or subjective immediately instantiates inescapable relativism that invalidates any truth-claims aspiring to the universal is to fall into the trap of the selfsame mutually exclusive objectivity/subjectivity duality that feminist epistemology is trying to revise.

By wrestling down the dualisms that we use to define self and our relation to the world around us, [feminist epistemologists] make considerable strides toward identifying an epistemology that can ground a common resistance for women without ignoring our important differences.²⁹

Through refusing to situate knowledge in an ontological binarism, feminist epistemology structures knowledge with relevance to *both* the universal and the specific. Epistemic doubt should not necessarily be aroused by anything that invokes subjectivity in its methods of ascertaining truth; on the contrary, suspicion should be provoked by the categorization of any knowledge claim as purely objective or totally subjective.

In short, no knowledge claim can be purely objective or absolutely relativistic.³⁰ Feminist epistemology thus offers us important criticisms and revisions not only of scientific epistemology, but of epistemology in general. In fact, the emphasis on subjectivity is not unique to feminist epistemologists.³¹ Their particular insights, however, offer much more than simply the tools with which concerned epistemologists may correct dominant methodology. Feminist epistemology proposes a correlate claim with its theory of knowledge that brings more immediate relevance to the pursuit of knowledge. As Hurtado says, "What is appealing about a

22. Toril Moi, *Sex, Gender, and the Body: The Student Edition of What Is a Woman?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 248.

23. Ibid, 133.

24. For a discussion of relativism in the works of Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Helen Longino, see Sharyn Clough, "A Hasty Retreat From Evidence: The Recalcitrance of Relativism in Feminist Epistemology," *Hypatia* 13.4 (Fall 1998): 88-111.

25. Ibid, 105.

26. Ibid, 108.

27. Ibid, 107.

28. Moi, 236.

29. Laura Sells, "Feminist Epistemology: Rethinking the Dualisms of Atomic Knowledge," *Hypatia* 8.3 (Summer 1993): 210.

30. NB: Just because an experience is uniquely personal does not mean it is completely relativistic. As I hope the above has demonstrated, something that is absolutely relativistic would be strictly unintelligible to any but the original subject of the experience in the first place; commonalities are a prerequisite to understanding, and hence to any kind of disagreement. Likewise for "pure" objectivity: while one may claim that $2 + 2 = 4$ universally, this phrase would have no significance if it were uttered in a social context wherein agents did not have either (a) such terminology as part of their intellectual vocabulary or (b) any valuation of the significance of numeration to their lives.

31. For instance, the arguments of several pragmatists and contextualists parallel many claims of feminist epistemology. William James's focus on "live" and "dead" options attributes much epistemic gravity to the sociocultural situation of the knowledge-claimant. Additionally, David Annis's contextualism calls attention to the situational construction of methodological norms: certain contexts make certain truth-claims/objections possible, while others may invalidate them a priori. See, respectively, William James, *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Longman, Greens, and Co., 1897); and David Annis, "A Contextual Theory of Epistemic Justification," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (1979): 213-219.



feminist epistemology... is the struggle to focus on life and the recognition that humans should not be oppressed.... [A] feminist epistemology assumes that oppression is unnecessary."³² By undermining the prospects of "pure" objectivity on the human level, feminist epistemology eliminates the ability to claim *without doubt* that oppression is ever a natural or inevitable phenomenon of the universe, like some biological determinists controversially claim about women's social roles in society. Further, by demonstrating that nothing is relativistic, it disallows anybody from categorically dismissing, ignoring, or overlooking the subjective experience of another on the grounds of it being "too" personal.

As Beauvoir expresses in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, we must learn to live with the realization that our existence is founded in essential ambiguities: while every second is a moment closer to death, every step towards death is a moment of our lives, and more importantly

the individual and the universal are *not* mutually exclusive. "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny a priori that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all."³³ Essentially, this means that "an action which serves man ought to be careful not to forget him on the way."³⁴ I am by no means arguing that any objectivity is impossible, or that there are no personal experiences that are irrelevant to knowledge creation. Rather, I argue that to hold that only absolutely objective methodologies can yield valid truth-claims or that the personal is universally irrelevant to truth-claims is fundamentally dogmatic. Ultimately, feminist epistemology allows us to expose and to challenge instances of knowledge-as-oppression and to utilize knowledge-as-liberation: it provides a clear and valuable social goal to our knowledge production, as well as a means to achieving this end. ♦

32. Hurtado, 126.

33. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1948), 18.

34. *Ibid.*, 153.