Feminist Epistemology. About Male, Female and Knowledge

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Abstract

My aim in this paper is to develop a social constructivist approach of feminist epistemology and to assert that speaking about a feminist conception of the world is a meaningful statement. Historically speaking, we have to make a difference between some stages of the feminist movement. The first was the liberation stage, then the equity stage and the last the reflective stage. The feminist epistemology was developed beginning with the second stage and its main topics were related to gender discrimination in scientific community. In the third stage of the feminist movement, the feminist epistemology became a sort of naturalized epistemology. The content of science itself was analized starting from feminist suppositions. But the assertions that the content of scientific theories and the truth of them are determined by gender criteria are too strong and refutable. Therefore, I suppose that the feminist epistemology could be conceived as a social construction. This means that some social factors related with gender differences have an epistemological significance. My thesis is that the epistemic value of these differences is equal with the differences between the so-called qualia. Hence, my approach is based on the supposition that we have to take into account the gender qualia as an explanans of the epistemic differences between male and female.

Keywords: feminist movement, feminist epistemology, social construction of science, naturalized epistemology, gender qualia.

The Feminist Movement: Its Waves and Fashions

Undoubtedly, the feminist movement has to be understood as a bundle of different ideologies with a common core; if it is approached

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historically, as a succession of different ideologies, or in a theoretical sincronicity, as a domain of ideological controversies. Some philosophers make a distinction between some waves of feminism. The first wave was related with the liberation movement, namely, the fight for civil rights, the second was explicitly related with the problem of gender equity (mainly, with that of equality between male and female) and the third has as its aim the rediscovery of femininity in a post-modern cultural context. This third wave contains the premises for overtaking the traditional feminism and is opened to the so called post feminism.

In the terms of the first two waves, the feminist thinking tried to solve the theoretical puzzles which were derived from a social and political state of fact. Therefore, because the women were traditionally excluded from the community of scientific research, the feminist movement advocated women participation in scientific research activities and tried to demolish the traditional gender barriers from within the scientific community.

The standard definition of knowledge as justified true belief used by traditional epistemology is related with a strong doxastic ideal which has an unavoidable normative content. As a necessary result, the concept of objective knowledge was produced according to any proposition which is a candidate to the title of knowledge and has to fulfill two strong conditions: intersubjective communication and intersubjective testability. Objective knowledge is free from context, values and other subjective constraints. All the social, psychological and other subjective factors are not epistemic factors related with the content of knowledge. Hence, knowledge is objective because it is impersonal. Anyway, it would have been impossible to develop a feminist epistemology from the standpoint of traditional epistemology.

But the traditional image of science was challenged and changed. First of all, the history of science and the sociology of science revealed (with the support of some case studies) that great scientific achievements were not the exclusive result of a pure research and that some social factors have an epistemic role. Moreover, some

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2 See Heywood, Drake, 1997; Gillis et al., 2007.
philosophers, from Michael Polanyi to Thomas Kuhn, have highlighted the so-called tacit dimension of science and developed theories about personal knowledge and knowledge incorporated into a scientific paradigm. They also recognized that some philosophical prejudices and presuppositions guide the scientific research of nature. The different research programmes in sociology of science, from what is recognized as the “strong programme”, developed by Barry Bloor and David Barnes, to the actor network theory proposed by Michel Callon and Bruno Latour, have replaced the traditional imagine of science as objective knowledge with a new one which is more opened to the so-called context of discovery.

The feminist movement connected with these changes in epistemology discovered a new area of interest in feminist epistemology. One of the main critical assertions of the feminist philosophers which belong to the first two waves is that women were systematically excluded from the production of knowledge. Male and female are different by their nature and the sexual difference makes a difference in their social roles. Women have to use their vital energy in reproduction and in domestic activities, devoted to their family and children, and not to an effort that is not their own. This image was dominant both in society and in philosophy.

But an accurate investigation in the history of science will offer surprising proofs about the real state of facts. I will only mention Londa Schiebinger’s book about the role of women in the origins of modern science (Schiebinger 1989). She argued that in fact the participation of women in scientific revolution in early modern Europe was encouraged. Aristocratic women dominated the informal discourse of the Renaissance courts. Galileo, for example, had a correspondence with the Grand Duchess Christina in order to assure his position as a scientist. But these promises of Enlightenment were not fulfilled because the image of science as a well done thing has changed, because in the public space a transition was made, from the woman as an ancient personification of science to the man as an efficient and solitary researcher. It was an invisible and deep intellectual shift which produced a sexual difference between men and women and their statute in science as researcher and as a member of scientific community. The scientific research itself, first of all in biology and anatomy, was focused on this biological difference between man and woman.
The effect was that scientific research became an activity which was guided by male managerial criteria of power and domination. Therefore, the neutrality of science became a myth: it was claimed theoretically, as a principle, but in reality science became a male activity, based on male domination (Rose 1983). I have to note that the objection against the so-called *neutrality of science* was raised simultaneously starting from different approaches of science which were based on different conceptual frameworks. The feminist epistemology adds a new point: science is not neutral and impartial, because it expresses a male standpoint.

Consequently, we will take science into account as an activity or as a practice and not science as a theory after it has been detached from the real scientific life of scientists as members of scientific community.

In this case, the main question changes: is science as it is currently made a male centred activity? Is science directed by some gender values, prejudices or presuppositions?

If we take into account the scientific practice and the dominant image of science then it will be easy to identify some gender characteristics of it and to claim that the practice of science is based on some strong male biases.

I will only name some of these characteristics:

- science is a patriarchal activity;
- science is an authoritarian activity;
- science is conceived deterministic;
- science is a neutral activity, detached from social context in which it is embedded;
- the scientific discoveries are used as means which are able to increase the power and the instrumental capacities of mankind against nature;
- the technological applications of science are destructive and oppressive.

It is easy to recognize in the list sketched above some male characteristics. Generally speaking, the dichotomy between male and female is proper to modern thought which is based on such dichotomies, outlined by Descartes.
Paths to Feminist Epistemology

The first stage of the feminist movement in science as a whole was the struggle for the women rights in scientific and academic community, for a better participation to decision and for an equal access to the research funds.

The second stage was more reflexive and led to a theoretical debate, in the attempt to change the framework. The feminist philosophers criticized the fact that science as an institution is based on male dominance and bureaucracy. From a feminist point of view we have to find an alternative to this ideology of dominance and to try to change the mentality of scientific community. In Rose’s terms we have to integrate the hand, the brain and the heart in order to change the order based on the male domination (Rose 1983).

The main topics were those regarding women exclusion from the scientific research and the sexist division of labour in a scientific community. In the meantime, the formal barriers were abolished but the informal ones remain. It is obvious that in schools the girls are not encouraged to have an academic carrier as much as the boys and that the selection mechanisms are at least implicitly favorable to boys. These trends are maintained after school in the academic life (Chamberlain 1988). Women occupied low academic positions and, even if they have the same competences, skills or performances as good as their men colleagues, the rewards mechanism is preferential and discriminatory.

Some feminist philosophers mentioned that the epistemic authority is also discriminatory distributed. The men are more credible and more respected than the women. Paludi and Baner (1983), in a well-known case study proposed for peer review; the same paper with the difference that the signed author was a woman, Joan T. McKay, in some cases, or a man, John T. McKay, in other cases. The male author received better references than the female author.

But can we speak about a relation between the content of science and the gender distribution in the scientific community? Are the

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methods and the aims of science affected by the gender characteristics of the researchers? Shortly speaking, is it correct to think about a gender understanding regarding the nature of knowledge? What is the relation, if there is one, between mind and sex?

The project of a feminist epistemology answered these questions. After Longino, this project has two main aims (Longino 1993).

First, the feminist epistemology needs to develop a feminist critique of science. Principally, it has to reveal the sexist and androcentric character of theoretical research in all sciences. Therefore, the feminist epistemology has to offer a definition of sexism and androcentrism and to explain why a scientific theoretical research and practice is sexist and androcentric. The feminist epistemology has to explain how the sexist and androcentric characteristics influence the theoretical research, the application of scientific results and the evaluation of research.

Second, the feminist epistemology has to defend the feminist scientific practices, to support the liberation of women in science, their equity and their presence as an equal member of scientific community. Moreover, the feminist epistemology has to argue how these moral and political projects regarding the equal presence of women in research communities will assure the success of research and will produce more knowledge according with the epistemic criteria of theoretical and empirical adequacy.

Some feminists considered that the sexual discrimination not only has some consequences on the scientific community as a social group, but also on the structure, form, content and growth of scientific knowledge. One of the best documented cases is that of Barbara McClintock (Keller 1983). She made a revolutionary discovery, the so-called genetic transposition, but in spite of the importance of this discovery, it was only recognized after thirty years. She did not have a strong academic position in the scientific community or the possibility to diffuse her discovery on the official channels inside the community and when she tried to communicate the results she was met with disbelief.

One skeptic may argue that many male researchers were also neglected for a long time in the history of science. But if we leave aside this kind of objection, another will be more important: these cases proved that gender discrimination slows the growth of knowledge, but
not that this kind of discrimination affects the content of knowledge or changes the direction of knowledge progress. Therefore, it is possible to argue, that feminist epistemology recognizes the neutral character of scientific ideas, theories, discoveries and inventions, and has the role to try to prevent the anomalies which are produced through gender discrimination. If we want to improve the science and to make good science, to grow the rate of discoveries and to accelerate the progress, then all we have to do is to change the scientific community in its traditional structure which is an androcentric one. This means that feminist epistemology does not try to replace the old androcentric prejudices with some feminist one, but to assure a research framework which has the capacity to use all minds, talents and energies without any discrimination. As a result, the scientific community is enlarged.

**Social Constructivism and Beyond It**

But the feminist epistemology means so much more. If we admit that science is a social construction then we have to ask if this construction is affected by gender dichotomies.

If science is a social construction then it is not free from the social context. This means that science is guided by some values. But how can we argue that science is usually guided by some male values? And what do we have to do? Is it really possible to replace the male values with the female values? And if it is possible to do this, then is this a better solution?

If society is androcentric in its nature and structure, then a feminist science will be possible if and only if we radically change the society. This means that the project of a feminist science becomes related with a revolutionary project regarding the transformation of society.

The main question for this approach is one regarding the causal relation, if there is one, between the content of a theory and gender researcher. If the answer is yes, this means that the gender researcher has some consequences to what is accepted as knowledge. In this case, the epistemological neutrality becomes a wrong attitude. On the contrary, we have to take into account gender diversity and to assure gender equilibrium in a research community so that the male and female
join together their different beliefs in a final consensual belief which is a mixture of those previous beliefs that are gender loaded. But is it possible to do this in a research community? And the so-called gender loaded beliefs are really acceptable?

Anyway, it is obvious that feminist epistemology in this sense goes further than a simple social reform of research community so that it assures the access of women to high positions and funds.

Let us suppose that at least in social sciences gender researcher has some consequences on the content of knowledge which is obtained through research. Carolyn Sherif (1987) claimed that the ways to pursue knowledge are sources of bias that can influence the content of knowledge. For example, in a research based on a questionnaire which is directly used by operators, a kind of research which is currently used in psychology, sociology and anthropology, we can notice that the subject interviewed gave different answers according to the gender researcher. The differences appear from both sides: the answers will be different if the researcher is a male or a woman and also if the subject is a male or a woman, so that we will have so many possibilities as in math permutations of two taken by two. The ways in which a question is asked or the ways in which an answer is interpreted will influence the assertions with a cognitive content. But to conceive science in such a manner is too dangerous because it looks like a slippery path: the introduction of other similar criteria – for example, age – will be thus justified.

The main question is if we are right to assert that there is a causal relation between the sex researcher and the way in which the object of research is approached. If the road to knowledge goes through the researcher subjectivity, then the gender differences have to influence the results. Could knowledge really be this piece of information that results following this subjective way? On the contrary, traditionally speaking, we are tempted to say that it is not. This kind of candidate to the title of knowledge will be rejected if we consider the standard definition of knowledge.

Let us consider an area of medicine which could be very subjective, the domain of gynecology. Can we speak about a traditional misogynist gynecology and about the new development of this domain after the acceptance of women as doctors? If we want to be on the side of
feminist epistemology we will say that only women can understand some biological facts because only they have the possibility to get pregnant and to give birth to a baby. This means that only women’s experiences have the epistemic statute of personal knowledge in Michael Polanyi’s sense (1958). Therefore, if we have here a form or a case of tacit knowledge then we are able to claim that this tacit knowledge influences the practice in the medical domain of gynecology and that at least the practice in gynecology has developed as a consequence of women’s experiences. Moreover, if we agree that in our bodies and brains a somatic tacit knowledge is embodied, then we can assert that the somatic differences between men and women have a causal impact on the content of cognitive statements which are made by a man and a woman. The epistemological question is one about the nature of this epistemic difference between man and woman. Here is where my hypothesis about gender qualia begins. I will come back to it at the end of this paper.

We will now investigate the idea of a feminist conception of the world as a social construction. Some philosophers suggested that a feminist conception of the world is first focused on a holistic approach, second on interactions and on relational aspects, and finally on complexity. Women’s thought is more intuitive and more oriented to the context than men’s thought. All these features are derived from the women temperamental characteristics, form their sensibility and emotions. But is it correct to speak about different ways or styles of knowledge starting from gender differences between male and female? Can we speak about a different kind of science, a male science and a female science? Moreover, can we speak about two different methodologies and two different ontologies? Is female science a better one?

I think that it is obvious for us to not be able to assess that a female science will have different criteria for validation and truth. All we can suggest would be that a female science will be made in another way and will be better in this sense, as an activity and practice.

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4 The hypothesis was stated by Collins, 2010.
It is also very risky to answer positively to the questions asked above because we do not have any favourable evidence except the one related to the psychological level of gender differences. Consequently, the reasonable attitude is to refuse to talk about different ways of knowledge or about different methodologies and ontologies which are based on gender differences.

Elisabeth Anderson (1995) proposes treating the feminist epistemology as a domain of naturalized epistemology. The area of research will cover the relations and influences between gender views and norms, gender interests and experiences, on the one hand, and the production of knowledge, on the other hand. Anderson asserts that this kind of research will avoid the doubtful assumptions regarding the female cognitive capacities and an internal criticism will be provided. The commitment for a modest empiricism and a reasonable research will be preserved. Therefore, as a naturalized epistemology, the feminist epistemology, is not a radical rupture with the traditional epistemological criteria of good empirical science.

In Anderson’s view, the feminist epistemology has the task to reveal the uses of gender symbolism and to prevent the confusion between this symbolism and the characteristics of a woman researcher. The male/female dichotomy is related with other well-known dichotomies like those between mind and body, reason and emotion, nature and culture and so on. All of them have an important cognitive role in social imagery because they are the elements of the deep structure in which the ordinary facts are placed. Hence, the feminist epistemology has to reveal the way in which the sexist social imagery influences the vision of the world and the knowledge of it.

Generally speaking, gender symbolism is implicitly used in scientific practice whenever we recognize scientific hierarchies in different domains or we recognize the authority in one domain or another. At the most general level the dichotomy male/female is related with the distinction between theoretical knowledge and personal

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5 I needed to make this observation, because, from the traditional standpoint a feminist approach is associated with an antiempiricist attitude and irrationalism.
knowledge. The theoretical knowledge, which is construed according to the male pattern, is impersonal, objective and reasonable, while the personal knowledge is structured after a female pattern, is subjective and emotional. The two types of knowledge are considered hierarchically according to the gender hierarchical prejudices: the theoretical knowledge is superior to all the other kinds of knowledge and the owners of theoretical knowledge have the right to despise those who are engaged in other cognitive activities.

We find the same sexist prejudices in the debate about the methodological differences between natural sciences and social sciences. Natural sciences are conceived after the male pattern as strong or hard sciences with a male character, while the social sciences are described as soft sciences with a lot of weaknesses. Mathematics is a male activity par excellence and, for this reason, Physics uses a mathematical language and is focused on quantitative characteristics of the world. Social sciences offer results which are qualitative and for this reason they are interpretable in different contexts according to the values which are accepted. Similarly, in philosophy we make a difference between philosophy of language and philosophy of mind, on the one hand, which are conceived as hard domains of philosophy, and political philosophy and philosophy of culture, on the other hand, which are considered as soft domains, opened to interpretation. It is obvious that what we have here is a cognitive distortion which is produced by the sexist prejudices.

But is the cognitive content of science affected by the gender symbolism? Evelyn Fox Keller (1992) published a book in which she tried to offer a strong argument for the thesis that the evolutionary theory is full contaminated by the sexist prejudices. Darwin used in his theory a conflictual model of evolution even if in those cases the cooperation was prevalent. He centered his theory on the fight for survival between individuals, starting from the idea that every individual is egoist, and also on species, based on the thesis that species have the interest to protect their own biological niche. He did not take into account that inside the individual, taken as a unity, the parts are a cooperation of relation.

The objection to this thesis is that even if Keller is right and Darwin thought the evolution and modeled it according to some sexist
prejudices, using the gender symbolism, this does not mean that the theory is false. And really, Darwin’s theory is probably supported by the empirical data much better than many other theories.

Therefore, I think that we have to make a distinction between two different problems: the first is that gender symbolism is used in the social contruction of science, and the second is that the uses of gender symbolism cause some cognitive distortions and that because of this intrusion the result is a false theory. I accept the first thesis and I want to revise the second: really, the gender symbolism may produce some cognitive distortions, but this happen also in the case of true theories. Accordingly, we cannot claim that there is a causal relation between the uses of gender theory in science and the truth value of scientific theories.

**Conclusion: the Gender qualia Hypothesis**

My hypothesis is that the explanans of epistemological gender differences, if we are justified to take into account such differences, consists in the so-called gender qualia. My idea is that the differences in knowledge which are produced by gender differences are equivalent with the differences between the so-called qualia. This means that gender qualia does not change the truth value of a propositional content, but only that with such a cognitive content are associated to different experiences. In other terms, if we use the old positivist distinction between form and empirical content, gender qualia does not have any influence to the form or to the structure of a sentence with a cognitive significance, but only to the empirical content of it. Consequently, we do not have a male science and a female science, but only different personal experiences which are associated with assertions accepted as knowledge. It is a similar situation in the case of color perception. The experience to perceive something red adds something to the previous theoretical knowledge about red color. I agree that to have the experience of red colour means to know something which is not implicitly contained in the theory of colors. Similarly, to be male and to be female are different experiences which add something to different practices, derived from a scientific theory. For example, if we work with
the distinction between knowing what and knowing how, then we can assert that at the level of knowing how we are able to make a distinction between a male knowing how and a female knowing how. The women have an untheoretical knowledge, which is different from that which is detained by men. For example, a woman has a special kind of knowledge regarding her children and a man cannot have the same one. But this does not mean that the truth value and the scientific criteria of evaluation have to be genderly changed. Finally, I think that my hypothesis has a constructive effect on the feminist epistemology as naturalized epistemology.6

REFERENCES


6 I have in mind the idea of a constructive feminist epistemology as it was expressed by Longino in Longino and Lennon, 1997.


