

35 TAKING SUBJECTIVITY INTO ACCOUNT

Lorraine Code

Lorraine Code (1937–) has been a perennial critic of traditional epistemologies, what she calls “*S-knows-that-p*” epistemologies. *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies assume that a person, *S*, knows some proposition, *p*, just in case *S* satisfies a certain set of conditions. These conditions may include, for example, “*p* is true,” “*S* believes that *p*,” “*S* is justified in believing that *p*,” “*S*’s belief that *p* does not rest on a false belief,” and so forth. Notice that *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies assume that it does not matter who *S* is; that is, *S*’s subjectivity makes no difference in the assessment of *S*’s claims to knowledge. And thus knowledge claims, especially scientific claims, are assumed to be objective and unbiased.

According to Code, however, this is a mistake. In this reading, Code illustrates this thesis by examining psychologist Philippe Rushton and his claim 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.” Code finds Rushton’s research suspect for all sorts of reasons—reasons, however, that would be ignored and overlooked by traditional *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies. Thus we require a more inclusive epistemological method, which Code outlines at the end of her essay.

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Reading Questions

1. How does Code characterize traditional epistemology?
2. In what way does Code's proposed epistemology differ from traditional epistemology? What (new) category plays a prominent role in her epistemology? Why does she include this new category?
3. How does Code demonstrate that it is dangerous to ignore questions about subjectivity in the name of objectivity and value-neutrality?
4. Why does Code find it hard to believe that Rushton's research is objective?
5. How should epistemological investigation be expanded to handle troubling knowledge claims such as Rushton's?
6. How might Rushton's research be seen as symptomatic of the moral health of our society?
7. With what conception of knowledge does Code wish to replace *S-knows-that-p* epistemologies?

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[T]he 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 her or his circumstances and interests in just the same way as she or he would know them. Hence those circumstances and interests are deemed epistemologically irrelevant. Moreover, by virtue of their professed disinterestedness, these ideals erase the possibility of analyzing the interplay between emotion and reason, and obscure connections between knowledge and power. Hence 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 "locations," then there is no knowledge worth analyzing.

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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—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.

Because my engagement in the project is prompted, specifically, 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?" But gender is not an enclosed category, for it is interwoven, always, with such other sociopolitical-historical locations as class, race, and ethnicity, to mention only a few. It is experienced differently, and 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?" Answers to that question must, necessarily, take subjectivity into account.

My thesis, then, is that a "variable construction" hypothesis 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*; 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 this reoriented epistemological project preserves a realist commitment which ensures 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. Hence 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.

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I want to suggest that . . . it is deceptive and dangerous to ignore questions about subjectivity in the name of objectivity and value-neutrality. 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." Presented as "facts" that "science [i.e., an allegedly scientific psychology] has proved . . ." using an objective, statistical methodology, Rushton's findings carry a presumption in favor of their reliability *because* they are products of objective research. 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"; can present himself as a neutral, infinitely replicable vehicle through which data pass *en route* to becoming knowledge. He can claim to have fulfilled his epistemic obligations if, "withdraw[ing] to . . . [his] professional self"; he can argue that he has been "objective"; detached, 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 have urged, is vital to any emancipatory epistemology makes it a mark of competent, responsible inquiry to approach even the most unsavory truth claims seriously, albeit critically. But the requirements are troubling in their implicit appeal to a doxastic involuntarism that becomes an escape hatch from the demands of 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 an inquirer *cannot*, rationally, withhold assent. He has no choice but to believe that *p*, however unpalatable it 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; and 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, with Rushton, to conceive of his "data" in perfect independence from ongoing debates about race, sex, and class.

These difficulties are compounded when Rushton's research is juxtaposed against analogous projects in other places and times. In her book, *Sexual Science*, 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, just at that time, there was a concerted effort 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 conclusions he does. Consider Rushton's contention that, evolutionarily, as the brain increases in size, the genitals shrink; 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, for women, excessive mental activity 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. 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 the appropriate route for a society concerned about its self-image to take: 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." 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.

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 processes 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. 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, cannot 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; that there are no dislocated truths, and that 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, in agreement with Naomi Scheman, that:

Feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science *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. . . .

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.

In seeking to explain what makes Rushton possible, 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 legitimated by the community and speaks in a discursive space that is made available, 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.

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Knowing other people in relationships requires constant learning: how to be with them, respond to them, 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 from simple artifacts, to flora and fauna, to customs and cultural phenomena. These experiences remind epistemologists of how tentative a process 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 “the 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, 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 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.

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Problems about determining criteria for justifying claims to know another person—the utter unavailability 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 observational paradigms continued veneration are evident in the reductive approaches of behaviorist psychology. They are apparent in parochial impositions of meaning upon the practices of other cultures 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 archeological 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.

I am not proposing that knowing other people 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.

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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 of the social-political 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 in 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. It is an interpretive project, alert to the possibility of finding generalities, commonalities within particulars—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, for it is grounded in experiences and practices, in the efficacy of dialogic negotiation and of action.