

## Philosophy 311: Knowledge and Justification

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### Handout 11: Feminism and Epistemology

Last week we talked about the epistemic significance of negative stereotypes. We saw that the existence of a negative stereotype can have epistemic effects on members of the stereotyped group (Handout 9), and that people who make judgments about members of a group on the basis of a negative stereotype about the group tend to be epistemically irrational (Handout 10).

This week we are going to consider the connection between stereotypes and epistemology itself. In particular we'll be considering how stereotypical ideas about the differences between men and women may (or may not) have affected our conception of knowledge. This has been a major concern of *feminist epistemology*. So today and Wednesday will also constitute an extremely brief introduction to some ideas in feminist epistemology. And before we can do *that*, we need a brief introduction to feminism itself. This handout is not primarily concerned with epistemology, though I will raise some epistemic issues related to feminism towards the end.

### Feminism

The Haslanger, Tuana & O'Connor article you read (henceforth 'HTO') characterize feminism as a pair of beliefs. One is *normative*, the other is *descriptive*.

*Descriptive*. Women tend to be significantly disadvantaged because they are women.  
*Normative*. It is unjust for women to be significantly disadvantaged because they are women.

To understand the descriptive belief we need to examine several issues more deeply.

*What do we mean by 'women'?*

*Sex* is a biological category that distinguishes between males and females (and intersex people). It is based primarily on anatomy, physiology, and reproductive roles. *Gender* is a socio-cultural category that distinguishes between men and women (and possibly additional categories). The concept of gender and its relation to the concept of sex is complicated and contested. The basic idea is that a person's gender is the social role assigned to them on the basis of their (perceived) sex.

Feminism's descriptive claim is that people who are gendered as women tend to be disadvantaged at least in part because of their gender.

*What do we mean by 'disadvantaged'?*

To say that a person is disadvantaged is to make a comparative claim; it's to say that in some respect things are not only bad for him but also worse for him or her than they are for many others. There are many different ways you can be disadvantaged.

Note that the descriptive belief is perfectly compatible with holding that there are some respects in which women are *advantaged* because they are women, and men *disadvantaged* because they are men. Consider, for example, the somewhat common idea that women and children should be rescued from a life-threatening emergency before men. Given that idea, when it comes to disasters, men may be disadvantaged relative to women.

However, the descriptive belief is not just that women are disadvantaged *in some respects* because they are women. That would be compatible with the claim that women are, as a whole, significantly better off than men, which feminists would be unlikely to agree with. Feminists believe that, on the whole, the disadvantages that accrue to women because they are women outweigh whatever advantages accrue to them because they are women.

*What do we mean by saying that women are disadvantaged 'because they are women'?*

Consider two stories:

Society A. Everybody believes that people with green eyes are weaker, lazier, and dumber than non-green-eyed people. This belief is reflected in social systems discriminate against green-eyed people. They are hired only for menial jobs, they are not allowed to continue school past tenth grade, they are forbidden from marrying non-green-eyed people, etc. Members of society A generally endorse these systems of discrimination against the green-eyed.

Society B. For many years people with green eyes were actively discriminated against. But today everybody knows that the old ideas about the differences between green-eyed people and everybody else were mistaken. Still, the long history of discrimination against green-eyed people has resulted in great disparities in wealth, education, and opportunity between communities of green-eyed people and everybody else. Nobody believes that these disparities are justified, but they are difficult to correct.

In both A and B, green-eyed people are disadvantaged because they are green-eyed. But what this means is different in each case. In A, the fact that a person is green-eyed is (taken by) society to justify discriminating against him or her. In B, the fact that a person is green-eyed is part of the best explanation for why he or she is disadvantaged in the ways characteristic of green-eyed people.

HTO note that their construal of the descriptive feminist claim is meant to embrace both senses of 'because'.

### *Intra-feminist disagreements*

What are the disadvantages? What explains them?

What is the relationship between the disadvantages women face *because they are women* with those they face because they are members of other groups?

Why is it unjust? What would be better? What should be done?

## *Feminism and epistemology*

So what does feminism have to do with epistemology? To start, consider three concrete issues that ought to be of equal interest to feminists and to epistemologists:

1. *Implicit bias.* In a recent study by psychologists at Yale, 127 scientists were given resumes of students applying to be lab managers. The resumes were identical in all respects, except that half had a man's name at the top and half had a woman's name at the top. The "men" were consistently rated higher in competence, hireability, and whether the scientist would be willing to mentor the applicant; the starting salary proposed for the "men" was on average over \$4,000 higher than that for the "women".
2. *Stereotype threat.*
3. *Mansplaining.* The sociologist Kieren Healey describes mansplaining as what happens when "a dude tells you, a woman, how to do something you already know how to do, or how you are wrong about something you are actually right about, or misleading or inaccurate 'facts' about something you know a hell of a lot more about than he does."

All suggest that gender influences our beliefs about individuals, our intellectual competence, and our epistemic assessments in subtle and surprising ways.

However, there is a deeper set of questions we can ask. Stage setting for the Jaggar paper:

Do the factors that disadvantage women also affect our epistemological ideas and theories themselves?

Perhaps our epistemic concepts are somehow "gendered" and reflect the women's disadvantage. E.g., emotion is traditionally associated with womanhood, and is also traditionally disvalued in epistemology. But emotion may play an important epistemic role. This suggests a way that our presuppositions about gender distort our epistemological ideas. Jaggar's paper deals with this theme.

Do our epistemological ideas and theories contribute to women's disadvantage?

Suppose that we disvalue the role of emotion in rational belief formation and knowledge. If we also assume that women are more influenced by emotion, this may lead us to disvalue the beliefs of women. This would be a way that our epistemological ideas themselves contribute to women's disadvantage. Jaggar's paper more indirectly deals with this theme.