

## 2

# Taking Subjectivity into Account

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### 1. The Problem

Suppose epistemologists should succeed in determining a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for justifying claims that “S knows that *p*” across a range of “typical” instances. Furthermore, suppose that these conditions could silence the skeptic who denies that human beings can have certain knowledge of the world. Would the epistemological project then be completed? I maintain that it would not.

There is no doubt that a discovery of necessary and sufficient conditions that offered a response to the skeptic would count as a major epistemological breakthrough. But once one seriously entertains the hypothesis that knowledge is a *construct* produced by cognitive agents within social practices and acknowledges the variability of agents and practices across social groups, the possible scope even of “definitive” justificatory strategies for *S-knows-that-p* claims reveals itself to be very narrow indeed. My argument here is directed, in part, against the breadth of scope that many epistemologists accord to such claims. I am suggesting that necessary and sufficient conditions in the “received” sense—by which I mean conditions that hold for any knower, regardless of her or his identity, interests, and circumstances (i.e., her or his subjectivity)—could conceivably be discovered only for a narrow range of artificially isolated and purified empirical knowledge claims, which might be paradigmatic by fiat but are unlikely to be so ‘in fact.’

In this essay I focus on *S-knows-that-p* claims and refer to *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies because of the emblematic nature of such claims in the Anglo-American epistemology. My suggestion is not that discerning necessary and sufficient conditions for the justification of such

claims is the sole, or even the central, epistemological preoccupation. Rather, I use this label, *S-knows-that-p*, for three principal reasons as a trope that permits easy reference to the epistemologies of the mainstream. First, I want to mark the positivist-empiricist orientation of these epistemologies, which is both generated and enforced by appeals to such paradigms. Second, I want to show that these paradigms prompt and sustain a belief that universally necessary and sufficient conditions can indeed be found. Finally—and perhaps most importantly—I want to distance my discussion from analyses that privilege scientific knowledge, as do *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies implicitly and often explicitly, and hence to locate it within an “epistemology of everyday lives.”

Coincidentally—but only, I think, coincidentally—the dominant epistemologies of modernity with their Enlightenment legacy and later infusion with positivist-empiricist principles, have defined themselves around ideals of pure objectivity and value-neutrality. These ideals are best suited to govern evaluations of the knowledge of knowers who can be considered capable of achieving a “view from nowhere” that allows them, through the autonomous exercise of their reason, to transcend particularity and contingency. The ideals presuppose a universal, homogeneous, and essential “human nature” that allows knowers to be substitutable for one another. Indeed, for *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies, knowers worthy of that title can act as “surrogate knowers,” who are able to put themselves in anyone else’s place and know his or her circumstances and interests in just the same way as she or he would know them.<sup>2</sup> Hence those circumstances and interests are deemed epistemologically irrelevant. Moreover, by virtue of their detachment, these ideals erase the possibility of analyzing the interplay between emotion and reason and obscure connections between knowledge and power. They lend support to the conviction that cognitive products are as neutral—as politically innocent—as the processes that allegedly produce them. Such epistemologies implicitly assert that if one cannot see “from nowhere” (or equivalently, from an ideal observation position that could be anywhere and everywhere)—if one cannot take up an epistemological position that mirrors the “original position” of “the moral point of view”—then one cannot *know* anything at all. If one cannot transcend subjectivity and the particularities of its “location,” then there is no knowledge worth analyzing.

The strong prescriptions and proscriptions that I have highlighted reveal that *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies work with a closely specified kind of knowing. That knowledge is by no means representative of “human knowledge” or “knowledge in general” (if such terms

retain a legitimate reference in these postmodern times), either diachronically (across recorded history) or synchronically (across the late twentieth-century epistemic terrain). Nor have *theories* of knowledge throughout the history of philosophy developed uniformly around these same exclusions and inclusions. Neither Plato, Spinoza, nor Hume, for example, would have denied that there are interconnections between reason and “the passions”; neither Stoics, Marxists, phenomenologists, pragmatists, nor followers of the later Wittgenstein would represent knowledge seeking as a disinterested pursuit, disconnected from everyday concerns. And these are but a few exceptions to the “rule” that has come to govern the epistemology of the Anglo-American mainstream.

The *positivism* of positivist-empiricist epistemologies has been instrumental in ensuring the paradigmatic status of *S*-knows-that-*p* claims and all that is believed to follow from them.<sup>3</sup> For positivist epistemologists, sensory observation in ideal observation conditions is the privileged source of knowledge, offering the best promise of certainty. Knowers are detached, neutral spectators, and the objects of knowledge are separate from them; they are inert items in the observational knowledge-gathering process. Findings are presented in *propositions* (e.g., *S*-knows-that-*p*), which are verifiable by appeals to the observational data. Each individual knowledge-seeker is singly and separately accountable to the evidence; however, the belief is that *his* cognitive efforts are replicable by any other individual knower in the same circumstances. The aim of knowledge seeking is to achieve the capacity to predict, manipulate, and control the behavior of the objects known.

The fact/value distinction that informs present-day epistemology owes its strictest formulation to the positivist legacy. For positivists, value statements are not verifiable and hence are meaningless; they must not be permitted to distort the facts. And it is in the writings of the logical positivists and their heirs that one finds the most definitive modern articulations of the supremacy of scientific knowledge (for which read “the knowledge attainable in physics”). Hence, for example, Karl Popper writes: “Epistemology I take to be the theory of *scientific knowledge*.”<sup>4</sup>

From a positivistically derived conception of scientific knowledge comes the ideal objectivity that is alleged to be achievable by any knower who deserves the label. Physical science is represented as the site of ideal, controlled, and objective knowing at its best; its practitioners are held to be knowers *par excellence*. The positivistic separation of the contexts of discovery and justification produces the conclusion that even though information gathering (discovery) may

sometimes be contaminated by the circumstantial peculiarities of everyday life, justificatory procedures can effectively purify the final cognitive product—knowledge—from any such taint. Under the aegis of positivism, attempts to give epistemological weight to the provenance of knowledge claims—to grant justificatory or explanatory significance to social- or personal-historical situations, for example—risk committing the “genetic fallacy.” More specifically, claims that epistemological insight can be gained from understanding the psychology of knowers or analyzing their socio-cultural locations invite dismissal either as “psychologism” or as projects belonging to the sociology of knowledge. For epistemological purists, many of these pursuits can provide anecdotal information, but none contributes to the real business of epistemology.

In this sketch I have represented the positivist credo at its starkest because it is these stringent aspects of its program that have trickled down not just to produce the tacit ideals of the epistemological orthodoxy but to inform even well-educated laypersons’ conceptions of what it means to be objective and of the authoritative status of modern science.<sup>5</sup> Given the spectacular successes of science and technology, it is no wonder that the scientific method should appear to offer the best available route to reliable, objective knowledge not just of matters scientific but of everything one could want to know, from what makes a car run to what makes a person happy. It is no wonder that reports to the effect that “Science has proved . . .” carry an immediate presumption of truth. Furthermore, the positivist program offered a methodology that would extend not just across the natural sciences, but to the human/social sciences as well. All scientific inquiry—including inquiry in the human sciences—was to be conducted on the model of natural scientific inquiry, especially as practiced in physics.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge of people could be scientific to the extent that it could be based on empirical observations of predictable, manipulable patterns of behavior.

I have focused on features of mainstream epistemology that tend to sustain the belief that a discovery of necessary and sufficient conditions for justifying *S*-knows-that-*p* claims could count as the last milestone on the epistemological journey. Such claims are distilled, simplified observational knowledge claims that are objectively derived, propositionally formulable, and empirically testable. The detail of the role they play varies according to whether the position they figure in is foundational or coherentist, externalist or internalist. My intent is not to suggest that *S*-knows-that-*p* formulations capture the essence of these disparate epistemic orientations or to reduce them to one common principle. Rather, I am contending that certain rea-

sonably constant features of their diverse functions across a range of inquiries—features that derive at least indirectly from the residual prestige of positivism and its veneration of an idealized scientific methodology—produce epistemologies for which the places *S* and *p* can be indiscriminately filled across an inexhaustible range of subject matters. The legislated (not “found”) context-independence of the model generates the conclusion that knowledge worthy of the name must transcend the particularities of experience to achieve objective purity and value neutrality. This is a model within which the issue of taking subjectivity into account simply does not arise.

Yet despite the disclaimers, hidden subjectivities produce these epistemologies and sustain their hegemony in a curiously circular process. It is true that, in selecting examples, the context in which *S* knows or *p* occurs is rarely considered relevant, for the assumption is that only in abstraction from contextual confusion can clear, unequivocal knowledge claims be submitted for analysis. Yet those examples tend to be selected—whether by chance or by design—from the experiences of a privileged group of people and to be presented as paradigmatic for all knowledge. Hence a certain range of contexts is, in effect, presupposed. Historically, the philosopher arrogated that privilege to himself, maintaining that an investigation of his mental processes could reveal the workings of human thought. In Baconian and later positivist-empiricist thought, as I have suggested, paradigmatic privilege belongs more specifically to standardized, faceless observers or to scientists. (The latter, at least, have usually been white and male.) Their ordinary observational experiences provide the “simples” of which knowledge is comprised: observational simples caused, almost invariably, by medium-sized physical objects such as apples, envelopes, coins, sticks, and colored patches. The tacit assumptions are that such objects are part of the basic experiences of every putative knower and that more complex knowledge—or scientific knowledge—consists in elaborated or scientifically controlled versions of such experiences. Rarely in the literature, either historical or modern, is there more than a passing reference to knowing other people, except occasionally to a recognition (i.e., observational information) that this is a man—whereas that is a door or a robot. Neither with respect to material objects nor to other people is there any sense of how these “knowns” figure in a person’s life.

Not only do these epistemic restrictions suppress the context in which objects are known, they also account for the fact that, apart from simple objects—and even there it is questionable—one cannot, on this model, know anything well enough to do very much with it. One can only *perceive* it, usually at a distance. In consequence, most

of the more complex, contentious, and locationally variable aspects of cognitive practice are excluded from epistemological analysis. Hence the knowledge that epistemologists analyze is not of concrete or unique aspects of the physical/social world. It is of *instances* rather than particulars; the norms of formal sameness obscure practical and experiential differences to produce a picture of a homogeneous epistemic community, comprised of discrete individuals with uniform access to the stuff of which knowledge is made.

The project of remapping the epistemic terrain that I envisage is subversive, even anarchistic, in challenging and seeking to displace some of the most sacred principles of standard Anglo-American epistemologies. It abandons the search for and denies the possibility of the disinterested and dislocated view from nowhere. More subversively, it asserts the political investedness of most knowledge-producing activity and insists upon the accountability—the epistemic responsibilities—of knowing subjects to the community, not just to the evidence.<sup>7</sup>

Because my engagement in the project is specifically prompted by a conviction that *gender* must be put in place as a primary analytic category, I start by assuming that it is impossible to sustain the presumption of gender-neutrality that is central to standard epistemologies: the presumption that gender has nothing to do with knowledge, that the mind has no sex, that reason is alike in all men, and man “embraces” woman.<sup>8</sup> But gender is not an enclosed category, for it is always interwoven with such other sociopolitical-historical locations as class, race, and ethnicity, to mention only a few. It is experienced differently, and it plays differently into structures of power and dominance at its diverse intersections with other specificities. From these multiply describable locations, the world looks quite different from the way it might look from nowhere. Homogenizing those differences under a range of standard or typical instances always invites the question, “standard or typical for whom?”<sup>9</sup> Answers to that question must necessarily take subjectivity into account.

My thesis, then, is that a “variable construction” hypothesis<sup>10</sup> requires epistemologists to pay as much attention to the nature and situation—the location—of *S* as they commonly pay to the content of *p*; I maintain that a constructivist reorientation requires epistemologists to take subjective factors—factors that pertain to the circumstances of the subject, *S*—centrally into account in evaluative and justificatory procedures. Yet the socially located, critically dialogical nature of the reoriented epistemological project preserves a realist orientation, ensuring that it will not slide into subjectivism. This caveat is vitally important. Although I shall conclude this essay with a plea for a hybrid

breed of relativism, my contention will be that realism and relativism are by no means incompatible. Although I argue the need to excise the positivist side of the positivist-empiricist couple, I retain a modified commitment to the empiricist side for several reasons.

I have suggested that the stark conception of objectivity that characterizes much contemporary epistemology derives from the infusion of empiricism with positivistic values. Jettison those values, and an empiricist core remains that urges both the survival significance and emancipatory significance of achieving reliable knowledge of the physical and social world.<sup>11</sup> People need to be able to explain the world and to explain their circumstances as part of it; hence they need to be able to assume its 'reality' in some minimal sense. The fact of the world's intractability to intervention and wishful thinking is the strongest evidence of its independence from human knowers. Earthquakes, trees, disease, attitudes, and social arrangements are *there*, requiring different kinds of reaction and (sometimes) intervention. People cannot hope to transform their circumstances and hence to realize emancipatory goals if their explanations cannot at once account for the intractable dimensions of the world and engage appropriately with its patently malleable features. Therefore it is necessary to achieve some match between knowledge and "reality," even when the reality at issue consists primarily in social productions such as racism or tolerance, oppression or equality of opportunity. A reconstructed epistemological project has to retain an empirical-realist core that can negotiate the fixities and less stable constructs of the physical-social world, while refusing to endorse the objectivism of the positivist legacy or the subjectivism of radical relativism.

## **2. Autonomous Solidarity**

Feminist critiques of epistemology and philosophy of science/social science have demonstrated that the ideals of the autonomous reasoner—the dislocated, disinterested observer—and the epistemologies they inform are the artifacts of a small, privileged group of educated, usually prosperous, white men.<sup>12</sup> Their circumstances enable them to believe that they are materially and even affectively autonomous and to imagine that they are nowhere or everywhere, even as they occupy an unmarked position of privilege. Moreover, the ideals of rationality and objectivity that have guided and inspired theorists of knowledge throughout the history of western philosophy have been constructed through processes of excluding the attributes and experiences commonly associated with femaleness and underclass social status: emotion, connection, practicality, sensitivity, and idiosyncrasy.<sup>13</sup> These

systematic excisions of “otherness” attest to a presumed—and willed—belief in the stability of a social order that the presumpers have good reasons to believe that they can ensure, because they occupy the positions that determine the norms of conduct and enquiry. Yet all that these convictions demonstrate is that ideal objectivity is a generalization from the *subjectivity* of quite a small social group, albeit a group that has the power, security, and prestige to believe that it can generalise its experiences and normative ideals across the social order, thus producing a group of like-minded practitioners (“we”) and dismissing “others” as deviant, aberrant (“they”).

Richard Foley’s book *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* illustrates my point. Foley bases his theory on a criterion of first-person persuasiveness, which he calls a “subjective foundationalism.” He presents exemplary knowledge claims in the standard S-knows-that-*p* rubric. Whether or not a propositional knowledge claim turns out to be warranted for any putative knower/believer will depend upon its being “uncontroversial,” “argument-proof” for that individual, “in the sense that all possible arguments against it are implausible.”<sup>14</sup> Foley is not concerned that his “subjective” appeal could force him into subjectivism or solipsism. His unconcern, I suggest, is precisely a product of the confidence with which he expands his references to S into “we.” Foley’s appeals to S’s normality—to his being “one of us,” “just like the rest of us”—to his not having “crazy, bizarre [or] outlandish beliefs,”<sup>15</sup> “weird goals,” or “weird perceptions,”<sup>16</sup> underpin his assumption that in speaking for S he is speaking for everyone—or at least for “all of us.” Hence he refers to what “any normal individual on reflection would be likely to think,”<sup>17</sup> without pausing to consider the presumptuousness of the terminology. There are no problems, no politics of “we-saying” visible here; this is an epistemology oblivious to its experiential and political specificity. Yet its appeals to a taken-for-granted normality, achieved through commonality, align it with all of the positions of power and privilege that unthinkingly consign to epistemic limbo people who profess “crazy, bizarre, or outlandish” beliefs and negate their claims to the authority that knowledge confers. In its assumed political innocence, it prepares the ground for the practices that make ‘knowledge’ an honorific and ultimately exclusionary label, restricting it to the products of a narrow subset of the cognitive activities of a closely specified group. The histories of women and other “others” attempting to count as members of that group are justifiably bitter. In short, the assumptions that accord S-knows-that-*p* propositions a paradigmatic place generate epistemologies that derive from a privileged subjective specificity to inform sociopolitical structures of dominance and submission. Such epistemologies—and



Foley's is just one example—mask the specificity of their origins beneath the putative neutrality of the rubric.

Therefore, although subjectivity does not figure in any explicit sense in the formulaic, purely place-holder status of *S* in Foley's theory, there is no doubt that the assumptions that allow him to presume *S*'s normality—and apolitical status—in effect work to install a very specific conception of subjectivity in the *S*-place: a conception that demands analysis if the full significance of the inclusions and exclusions it produces are to be understood. These “subjects” are interchangeable only across a narrow range of implicit group membership. And the group in question is the dominant social group in western capitalist societies: propertied, educated, white men. Its presumed political innocence needs to be challenged. Critics must ask for whom this epistemology exists; whose interests it serves; and whose it neglects or suppresses in the process.<sup>18</sup>

I am not suggesting that *S*-knows-that-*p* epistemologies are the only ones that rely on silent assumptions of solidarity. Issues about the implicit politics of “we-saying” infect even the work of such an antifoundationalist, anti-objectivist, anti-individualist as Richard Rorty, whom many feminists are tempted to see as an ally in their successor-epistemology projects. Again, the manner in which these issues arise is instructive.

In that part of his work with which feminist and other revisionary epistemologists rightly find an affinity,<sup>19</sup> Rorty develops a sustained argument to the effect that the “foundational” (for which read “empiricist-positivist and rationalist”) projects of western philosophy have been unable to fulfill their promise. That is to say, they have not been successful in establishing their claims that knowledge must—and can—be grounded in absolute truth and that necessary and sufficient conditions can be ascertained. Rorty turns his back on the (in his view) ill-conceived project of seeking absolute epistemic foundations to advocate a process of “continuing conversation rather than discovering truth.”<sup>20</sup> The conversation will be informed and inspired by the work of such “edifying philosophers” as Dewey, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and (latterly) Gadamer. It will move away from the search for foundations to look within communally created and communally available history, tradition, and culture for the only possible bases for truth claims. Relocating questions about knowledge and truth to positions within the conversations of humankind does seem to break the thrall of objectivist detachment and to create a forum for dialogic, cooperative debate of the epistemological issues of everyday, practical life. Yet the question is how open that forum would—or could—be; who

would have a voice in Rorty's conversations? They are not likely, I suspect, to be those who fall under Foley's exclusions.

In his paper "Solidarity or Objectivity?," Rorty reaffirms his repudiation of objectivist epistemologies to argue that "for the pragmatist [i.e., for him, as pragmatist] . . . knowledge is, like 'truth,' simply a compliment paid to the beliefs which *we* think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed."<sup>21</sup> He eschews epistemological analysis of truth, rationality, and knowledge to concentrate on questions about "what self-image our society should have of itself."<sup>22</sup> Contending that philosophy is a frankly ethnocentric project and affirming that "'there is only the dialogue,' only *us*," he advocates throwing out "the last residue of transcultural rationality."<sup>23</sup> It is evidently his belief that communal solidarity, guided by principles of liberal tolerance—and of Nietzschean irony—will both provide solace in this foundationless world *and* check the tendencies of ethnocentricity to oppress, marginalize, or colonize.

Yet as Nancy Fraser aptly observes: "Rorty homogenizes social space, assuming tendentially that there are no deep social cleavages capable of generating conflicting solidarities and opposing "we's".<sup>24</sup> Hence he can presume that there will be no disagreement about the best self-image of "our" society; he can fail to note—or at least to take seriously—the androcentricity, class-centricity, and all of the other centricities that his solidarity claims produce. The very goal of achieving "as much intersubjective agreement as possible," of extending "the reference of 'us' as far as we can,"<sup>25</sup> with the belief that tolerance will do the job when conflicts arise, is unlikely to convince members of groups who have never felt solidarity with the representers of the self-image of the society. The very promise of inclusion in the extension of that "we" is as likely to occasion anxiety as it is to offer hope. Naming ourselves as "we" empowers us, but it always risks disempowering others. The we-saying, then, of assumed or negotiated solidarity must always be submitted to critical analysis.

Now it is neither surprising nor outrageous that epistemologies should derive out of specific human interests. Indeed, it is much less plausible to contend that they do not; human cognitive agents, after all, have made them. Why would they not bear the marks of their makers? Nor does the implication of human interests in theories of knowledge, *prima facie*, invite censure. It does alert epistemologists to the need for case-by-case analysis and critique of the sources out of which claims to objectivity and neutrality are made.<sup>26</sup> More pointedly, it forces the conclusion that if the ideal of objectivity cannot pretend to have been established in accordance with its own demands, then it has no right to the theoretical hegemony to which it lays claim.

Central to the program of taking subjectivity into account that feminist epistemological inquiry demands, then, is a critical analysis of that very politics of “we-saying” that objectivist epistemologies conceal from view. Whenever an *S*-knows-that-*p* claim is declared paradigmatic, the first task is to analyze the constitution of the group(s) by whom and for whom it is accorded that status.

### 3. Subjects and Objects

I have noted that the positivist-empiricist influence on the principal epistemologies of the mainstream manifests itself in assumptions that verifiable knowledge—knowledge worthy of the name—can be analyzed into observational simples; that the methodology of the natural sciences, and especially physics, is a model for productive enquiry; and that the goal of developing a “unified science” translates into a “unity of knowledge” project in which all knowledge—including everyday and social-scientific knowledge about people—would be modeled on the knowledge ideally obtainable in physics. Reliance upon *S*-knows-that-*p* paradigms sustain these convictions. In the preceding section I have shown that these paradigms, in practice, are problematic with respect to the subjects (knowers) who occupy the *S* position, whose subjectivity and accountability are effaced in the formal structure. In this section I shall show that they are ultimately oppressive for subjects who come to occupy the *p* position—who become objects of knowledge—because their subjectivity and specificity are reduced to interchangeable, observable variables. When more elaborated knowledge claims are at issue—theories and interpretations of human behaviors and institutions are the salient examples here—these paradigms generate a presumption in favor of apolitical epistemic postures that is at best deceptive and at worst dangerous, both politically and epistemologically.

This last claim requires some explanation. The purpose of singling out *paradigmatic* knowledge claims is to establish exemplary instances that will map, feature by feature, onto knowledge that differs from the paradigm in content across a wide range of possibilities. Strictly speaking, paradigms are meant to capture just the formal, structural character of legitimate (appropriately verifiable) knowledge. But their paradigmatic status generates presumptions in favor of much wider resemblances across the epistemic terrain than the strictest reading of the model would permit. Hence it looks as if it is not just the paradigm’s purely formal features that are generalizable to knowledge that differs not just in complexity but in kind from the simplified, paradigmatic example. Of particular interest in the present context is

the fact that paradigms are commonly selected from mundane experiences of virtually indubitable facticity (“Susan knows that the door is open”); they are distilled from simple objects in the world that seem to be just neutrally *there*. There appear to be no political stakes in knowing such a fact. Moreover, it looks (at least from the vantage point of the epistemologist) as though the poorest, most “weird,” and most marginalized of knowers would have access to and know about these things in exactly the same way. Hence the substitutionalist assumption that the paradigm relies on points to the conclusion that *all* knowing—knowing theories, institutions, practices, life forms, *and* forms of life—is just as objective, transparent, and apolitical an exercise.

My contention that subjectivity has to be taken into account takes issue with the belief that epistemologists need only to understand the conditions for propositional, observationally derived knowledge, and all the rest will follow. It challenges the concomitant belief that epistemologists need only to understand how such knowledge claims are made and justified by individual, autonomous, self-reliant reasoners to understand all the rest. Such beliefs derive from conceptions of detached and faceless cognitive agency that mask the variability of the experiences and practices from which knowledge is constructed.

Even if necessary and sufficient conditions cannot yet be established, say in the form of unassailable foundations or seamless coherence, there are urgent questions for epistemologists to address. They bear not primarily upon criteria of evidence, justification, and warrantability but upon the “nature” of inquirers: upon their interests in the inquiry, their emotional involvement and background assumptions, and their character; upon their material, historical, and cultural circumstances. Answers to such questions will rarely offer definitive assessments of knowledge claims and hence are not ordinarily open to the charge that they commit the genetic fallacy; but they can be instructive in debates about the worth of such claims. I am thinking of questions about how credibility is established, about connections between knowledge and power, about political agendas and epistemic responsibilities, and about the place of knowledge in ethical and aesthetic judgments. These questions are less concerned with individual, monologic cognitive projects than with the workings of epistemic communities as they are manifested in structures of authority and expertise and in the processes through which knowledge comes to inform public opinion. Such issues will occupy a central place in reconstructed epistemological projects that eschew formalism in order to engage with cognitive practices and to promote emancipatory goals.

The epistemic and moral/political ideals that govern inquiry in technologically advanced, capitalist, free-enterprise western societies are an amalgam of liberal-utilitarian moral values and the empiricist-positivist intellectual values that I have been discussing in this essay. These ideals and values shape both the intellectual enterprises that the society legitimates and the language of liberal individualism that maps out the rhetorical spaces where those enterprises are carried out. The ideal of tolerance and openness is believed to be the right attitude from which, initially, to approach truth claims. It combines with the assumptions that objectivity and value-neutrality govern the rational conduct of scientific and social-scientific research to produce the philosophical commonplaces of late twentieth-century anglo-American societies, not just in “the academy” but in the public perception—the “common sense,” in Gramsci’s terms—that prevails about the academy and the scientific community.<sup>27</sup> (Recall that for Rorty, tolerance is to ensure that postepistemological societies will sustain productive conversations.) I have noted that a conversational item introduced with the phrase “Science has proved . . .” carries a presumption in favor of its reliability *because of* its objectivity and value-neutrality—a presumption that these facts can stand up to scrutiny *because* they are products of an objective, disinterested process of inquiry. (It is ironic that this patently “genetic” appeal—that is, to the genesis of cognitive products in a certain kind of process—is normally cited to discredit other genetic accounts!) Open and fair-minded consumers of science will recognize its claims to disinterested, tolerant consideration.

I want to suggest that these ideals are inadequate to guide epistemological debates about contentious issues and hence that it is deceptive and dangerous to ignore questions about subjectivity in the name of objectivity and value-neutrality. (Again, this is why simple observational paradigms are so misleading.) To do so, I turn to an example that is now notorious, at least in Canada.

Psychologist Philippe Rushton claims to have demonstrated that “Orientals as a group are more intelligent, more family-oriented, more law-abiding and less sexually promiscuous than whites, and that whites are superior to blacks in all the same respects.”<sup>28</sup> Presented as “facts” that “science [i.e., an allegedly scientific psychology] has proved . . .” by using an objective statistical methodology, Rushton’s findings carry a presumption in favor of their reliability *because* they are products of objective research.<sup>29</sup> The “Science has proved . . .” rhetoric creates a public presumption in favor of taking them at face value, believing them true until they are proven false. It erects a screen, a blind, behind which the researcher, like any other occupant of the S place, can

abdicate accountability to anything but “the facts” and can present himself as a neutral, infinitely replicable vehicle through which data passes en route to becoming knowledge. He can claim to have fulfilled his epistemic obligations if, “withdraw[ing] to his professional self,”<sup>30</sup> he can argue that he has been “objective,” detached and disinterested in his research. The rhetoric of objectivity and value-neutrality places the burden of proof on the challenger rather than the fact-finder and judges her guilty of intolerance, dogmatism, or ideological excess if she cannot make her challenge good. That same rhetoric generates a conception of knowledge for its own sake that at once effaces accountability requirements and threatens the dissolution of viable intellectual and moral community.

I have noted that the “Science has proved . . .” rhetoric derives from the sociopolitical influence of the philosophies of science that incorporate and are underwritten by S-knows-that-*p* epistemologies. Presented as the findings of a purely neutral observer who “discovered” facts about racial inferiority and superiority in controlled observation conditions so that he could not rationally withhold assent, Rushton’s results ask the community to be equally objective and neutral in assessing them. These requirements are at once reasonable and troubling. They are reasonable because the empiricist-realist component that I maintain is vital to any emancipatory epistemology makes it a mark of competent, reasonable inquiry to approach even the most unsavory truth claims seriously, albeit critically. But the requirements are troubling in their implicit appeal to a doxastic subjective accountability. The implicit claim is that empirical inquiry is not only a neutral and impersonal process but also an inexorable one; it is compelling, even coercive, in what it turns up to the extent that a rational inquirer *cannot* withhold assent. He has no choice but to believe that *p*, however unpalatable the findings may be. The individualism and presumed disinterestedness of the paradigm reinforces this claim.

It is difficult, however, to believe in the coincidence of Rushton’s discoveries; they could only be compelling in that strong sense if they could be shown to be purely coincidental—brute fact—something he came upon as he might bump into a wall. Talk about his impartial reading of the data assumes such hard facticity: the facticity of a blizzard or a hot sunny day. “Data” is the problematic term here, suggesting that facts presented themselves neutrally to Rushton’s observing eye as though they were literally given, not sought or made. Yet it is not easy to conceive of Rushton’s “data” in perfect independence from ongoing debates about race, sex, and class.

These difficulties are compounded when Rushton’s research is jux-

taped against analogous projects in other places and times. In her book, *Sexual Science*,<sup>31</sup> Cynthia Russett documents the intellectual climate of the nineteenth century, when claims for racial and sexual equality were threatening upheavals in the social order. She notes that there was a concerted effort just at that time among scientists to produce studies that would demonstrate the “natural” sources of racial and sexual *inequality*. Given its aptness to the climate of the times, it is hard to believe that this research was “dislocated,” prompted by a disinterested spirit of objective, neutral fact-finding. It is equally implausible, at a time when racial and sexual unrest is again threatening the complacency of the liberal dream—and meeting with strong conservative efforts to contain it—that it could be purely by coincidence that Rushton reaches the conclusion he does. Consider Rushton’s contention that the brain has increased in size and the genitals have shrunk correspondingly over the course of human evolution; blacks have larger genitals, ergo. . . . Leaving elementary logical fallacies aside, it is impossible not to hear echoes of nineteenth-century medical science’s “proofs” that excessive mental activity in women interferes with the proper functioning of the uterus; hence, permitting women to engage in higher intellectual activity impedes performance of their proper reproductive roles.

The connections Rushton draws between genital and brain size, and conformity to idealized patterns of good liberal democratic citizenship, trade upon analogous normative assumptions. The rhetoric of stable, conformist family structure as the site of controlled, utilitarian sexual expression is commonly enlisted to sort the “normal” from the “deviant” and to promote conservative conceptions of the self-image a society should have of itself.<sup>32</sup> The idea that the dissolution of “the family” (the nuclear, two-parent, patriarchal family) threatens the destruction of civilized society has been deployed to perpetuate white male privilege and compulsory heterosexuality, especially for women. It has been invoked to preserve homogeneous WASP values from disruption by “unruly” (not law-abiding, sexually promiscuous) elements. Rushton’s contention that “naturally occurring” correlations can explain the demographic distribution of tendencies to unruliness leaves scant room for doubt about what he believes a society concerned about its self-image should do: suppress unruliness. As Julian Henriques puts a similar point, by a neat reversal, the “black person becomes the cause of racism whereas the white person’s prejudice is seen as a natural effect of the information-processing mechanisms.”<sup>33</sup> The “facts” that Rushton produces are simply presented to the scholarly and lay communities so that they allegedly “speak for themselves” on two levels: both roughly as data and in more formal

garb as research findings. What urgently demands analysis is the process by which these “facts” are inserted into a public arena that is prepared to receive them, with the result that inquiry stops right where it should begin.<sup>34</sup>

My point is that it is not enough just to be more rigorously empirical in adjudicating such controversial knowledge claims with the expectation that biases that may have infected the “context of discovery” will be eradicated in the purifying process of justification. Rather, the scope of epistemological investigation has to expand to merge with moral-political inquiry, acknowledging that “facts” are always infused with values and that both facts and values are open to ongoing critical debate. It would be necessary to demonstrate the innocence of descriptions (their derivation from pure data) and to show the perfect congruence of descriptions with “the described” in order to argue that descriptive theories have no normative force. Their assumed innocence licenses an evasion of the accountability that socially concerned communities have to demand of their producers of knowledge. Only the most starkly positivistic epistemology merged with the instrumental rationality it presupposes could presume that inquirers are accountable only to the evidence. Evidence is *selected*, not found, and selection procedures are open to scrutiny. Nor can critical analysis stop there, for the funding and institutions that enable inquirers to pursue certain projects and not others explicitly legitimize the work.<sup>35</sup> So the lines of accountability are long and interwoven; only a genealogy of their multiple strands can begin to unravel the issues.

What, then, should occur within epistemic communities to ensure that scientists and other knowers cannot conceal bias and prejudice or claim *a right not to know* about their background assumptions and the significance of their locations?

The crux of my argument is that the phenomenon of the disinterested inquirer is the exception rather than the rule; there are no dislocated truths, and some facts about the locations and interests at the source of inquiry are always pertinent to questions about freedom and accountability. Hence I am arguing, with Naomi Scheman, that

Feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science [who] *along with others who have been the objects of knowledge-as-control* [have to] understand and . . . pose alternatives to the epistemology of modernity. As it has been central to this epistemology to guard its products from contamination by connection to the particularities of its producers, it must be central to the work of its critics and to those who would create genuine alternatives to remember those connections . . .<sup>36</sup>

There can be no doubt that research is—often imperceptibly—shaped



by presuppositions and interests external to the inquiry itself, which cannot be filtered out by standard, objective, disinterested epistemological techniques.<sup>37</sup>

In seeking to explain what makes Rushton possible,<sup>38</sup> the point cannot be to exonerate him as a mere product of his circumstances and times. Rushton accepts grants and academic honors in his own name, speaks “for himself” in interviews with the press, and claims credit where credit is to be had. He upholds the validity of his findings. Moreover, he participates fully in the rhetoric of the autonomous, objective inquirer. Yet although Rushton is plainly accountable for the sources and motivations of his projects, he is not singly responsible. Such research is legitimized by the community and speaks in a discursive space that is available and prepared for it. So scrutinizing Rushton’s “scientific” knowledge claims demands an examination of the moral and intellectual health of a community that is infected by racial and sexual injustices at every level. Rushton may have had reasons to believe that his results would be welcome.

Equally central, then, to a feminist epistemological program of taking subjectivity into account are case-by-case analyses of the political and other structural circumstances that generate projects and lines of inquiry. Feminist critique—with critiques that center on other marginalizing structures—needs to act as an “experimental control” in epistemic practice so that every inquiry, assumption, and discovery is analyzed for its place in and implications for the prevailing sex/gender system, in its intersections with the systems that sustain racism, homophobia, and ethnocentrism.<sup>39</sup> The burden of proof falls upon inquirers who claim neutrality. In all “objective” inquiry, the positions and power relations of *gendered* and otherwise located subjectivity have to be submitted to piece-by-piece scrutiny that will vary according to the field of research. The task is intricate, because the subjectivity of the inquirer is always also implicated and has to be taken into account. Hence, the inquiry is at once critical and self-critical. But this is no monologic, self-sufficient enterprise. Conclusions are reached and immoderate subjective omissions and commissions become visible in dialogic processes among inquirers and—in social science—between inquirers and the subjects of their research.

It emerges from this analysis that although the ideal objectivity of the universal knower is neither possible nor desirable, a realistic commitment to achieving empirical adequacy that engages in situated analyses of the subjectivities of both the knower and (where appropriate) the known is both desirable and possible. This exercise in supposing that the places in the *S-knows-that-p* formula could be filled by asserting “Rushton knows that blacks are inferior” shows that sim-

ple, propositional knowledge claims that represent inquirers as purely neutral observers of unignorable data cannot be permitted to count as paradigms of knowledge. Objectivity *requires* taking subjectivity into account.

#### 4. Knowing Subjects

Women—and other “others”—are *produced* as “objects of knowledge-as-control” by S-knows-that-*p* epistemologies and the philosophies of science/social science that they inform. When subjects become objects of knowledge, reliance upon simple observational paradigms has the consequence of assimilating those subjects to physical objects, reducing their subjectivity and specificity to interchangeable, observable features.

S-knows-that-*p* epistemologies take for granted that observational knowledge of everyday objects forms the basis from which all knowledge is constructed. *Prima facie*, this is a persuasive belief. Observations of childhood development (at least in materially advantaged, “normal” western families) suggest that simple observational truths are the first bits of knowledge an infant acquires in learning to recognize and manipulate everyday objects. Infants seem to be objective in this early knowing: they *come across* objects and learn to deal with them, apparently without preconceptions and without altering the properties of the objects. Objects ordinarily remain independent of a child’s knowing; these same objects—cups, spoons, chairs, trees, and flowers—seem to be the simplest and surest things that every adult knows. They are *there* to be known and are reasonably constant through change. In the search for examples of what standard knowers know “for sure,” such knowledge claims are obvious candidates. So it is not surprising that they have counted as paradigmatic.

I want to suggest, however, that when one considers how basic and crucial *knowing other people* is in the production of human subjectivity, paradigms and objectivity take on a different aspect.<sup>40</sup> If epistemologists require paradigms or other less formal exemplary knowledge claims, knowing other people in personal relationships is at least as worthy a contender as knowledge of everyday objects. Developmentally, learning what she or he can expect of other people is one of the first and most essential kinds of knowledge a child acquires. She or he learns to respond *cognitively* to the people who are a vital part of and provide access to her or his environment *long before* she or he can recognize the simplest physical objects. Other people are the point of origin of a child’s entry into the material/physical environment both in providing or inhibiting access to that environment—

in *making* it—and in fostering entry into the language with which children learn to name. Their initial induction into language generates a framework of presuppositions that prompts children, from the earliest stages, to construct their environments variously, according to the quality of their affective, intersubjective locations. Evidence about the effects of sensory and emotional deprivation on the development of cognitive agency shows that a child's capacity to make sense of the world (and the manner of engaging in that process) is intricately linked with her or his caregivers' construction of the environment.

Traditionally, theories of knowledge tend to be derived from the experiences of uniformly educated, articulate, epistemically "positioned" adults who introspect retrospectively to review what they must once have known most simply and clearly. Locke's *tabula rasa* is one model; Descartes's radical doubt is another. Yet this introspective process consistently bypasses the epistemic significance of early experiences with other people, with whom the relations of these philosophers must surely have been different from their relations to objects in their environment. As Seyla Benhabib wryly notes, it is a strange world from which this picture of knowledge is derived: a world in which "individuals are grown up before they have been born; in which boys are men before they have been children; a world where neither mother, nor sister, nor wife exist."<sup>41</sup> Whatever the historical variations in childraising practices, evidence implicit in (similarly evolving) theories of knowledge points to a noteworthy constancy. In separated adulthood, the knowledge that enables a knower to give or withhold trust as a child—and hence to survive—is passed over as unworthy of philosophical notice. It is tempting to conclude that theorists of knowledge must either be childless or so disengaged from the rearing of children as to have minimal developmental awareness. Participators in childraising could not easily ignore the primacy of knowing and being known by other people in cognitive development, nor could they denigrate the role such knowledge plays throughout an epistemic history. In view of the fact that disengagement throughout a changing history and across a range of class and racial boundaries has been possible primarily for *men* in western societies, this aspect of the androcentricity of objectivist epistemologies is not surprising.

Knowing other people in relationships requires constant learning: how to be with them, respond to them, and act toward them. In this respect it contrasts markedly with the immediacy of common, sense-perceptual paradigms. In fact, if exemplary "bits" of knowledge were drawn from situations where people have to *learn* to know, rather than from taken-for-granted adult expectations, the complexity of

knowing even the simplest things would not so readily be masked, and the fact that knowledge is *qualitatively* variable would be more readily apparent. Consider the strangeness of traveling in a country and culture where one has to suspend judgment about how to identify and deal with things like simple artifacts, flora and fauna, customs and cultural phenomena. These experiences remind epistemologists of how tentative the process of making everyday observations and judgments really is.

Knowledge of other people develops, operates, and is open to interpretation at various levels; it admits of degree in ways that knowing that a book is red does not. Such knowledge is not primarily propositional; I can know that Alice is clever and not *know* her very well at all in a “thicker” sense. Knowing “facts” (the standard S-knows-that-*p* substitutions) is part of such knowing, but the knowledge involved is more than and different from its propositional parts. Nor is this knowledge reducible to the simple observational knowledge of the traditional paradigms. The fact that it is acquired differently, interactively, and relationally differentiates it both as process and as product from standard propositional knowledge. Yet its status as knowledge disturbs the smooth surface of the paradigm’s structure. The contrast between its multidimensional, multiperspectival character and the stark simplicity of standard paradigms requires philosophers to reexamine the practice of granting exemplary status to those paradigms. “Knowing how” and “knowing that” are implicated, but they do not begin to tell the whole story.

The contention that people are *knowable* may sit uneasily with psychoanalytic decenterings of conscious subjectivity and postmodern critiques of the unified subject of Enlightenment humanism. But I think this is a tension that has to be acknowledged and maintained. In practice, people often know one another well enough to make good decisions about who can be counted on and who cannot, who makes a good ally and who does not. Yet precisely because of the fluctuations and contradictions of subjectivity, this process is ongoing, communicative, and interpretive. It is never fixed or complete; any fixity claimed for “the self” will be a fixity in flux. Nonetheless, I argue that something must be fixed to “contain” the flux even enough to permit references to and ongoing relationships with “this person.” Knowing people always occurs within the terms of this tension.

Problems about determining criteria for justifying claims to know another person—the utter availability of necessary and sufficient conditions, the complete inadequacy of S-knows-that-*p* paradigms—must account for philosophical reluctance to count this as knowledge that bears epistemological investigation. Yet my suggestion that such

knowledge is a model for a wide range of knowledge and is not merely inchoate and unmanageable recommends itself the more strongly in view of the extent to which cognitive practice is grounded upon such knowledge. I am thinking not just of everyday interactions with other people, but of the specialized knowledge—such as Rushton's—that claims institutional authority. Educational theory and practice, psychology, sociology, anthropology, law, some aspects of medicine and philosophy, politics, history, and economics all depend for their credibility upon knowing people. Hence it is all the more curious that observation-based knowledge of material objects and the methodology of the physical sciences hold such relatively unchallenged sway as the paradigm—and paragon—of intellectual achievement. The results of according continued veneration to observational paradigms are evident in the reductive approaches of behaviorist psychology. They are apparent in parochial impositions of meaning upon the practices of other cultures which is still characteristic of some areas of anthropology, and in the simple translation of present-day descriptions into past cultural contexts that characterizes some historical and archaeological practice. But feminist, hermeneutic, and postmodern critiques are slowly succeeding in requiring objectivist social scientists to reexamine their presuppositions and practices. In fact, it is methodological disputes within the social sciences—and the consequent unsettling of positivistic hegemony—that, according to Susan Hekman, have set the stage for the development of a productive, postmodern approach to epistemology for contemporary feminists.<sup>42</sup>

I am not proposing that knowing other people should become *the* new epistemological paradigm but rather that it has a strong claim to exemplary status in the epistemologies that feminist and other case-by-case analyses will produce. I am proposing further that if epistemologists require a model drawn from “scientific” inquiry, then a reconstructed, interpretive social science, liberated from positivistic constraints, will be a better resource than natural science—or physics—for knowledge as such.

Social science of whatever stripe is constrained by the factual-informational details that constrain all attempts to know people; physical, historical, biographical, environmental, social-structural, and other *facts* constitute its “objects” of study. These facts are available for objective analysis, yet they also lend themselves to varying degrees of interpretation and ideological construction. Social science often focuses upon meanings, upon purposeful and learned behavior, preferences, and intentions, with the aim of explaining what Sandra Harding calls “the origins, forms and prevalence of apparently irrational but culturewide patterns of human belief and action.”<sup>43</sup> Such phe-

nomena cannot be measured and quantified to provide results comparable to the results of a controlled physics experiment. Yet this constraint neither precludes social-scientific objectivity nor reclaims the methodology of physics as paradigmatic. Harding is right to maintain that “the totally reasonable exclusion of intentional and learned behavior from the subject matter of physics is a good reason to regard enquiry in physics as atypical of scientific knowledge-seeking.”<sup>44</sup> I am arguing that it is equally atypical of everyday knowledge-seeking. Interpretations of intentional and learned behavior are indeed subjectively variable; taking subjectivity into account does not *entail* abandoning objectivity. Rabinow and Sullivan put the point well: “Discourse being about something, one must understand the world in order to interpret it . . . Human action and interpretation are subject to many *but not infinitely many* constructions.”<sup>45</sup> When theorists acknowledge the oddity and peculiar insularity of physics-derived paradigms with their suppression of subjectivity, it is clear that their application to areas of inquiry in which subjectivities are the “objects” of study has to be contested.

The problem about claiming an exemplary role for personal-knowledge paradigms is to show how the kinds of knowledge integral to human relationships could work in situations where the object of knowledge is inanimate. The case has to be made by analogy and not by requiring knowers to convert from being objective observers to being friends with tables and chairs, chemicals, particles, cells, planets, rocks, trees, and insects. There are obvious points of disanalogy, not the least of which derives from the fact that chairs and plants and rocks cannot reciprocate in the ways that people can. There will be none of the mutual recognition and affirmation between observer and observed that there is between people. But Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle” suggests that not even physical objects are inert in and untouched by observational processes. If there is any validity to this suggestion, then it is not so easy to draw rigid lines separating responsive from unresponsive objects. Taking knowledge of other people as a model does not, *per impossibile*, require scientists to begin talking to their rocks and cells or to admit that the process is not working when the rocks fail to respond. It calls, rather, for a recognition that rocks, cells, and scientists are located in multiple relations to one another, all of which are open to analysis and critique. Singling out and privileging the asymmetrical observer–observed relation is but one possibility.

A more stubborn point of disanalogy may appear to attach to the belief that it is *possible* to know physical objects, whereas it is never possible really to know other people. But this apparent disanalogy

appears to prevent the analogy from going through because of another feature of the core presupposition of empiricist-objectivist theories.

According to the standard paradigms, empirical observation can produce knowledge that is universally and uncontroversibly established for all time. Whether or not such perfect knowledge has ever been achieved is an open question; a belief in its possibility guides and regulates mainstream epistemologies and theories of science. The presumption that knowing other people is difficult to the point of near impossibility is declared by contrast with those paradigms, whose realization may only be possible in contrived, attenuated instances. By *that* standard, knowing other people, however well, does look like as pale an approximation as it was for Descartes, by contrast with the "clear and distinct ideas" he was otherwise able to achieve. The question, again, is why *that* standard, which governs so minuscule a part of the epistemic lives even of members of the privileged professional class and gender, should regulate legitimate uses of the label "knowledge."

If the empiricist-positivist standard were displaced by more complex analyses in which knowledge claims are provisional and approximate, knowing other people might not seem to be so different. Current upheavals in epistemology point to the productivity of hermeneutic, interpretive, literary methods of analysis and explanation in the social sciences. The skills these approaches require are not so different from the interpretive skills that human relationships require. The extent of their usefulness for the natural sciences is not yet clear. But one point of the challenge is to argue that natural-scientific enquiry has to be located differently, where it can be recognized as a sociopolitical-historical activity in which knowing who the scientist is can reveal important epistemological dimensions of her or his inquiry.

A recognition of the space that needs to be kept open for reinterpretation of the contextualizing that adequate knowledge requires becomes clearer in the light of the "personal" analogy. Though the analogy is not perfect, it is certainly no more preposterous to argue that people should try to know physical objects in the nuanced way that they know their friends than it is to argue that they should try to know people in the unsubtle way that they often claim to know physical objects.

Drawing upon such an interpretive approach across the epistemic terrain would guard against reductivism and rigidity. Knowing other people occurs in a persistent interplay between opacity and transparency, between attitudes and postures that elude a knower's grasp and patterns that are clear and relatively constant. Hence knowers

are kept on their cognitive toes. In its need to accommodate change and growth, this knowledge contrasts further with traditional paradigms that deal, on the whole, with objects that can be treated as permanent. In knowing other people, a knower's subjectivity is implicated from its earliest developmental stages; in such knowing, her or his subjectivity is produced and reproduced. Analogous reconstructions often occur in the subjectivity of the person(s) she or he knows. Hence such knowledge works from a conception of subject-object relations different from that implicit in simple empirical paradigms. Claims to know a person are open to negotiation between knower and "known," where the "subject" and "object" positions are always, in principle, interchangeable. In the process, it is important to watch for discrepancies between a person's sense of her or his own subjectivity and a would-be knower's conception of how things are for her or him; neither the self-conception nor the knower-conception can claim absolute authority, because the limits of self-consciousness constrain the process as closely as the interiority of mental processes and experiential constructs and their unavailability to observation.

That an agent's subjectivity is so clearly implicated may create the impression that this knowledge is, indeed, purely subjective. But such a conclusion would be unwarranted. There *are* facts that have to be respected: facts that constitute "the person one is" at any historical moment.<sup>48</sup> Only certain stories can accurately be told; others simply cannot. "External" facts are obvious constraints: facts about age, sex, place and date of birth, height, weight, and hair color—the information that appears on a passport. They would count as objective even on a fairly traditional understanding of the term. Other information is reasonably objective as well: facts about marriage or divorce, childbirth, siblings, skills, education, employment, abode, and travel. But the intriguing point about knowing people—and another reason why it is epistemologically instructive—is that even knowing all the *facts* about someone does not count as knowing her as the person she is. No more can knowing all the facts about oneself, past and present, guarantee self-knowledge. Yet none of these problems raise doubts that there is such a creature as the person I am or the person anyone else is now. Nor do they indicate the impossibility of knowing other people. If the limitations of these accumulated factual claims were taken seriously with respect to empirical knowledge more generally, the limitations of an epistemology built from S-knows-that-*p* claims would be more clearly apparent.

That perfect, objective knowledge of other people is not possible gives no support to a contention *either* that "other minds" are radically unknowable *or* that people's claims to know one another never merit



the label “knowledge.” Residual assumptions to the effect that people are opaque to one another may explain why this knowledge has had minimal epistemological attention. Knowledge, as the tradition defines it, is *of* objects; only by assimilating people to objects can one hope to know them. This long-standing assumption is challenged by my claims that knowing other people is an exemplary kind of knowing and that subjectivity has always to be taken into account in making and assessing knowledge claims of any complexity.

### 5. Relativism After All?

The project I am proposing, then, requires a new *geography* of the epistemic terrain: one that is no longer primarily a physical geography, but a population geography that develops qualitative analyses of subjective positions and identities and the sociopolitical structures that produce them. Because differing social positions generate variable constructions of reality and afford different perspectives on the world, the revisionary stages of this project will consist of case-by-case analyses of the knowledge produced in specific social positions. These analyses derive from a recognition that knowers are always *somewhere*—and at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations.<sup>47</sup> It is an interpretive project, alert to the possibility of finding generalities and commonalities within particulars and hence of the explanatory potential that opens up when such commonalities can be delineated. But it is wary of the reductivism that results when commonalities are presupposed or forced. It has no ultimate foundation, but neither does it float free, because it is grounded in experiences and practices, in the efficacy of dialogic negotiation and of action.

All of this having been said, my argument in this essay points to the conclusion that necessary and sufficient conditions for establishing empirical knowledge claims cannot be found, at least where experientially significant knowledge is at issue. Hence it poses the question whether feminist epistemologists must, after all, “come out” as relativists. In view of what I have been arguing, the answer to that question will have to be a qualified “yes.” Yet the relativism that my argument generates is sufficiently nuanced and sophisticated to escape the scorn—and the anxiety—that “relativism, after all” usually occasions. To begin with, it refuses to occupy the negative side of the traditional absolutism/relativism dichotomy. It is at once realist, rational, and significantly objective; hence it is not forced to define itself within or against the oppositions between realism and relativism, rationality and relativism, or objectivism and relativism.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, it

takes as its starting point a recognition that the “positive” sides of these dichotomies have been caricatured to affirm a certainty that was never rightfully theirs.

The opponents of relativism have been so hostile, so thoroughly scornful in their dismissals, that it is no wonder that feminists, well aware of the folk-historical identification of women with the forces of unreason, should resist the very thought that the logic of feminist emancipatory analyses points in that direction.<sup>49</sup> Feminists know, if they know anything at all, that they have to develop the best possible explanations—the “truest” explanations—of how things are if they are to intervene effectively in social structures and institutions. The intransigence of material circumstances constantly reminds them that their world-making possibilities are neither unconstrained nor infinite; they have to be able to produce accurate, transformative analyses of things as they *are*. In fact, many feminists are vehement in their resistance to relativism precisely because they suspect—not without reason—that only the supremely powerful and privileged, the self-proclaimed sons of God, could believe that they can make the world up as they will and practice that supreme tolerance in whose terms all possible constructions of reality are equally worthy. Their fears are persuasive. Yet even at the risk of speaking within the oppositional mode, it is worth thinking seriously about the alternative. For there is no doubt that only the supremely powerful and privileged could believe, in the face of all the evidence to the contrary, that there is only one true view, and it is theirs; that they alone have the resources to establish universal, incontrovertible, and absolute Truth. Donna Haraway aptly notes that: “Relativism is a way of being nowhere and claiming to be everywhere”;<sup>50</sup> but absolutism is a way of being everywhere while pretending to be nowhere—and neither one, in its starkest articulation, will do. For this reason alone, it is clear that the absolutism/relativism dichotomy needs to be displaced because it does not, as a true dichotomy must, use up all of the alternatives.<sup>51</sup>

The position I am advocating is one for which knowledge is always *relative to* (i.e., a perspective *on*, a standpoint *in*) specifiable circumstances. Hence it is constrained by a realist, empiricist commitment according to which getting those circumstances right is vital to effective action. It may appear to be a question-begging position, for it does assume that the circumstances can be known, and it relies heavily upon pragmatic criteria to make good that assumption. It can usually avoid regress, for although the circumstances in question may have to be specified *relative to* other circumstances, prejudgments, and theories, it is never (as with Neurath’s raft) necessary to take away all of the pieces—all of the props—at once. Inquiry grows out of and turns

back to practice, to action; inquirers are always in media res, and the res are both identifiable and constitutive of perspectives and possibilities for action. Practice will show, not once and for all but case by case, whether conclusions are reasonable and workable. Hence the position at once allows for the development of practical projects and for their corrigibility.

This “mitigated relativism” has a skeptical component: a consequence many feminists will resist even more vigorously than they will resist my claim for relativism. Western philosophy is still in thrall to an Enlightenment legacy that equates skepticism with nihilism: the belief that if no absolute foundations—no necessary and sufficient conditions—can be established, then there can be no knowledge.<sup>52</sup> Nothing is any more reasonable or rational than anything else; there is nothing to believe in. This is the skepticism that necessary and sufficient conditions are meant to forestall.

But there are other skepticisms which are resourceful, not defeatist. The ancient skepticisms of Pyrrho and Sextus Empiricus were declarations not of nihilism but of the impossibility of certainty, of the need to withhold definitive judgment. They advocated continual searching in order to prevent error by suspending judgment. They valued a readiness to reconsider and warned against hasty conclusions. These were skepticisms about the possibility of definitive knowledge but not about the existence of a (knowable?) reality. For Pyrrhonists, skepticism was a moral stance that was meant to ensure the inner quietude (*ataraxia*) that was essential to happiness.<sup>53</sup>

My suggestion that feminist epistemologists can find a resource in such skepticisms cannot be pushed to the point of urging that they take on the whole package. There is no question that the quietude of *ataraxia* could be the achievement that feminists are after. Nor could they take on a skepticism that would immobilize them by negating all possibilities for action: a quietism born of a theorized incapacity to choose or take a stand. So the skepticism that flavors the position I am advocating is better characterized as a common-sense, practical skepticism of everyday life than as a technical, philosophers’ skepticism. It resembles the “healthy skepticism” that parents teach their children about media advertising and the skepticism that marks cautiously informed attitudes to politicians’ promises.

Above all, feminists cannot opt for a skepticism that would make it impossible to know that certain practices and institutions are *wrong* and likely to remain so. The political ineffectiveness of universal tolerance no longer needs demonstrating: sexism is only the most obvious example of an undoubted intolerable. (Seyla Benhabib notes that Rorty’s “admirable demand to ‘let a hundred flowers bloom’ is

motivated by a desire to depoliticize philosophy.”<sup>54</sup>) So even the skepticism that I am advocating is problematic in the sense that it has to be carefully measured and articulated if it is not to amount merely to “an apology for the existing order.”<sup>55</sup> Its heuristic, productive dimensions are best captured by Denise Riley’s observation that “an active skepticism about the integrity of the sacred category ‘women’ would be no merely philosophical doubt to be stifled in the name of effective political action in the world. On the contrary, it would be a condition *for* the latter.”<sup>56</sup> It is in “making strange,” loosening the hold of taken-for-granted values, ideals, categories, and theories, that skepticism demonstrates its promise.

Michel Foucault is one of the most articulate late twentieth-century successors of the ancient skeptics. A skeptic in his refusal of dogmatic unities, essences, and labels, Foucault examines changing practices of knowledge rather than taking the standard epistemological route of assuming a unified rationality or science. He eschews totalizing, universalist assumptions in his search for what John Rajchman calls the “invention of specific forms of experience which are taken up and transformed again and again.”<sup>57</sup> His is a skepticism about the certainty and stability of systems of representation. Like the ancient skeptics, Foucault can be cast as a realist. He never doubts that there *are* things, institutions, and practices whose genealogies and archaeologies can be written. His position recommends itself for the freedom that its skeptical component offers. Hence he claims

All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made.<sup>58</sup>

Yet this is by no means an absolute freedom, for Foucault also observes

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper- and pessimistic activism. . . . [T]he ethico-political choice we have to make . . . is to determine which is the main danger.<sup>59</sup>

One of the most urgent tasks that Foucault has left undone is that of showing how we can *know* what is dangerous.

There are many tensions within the strands that my skeptical-relativist recommendations try to weave together. For these I do not apologize. At this critical juncture in the articulation of emancipatory epistemological projects it is impossible to have all of the answers, to

resolve all of the tensions and paradoxes. I have exposed some ways in which S-knows-that-*p* epistemologies are dangerous and have proposed one route toward facing and disarming those dangers: taking subjectivity into account. The solutions that route affords and the further dangers it reveals will indicate the directions that the next stages of this enquiry must take.<sup>60</sup>

## Notes

1. I allude here to the title of Thomas Nagel's book, *A View From Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

2. I owe the phrase *surrogate knower* to Naomi Scheman, which she coined in her paper "Descartes and Gender," presented to the conference "Reason, Gender, and the Moderns," University of Toronto, February 1990. I draw on this idea to make a set of points rather different from these in my "Who Cares? The Poverty of Objectivism for Moral Epistemology," in Alan Megill, ed., *Rethinking Objectivity Annals of Scholarship* 9 (1992).

3. For an account of the central tenets of logical positivism, a representative selection of articles, and an extensive bibliography, see A. J. Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism* (New York: The Free Press, 1959).

4. Karl Popper, *Objective Knowledge* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 108; emphasis in original.

5. Mary Hesse advisedly notes that philosophers of science would now more readily assert than they would have done in the heyday of positivism that facts in both the natural and social sciences are "value-laden." [See Mary Hesse, *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 172–73.] I am claiming, however, that everyday conceptions of scientific authority are still significantly informed by a residual positivistic faith.

6. For classic statements of this aspect of the positivistic program see, for example, Rudolf Carnap, "Psychology in Physical Language"; and Otto Neurath, "Sociology and Physicalism," in Ayer, ed., *Logical Positivism*.

7. I discuss such responsibilities in my *Epistemic Responsibility* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1987).

8. See, for example, Joan Wallach Scott, "Is Gender a Useful Category of Historical Analysis?" in her book *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).

9. Paul Moser, for example, in reviewing my *Epistemic Responsibility*, takes me to task for not announcing “the necessary and sufficient conditions for one’s being epistemically responsible.” He argues that even if, as I claim throughout the book, epistemic responsibility does not lend itself to analysis in those terms, “we could still provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the wide range of typical instances, and then handle the wayward cases independently” [Paul Moser, review of *Epistemic Responsibility*, in *Philosophical Books* 29 (1988): 154–56]. Yet it is precisely their “typicality” that I contest. Moser’s review is a salient example of the tendency of dominant epistemologies to claim as their own even those positions that reject their central premises.

10. See p. 1 of this essay for a formulation of this thesis.

11. These aims are continuous with some of the aims of recent projects to naturalize epistemology by drawing on the resources of cognitive psychology. See especially W. V. Quine, “Epistemology Naturalized,” in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), Hilary Kornblith, ed. *Naturalizing Epistemology*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985); and his paper “The Naturalistic Project in Epistemology: A Progress Report,” presented to the American Philosophical Association, Los Angeles, April 1990; and Alvin I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986). Feminist epistemologists who are developing this line of inquiry are Jane Duran, *Toward a Feminist Epistemology* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991); and Lynn Hankinson Nelson, *Who Knows: From Quine to a Feminist Empiricism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). Feminists who find a resource in this work have to contend with the fact that the cognitive psychology that informs it presupposes a constancy in “human nature,” exemplified in “representative selves” who have commonly been white, male, and middle class. They have also to remember the extent to which appeals to “nature” have oppressed women and other marginal groups.

12. For an extensive bibliography of such critiques up to 1989, see Alison Wylie, Kathleen Okruhlik, Sandra Morton, and Leslie Thielen-Wilson, “Philosophical Feminism: A Bibliographic Guide to Critiques of Science,” *Resources for Feminist Research/Documentation sur la Recherche Feministe* 19, 2 (June 1990): 2–36.

13. For an analysis of the androcentricity—the ‘masculinity’ of these ideals—and their ‘feminine’ exclusions in theories of knowledge see Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); and Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). For discussions of the scientific context, see Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986); and Nancy Tuana, ed., *Feminism and Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

14. Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 48.

15. Ibid., 114.

16. Ibid., 140.

17. Ibid., 54.

18. I have singled out Foley's book because it is such a good example of the issues I am addressing. But he is by no means atypical. Space does not permit a catalogue of similar positions, but Lynn Hankinson Nelson notes that "Quine apparently assumes that at a given time "we" will agree about the question worth asking and the standards by which potential answers are to be judged, so he does not consider social arrangements as epistemological factors" (*Who Knows*, 170). Quine assumes, further, that "in the relevant community . . . we will all . . . see the same thing" (p. 184).

19. Here I am thinking of Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

20. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 373.

21. Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?" in John Rajchman and Cornel West, eds., *Post-Analytic Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 7; emphasis added.

22. Ibid., 11.

23. Ibid., 15.

24. Nancy Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty between Romanticism and Technocracy," in Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 104.

25. Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," 5.

26. I borrow the idea, if not the detail, of the potential of case-by-case analysis from Roger A. Shiner, "From Epistemology to Romance Via Wisdom," in Ilham Dilman, ed., *Philosophy and Life: Essays on John Wisdom* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1984), 291–314.

27. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

28. Rudy Platiel and Stephen Strauss, *The Globe and Mail*, 4 February 1989. I cite the newspaper report because the media produce the public impact that concerns me here. I discuss neither the quality of Rushton's research practice nor the questions his theories and pedagogical practice pose about academic freedom. My concern is with how structures of knowledge, power, and prejudice grant him an epistemic place.

29. Commenting on the psychology of occupational assessment, Wendy Hollway observes: "That psychology is a science and that psychological assessment is therefore objective is a belief which continues to be fostered in

organizations." She further notes: "The legacy of psychology as science is the belief that the individual can be understood through measurement" [Wendy Hollway, "Fitting work: psychological assessment in organizations," in Julian Henriques, Wendy Hollway, Cathy Urwin, Couze Venn, and Valerie Walkerdine, *Changing the Subject: Psychology, social regulation and subjectivity* (London: Methuen, 1984), 35, 55].

30. The phrase is Richard Schmitt's, from "Murderous Objectivity: Reflections on Marxism and the Holocaust," in Roger S. Gottlieb, ed., *Thinking the Unthinkable: Meanings of the Holocaust* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 71. I am grateful to Richard Schmitt for helping me to think about the issues I discuss in this section.

31. Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). In this connection, see also Lynda Birke, *Women, Feminism, and Biology* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1986); and Janet Sayers, *Biological Politics* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1982).

32. The best-known contemporary discussion of utilitarian, controlled sexuality is Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980). In Foucault's analysis, sexuality is utilitarian both in reproducing the population and in cementing the family bond.

33. Julian Henriques, "Social psychology and the politics of racism," in Henriques et al., *Changing the Subject*, 74.

34. Clifford Geertz comments: "It is not . . . the validity of the sciences, real or would-be, that is at issue. What concerns me, and should concern us all, are the axes that, with an increasing determination bordering on the evangelical, are being busily ground with their assistance" ["Anti Anti-Relativism," in Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 20].

35. Philippe Rushton has received funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Guggenheim Foundation in the USA, agencies whose status in the North American intellectual community confers authority and credibility. He has also received funding from the Pioneer Fund, an organization with explicit white supremacist commitments.

36. Naomi Scheman, "Commentary," in the Symposium on Sandra Harding's 'The Method Question' *APA Feminism and Philosophy Newsletter* 88.3 (1989): 42.

37. Helen Longino observes: ". . . How one determines evidential relevance, why one takes some state of affairs as evidence for one hypothesis rather than for another, depends on one's other beliefs, which we can call background beliefs or assumptions" (p. 43). And "When, for instance, background assumptions are shared by all members of a community, they acquire an invisibility that renders them unavailable for criticism" (p. 80). In *Science*



as *Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

38. Here I am borrowing a turn of phrase from Michel Foucault, when he writes in quite a different context: "And it was this network that made possible the individuals we term Hobbes, Berkeley, Hume, or Condillac" [Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1971), 63].

39. I owe this point to the Biology and Gender Study Group, in "The Importance of Feminist Critique for Contemporary Cell Biology," in Nancy Tuana, ed., *Feminism and Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 173.

40. The argument about the primacy of knowing other people is central to the position I develop in my *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991). Portions of this section of this essay are drawn, with modifications, from the book.

41. Seyla Benhabib, "The Generalized and the Concrete Other," in Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell, eds., *Feminism As Critique* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 85.

42. See Susan Hekman, *Gender and Knowledge: Elements of a Postmodern Feminism* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990), especially p. 3. For an introduction to these disputes, see Paul Rabinow & William M. Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

43. Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 47. Harding contends that "a critical and self-reflective social science should be the model for all science, and . . . if there are any special requirements for adequate explanations in physics, they are just that—special" (*Ibid.*, 44).

44. *Ibid.*, 46.

45. Introduction, "The Interpretive Turn," in Rabinow and Sullivan, *Interpretive Social Science*, 13; emphasis added.

46. The phrase is Elizabeth V. Spelman's, in "On Treating Persons as Persons," *Ethics* 88 (1978): 151.

47. Here I borrow a phrase from Susan Bordo, "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Gender-Scepticism," in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 145.

48. I allude here to three now-classic treatments of the relativism question: Anne Seller, "Realism versus Relativism: Toward a Politically Adequate Epistemology," in Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988); Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, eds., *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), and Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983).

49. Sandra Harding resists endorsing relativism even in her discussions of standpoint and postmodern epistemologies. In a recent piece she introduces the neologism "interpretationism" as a solution, noting that "relativism is a consequence, but not always the intent, of interpretationism." (See her "Feminism, Science, and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques," in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 102, n. 5.) By contrast, I am using the value of endorsing a reconstructed relativism, shorn of its enfeebling implications.

50. Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, 3 (Fall 1988).

51. See Nancy Jay, "Gender and Dichotomy," *Feminist Studies* 7 (1981) for a discussion of the exclusiveness of dichotomies.

52. Peter Unger, in *Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), argues that because no knowledge claim can meet the exacting standards of formulation in absolute terms, there is only conjecture, opinion, and fantasy. People are doomed to ignorance and should simply avow their skepticism.

53. In thinking about Pyrrhonian skepticism I am indebted to David R. Hiley, "The Deep Challenge of Pyrrhonian Skepticism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 25, 2 (April 1987): 185–213.

54. Seyla Benhabib, "Epistemologies of Postmodernism: A Rejoinder to Jean-Francois Lyotard," in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, 124.

55. The phrase is Hiley's, p. 213.

55. Denise Riley, "Am I That Name?" *Feminism and the Category of Women in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 113.

57. John Rajchman, *Michel Foucault: The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 3.

58. Rux Martin, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25, 1982," in Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton, eds., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 11.

59. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress." Afterword, in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 231.

60. Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the American Philosophical Association conference at Los Angeles and to the Departments of Philosophy at McMaster University and McGill University. I am grateful to participants in those discussions—especially to Susan Dwyer, Hilary Kornblith, and Doug Odegard—for their comments and to Linda Alcoff and Libby Potter for their valuable editorial suggestions.