

The Politics of Epistemology

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on the metaphysical and conceptual structures of reality organization that exist currently in western culture. Taking a feminist perspective, this paper analyzes how some disfavored social groups actively have their identities manipulated and sometimes conceptually erased from the dominant conceptual scheme. Utilizing this analysis, it is concluded that this conceptual scheme perpetuates oppression; therefore, maintained loyalty to it is incompatible with the belief that all people should be treated as full persons.



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In “To Be and Be Seen,” an excerpt from the book *The Politics of Reality*, Marilyn Frye analyzes the metaphysics of the dominant conceptual scheme in order to show that some people, for Frye the example is lesbians, are erased from the structure.¹ In what follows, I intend to explain how this erasure puts disfavored groups in a position relative to the structure where some critiques of the system are available to them more easily than they may be for people in favorable social positions relative to the dominant conceptual scheme.² By describing the oppressive nature of the system, one can start to make sense of people’s experiences, especially those in marginalized or minority groups whose ideas often contradict traditional epistemological thought. I will investigate the connection between who has cognitive authority, what we can or tend to see given our cognitive position and the nature of this new empiricism.

To begin, it is necessary to understand both how a person can be erased from reality and why certain people are in this position while others are not. Lesbians are one of these groups that have their identities erased from the conceptual framework in which society exists because their identification as lesbians defies the common practice of defining women through their relation to men. This is a practice that typically benefits men, who have historically been the bearers and lenders of cognitive authority within the scope of western culture to which both Frye and I are members. Cognitive authority is possessed by a person when their opinions, beliefs and the products of their reasoning are taken as conceptually plausible. For this reason, any objections raised by that person, such as a concern about the organization of the society in which one lives, ought to be acknowledged as real, relevant and local concerns. This becomes important when I attempt to describe what theory of epistemic justification Marilyn Frye assumes in making her claims.

Lesbians, Frye says, are a class that could be called woman-identified-woman,

which is inexpressible using the language of the dominant conceptual scheme—a phallographic conceptual scheme that sees and organizes reality according to “masculine” beliefs and desires.³ “If a conceptual scheme excludes something, the standard vocabulary of those whose scheme it is will not be adequate to the defining of a term which denotes it.”⁴ This gives lesbians a peculiar position as they exist within a space controlled by discourse that claims they do not exist, at least not in terms that would satisfy a lesbian’s idea of her own identity.

According to a contextualist theory of justification, a person is justified in holding a belief when she can satisfy, in the manner appropriate to the issue context, real, relevant, and local doubts posed by other potential believers whose shared goals are assumed to be truth and the avoidance of error.⁵ As described by David B. Annis, contextualism represents an alternative to the two traditional theories of justification—foundationalism and coherentism.⁶ To clarify, Foundationalism’s most central idea is that all beliefs or claims are at least partially justified by a particular sort of basic belief, which has the feature of being able to stop the process of justification. The reason for this stopping point could be that the claim is either unjustified, it justifies itself, it is neither justified nor unjustified, or the claim is justified by some other appropriate criteria that is not actually a claim, such as a observation or experience.⁷ Coherence, on the other hand, is also interested in basic beliefs in the sense that basic beliefs are those that are linked to the justification of numerous other individual beliefs. However, justifying individual beliefs is no longer the main goal; a coherence theory of justification primarily justifies whole sets of beliefs by seeking a maximally coherent belief set with the features of “consistency, connectedness, and comprehensiveness.”⁸

Both of these theories have undergone much scrutiny and many objections that could be considered sexist. For example, an objection to foundationalism could claim that basic statements of the kind described do not exist or would not be capable of doing the job of justifying everything one would want to justify. Similarly, one could object to the coherence theory by claiming that even a maximally coherent set of statements is not adequate for justification because there could potentially be a maximally coherent, yet false, set of beliefs.⁹

Yet, Annis objects most forcefully to both of these theories on the grounds that they do not appropriately include the role of social information. “Perhaps the most neglected component in justification theory is the *actual* social practices and norms of justification of a culture or community of people.”¹⁰ Annis calls for theories of justification to describe how justification is done by people in the world, within epistemic communities, groups of people that share social norms and practices. Including the social information of potential knowers and believers as relevant to the processes of belief formation and justification separates this theory from those that I have previously referred to as part of traditional epistemological thought.

Similarly, Frye’s account of reality can be seen as a critique of traditional empiricism, which

1. Marilyn Frye, “To Be and Be Seen” in *The Politics of Reality: essays in feminist theory* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1983): 152-174.

2. Frye, 152-174.

3. Frye, 152-153.

4. Frye, 154.

5. David B. Annis, “A Contextualist Theory of Justification,” in *Empirical Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology*, ed. Paul K. Moser (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1986): 204-209.

6. Annis, 203-213.

7. Roderick Chisholm, “The Problem of Criterion,” in *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, eds. Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2005): 108.

8. Annis, 203.

9. Annis, 203.

10. Annis, 206-207.

claims that a value-neutral viewpoint, or an “objective” stance from which the subject makes no value judgments of “good” or “bad,” is most appropriate to extract data from sense experience and observation of the world.¹¹ When knowledge is seen as being acquired in the empiricist fashion, it seems incompatible with Frye’s suggestion that what a person can know is reflective of their position in society, relative to the dominant conceptual scheme.

For traditional empiricists, knowledge is a justified, true belief; it exists without regard for the politicization of language and reality, capable of being found by any rational being independent of their social position within reality. It is on these grounds that many who self-identify as empiricists might be at odds with Frye’s depiction of the nature of knowledge if she is understood as claiming that only certain people are capable of “knowing” certain bits of knowledge.

After all, individuals can be found in the world whom do not fit into the cognitive roles that Frye describes. A person could easily claim to know a lesbian who has never expressed any concern about the organization of society; or, a person could know a white male, which is often seen as the most favorable social group available, who speaks voraciously against the structure of the government and other social institutions. However, it does not seem that Frye is making a claim to knowledge about the lives of any specific person other than herself. Frye says, “Any theorist would be a fool to think she could tell another woman exactly how the particularities of that other woman’s life reflect, or to what extent they do not reflect, the patterns the theorist has discerned.”¹² Instead, she is describing a mode of thought prevalent in her society and the mechanisms supported by that society through which data is received, referenced and understood.

Yet, these mechanisms are not set up to be universally beneficial. What Frye describes is a process through which those with political and cognitive authority use these mechanisms to interpret data in a manner that perpetuates the values of those loyal to the conceptual scheme while simultaneously denying cognitive authority to those whose perspectives are not easily co-opted by that same scheme. She describes this act of manipulation of data as “a mode according to which one begins with a firmly held view, composed from fabulous images of oneself, and adopts as one’s project the alteration of the world to bring it into accord with that view.”¹³ In other words, those people within society whose life experiences might bring them to raise concerns about the structure of society itself are told they are not the kind of people who can properly raise those concerns; therefore, cognitive authority is denied and reality as it is presently structured continues functioning.

However, when lesbians are described as being some of the people that can see aspects of this scheme that those countenanced by it cannot, this “can” is not representative of a logical impossibility; what it speaks to is a cognitive and linguistic improbability that those who remain at a given time firmly loyal to the scheme will see the cognitive gaps created by its erasures. The mechanisms of erasure are interwoven in such a way that it is fitting for it to be referred to as a structure, which obscures the view of other possible worlds from those inside. Yet, those who are on the edges and are not fully countenanced by the scheme, lesbians for example, can see it as a finite reality.

Still, it seems problematic to forget that the practicalities of life call for any single person to exist

within many different situations over the course of a lifetime. A person may spend several years in one place, perhaps attending college or working at a particular job, and then they may move to change jobs or start graduate school. In each location, the same person has interactions with friends, coworkers, mentors, and other people one might meet at the gas station, laundry mat, or in line at the grocery store. This makes it logically possible for someone, perhaps even by accident, to catch a glimpse of what someone else has been able to see all along.

So, through development anyone could see the things that lesbians see; however, this would mean a radical cognitive transformation for some. For example, a once loyalist who believed that homosexuality was in some sense unnatural through interaction with someone who self-identifies with that title, may begin to discover a maintained structure within the conceptual scheme that at one time was perceived as not a constructed reality, but rather an objective reality that encompasses all logical possibilities. I imagine this as an intense experience, which most likely forces the individual to undergo a certain degree of conceptual violence, or a forced break with the belief structures and patterns of thought common to the dominant conceptual scheme.¹⁴

“Where there is manipulation there is motivation... the meaning of this erasure and of the totality and conclusiveness of it has to do... with the maintenance of phallographic reality as a whole, and with the situation of women generally *a propos* that reality.”¹⁵ Hence, it seems that enjoying the social inclusion, which accompanies being countenanced by the system, can often enough be adequate incentive for a person to ignore the discrepancies among different groups’ experiences of the world and the concerns that they raise.

Therefore, the reality in which people move and interact with is constructed and reconstructed through conceptual schemes, or mechanisms of reality organization.¹⁶ The situation of women, generally, is to find themselves among currently dominant mechanisms of reality organization, which has been found to be the same ones that perpetuate existing systems of oppression. These systems restrict the autonomy of women, minorities and other marginalized groups. In order to more easily erase the evidence of oppression, one of the mechanisms has been to demean the emotions and the arguments posed by those disfavored groups that may intuitively feel tension in their lives when trying to create an identity within a conceptual reality that disfavors them. As people who are disfavored, whose identities are actively erased, do actually exist, their existence becomes paradoxical due to contradicting treatment. Frye says, “Women’s existence is both absolutely necessary to and irresolvably problematic for the dominant reality, but it is not and cannot be encompassed by or countenanced by that reality. Women’s existence is a background against which phallographic reality is a foreground.”¹⁷

The recognition of the value of intuition and emotional knowledge are present in understanding how lesbians might come to understand their own important vantage point and begin to use it to deconstruct reality. As Frye points out, the inability for the dominant conceptual scheme to countenance lesbians leads one to an understanding of lesbians as unnatural or unreal. ‘Being a lesbian’ is understood as something which could be nobody’s natural configuration but must be a configuration one is twisted into by some sort of force which is in some basic sense external. “‘Being a lesbian’ is understood here as certain people understand ‘being a delinquent’ or ‘being an alcoholic.’”¹⁸ This understanding of the

11. D.W. Hamlyn, “A Priori and A Posteriori,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company & The Free Press): 140-44.

12. Frye, xiii.

13. Frye, 163-164.

14. Frye, 163-164.

15. Frye, 162.

16. Frye, 162.

17. Frye, 167.

18. Frye, 159.

way lesbianism is viewed by the dominant conceptual scheme can shed light on the intuitive tension that exists within the lives of lesbians, which can drive a person in such a position to raise concerns about the paradoxical nature of their existence. Still, the particular intuition and knowledge of disfavored groups are relative to their perception of constructed reality. The same is true of loyalists to the conceptual scheme who might object to what they see as their knowledge being implicitly devalued through this emphasis on what may be seen by disfavored groups. However, the intent here is not to devalue anyone's particular perspective; instead, it is a recognition that some individual experiences are not counted as authentic as others. The recognition of these ignored experiences would not necessarily deny anyone else's unique perspective, even the unique perspectives among those who are mostly countenanced by the system.

The tone of this work may strike some as uncomfortably vague, especially to those who self-identify with a more traditional theory of justification and judge the success of epistemic dialogue according to how well that dialogue argues for that theory and then justifies specific claims according to its guidelines. Alternatively, as Frye states, "the point of the undertaking is not to find and present 'facts' (new or used), but to generate new ways of conceiving and interpreting which illuminate the meanings of things already in some way known and to stimulate the invention of more new ways of thinking."¹⁹

Even though it is not Frye's purpose to clarify her method of justification, features of a contextualist theory of justification underlie Frye's discourse. She speaks nothing of truth, except to describe the actuality of women's experience from the data gathered from women's lives, which again does not claim to apply to any particular woman's life. Still, this inability to create objective universal facts does not remove merit from the conclusions rendered regarding the nature of oppression and the nature of reality. "From the fact that justification is relative to the social practices and norms of a group, it does not follow that they cannot be criticized nor that justification is somehow subjective."²⁰ This is because, as Annis points out, practices and norms that are epistemic in nature share as their goal truth and the avoidance of error, so they can be criticized if they fail to reach these goals.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that people do the work of justifying beliefs in groups by raising questions challenging the truth-value of stated claims.²¹ It is possible to object to a claim in two ways: (1) by saying that the person that made the claim is not in a position to know it; or (2) by saying that the claim is false. So, what it means to say that women have not historically been given cognitive authority is that they have consistently been told they are not the kinds of beings in a position to know anything, effectively removing a loyalist's need to listen to their critiques of the conceptual system. If women are viewed as persons, then the real, relevant and local concerns they raise should not be ignored.

What Frye is ultimately describing is a mode of relating belief and action, which I think is characteristic of phallogocentric reality. She says that this mode is "an insane reversal of the reasonable procedure of adjusting one's views so that they accord with reality as actively discovered."²² In other words, if a person's beliefs seem to contradict the data received from the world and relevant doubts cannot be appropriately relieved by believers, then the proper response in most situations would be to alter the belief, not alter our environments to better reflect the doubted belief.

19. Frye, xi.

20. Annis, 206-207.

21. Annis, 204-207.

22. Frye, 163-164.

However, one can imagine beliefs that have contents that might urge the believer to attempt to alter one's environment. For example, if a person holds a belief regarding the nature of their environment, such as the belief that oppression exists while a world without oppression is more ethically desirable, then they would likely begin to experience doubt about the appropriateness of their environment. To clarify, doubt can be described as "an uneasy and dissatisfied state" arising from jarring phenomena that surprises or disturbs a person's expectations.²³ A state of doubt is one that a person would actively try to free themselves from, which is why the expression of real, relevant and local concerns would follow.

This example can help explain why a person, even one once loyal to the conceptual scheme, after glimpsing the oppressive background necessary to the maintenance of society as it is, may decide to accept the radical transformation of their cognitive persona. Yet, the examples chosen are not arbitrary. Frye charges that these are examples of what the concerns that people, mostly those who belong to disfavored groups, raise in reality and these concerns are currently and actively being ignored. I agree; and I believe it follows that because of this anyone who refuses to be loyal to the dominant conceptual scheme opens up a world of possibilities that can potentially lead to the development of a non-oppressive society. According to Tiles and Tiles in *Idols of the Cave*:

Here we get the full impact of the conception of man as self-creating. Individuals are constrained by the society in which they live to act and think in certain ways; there is a framework of customs, laws, and language which set the bounds of what is possible for them to do or think. To this extent all individuals are 'made' by others, or are a product of their culture. But as participants in society they can deliberately, by discovering new ways to do things which are picked up by others, change aspects of their culture. With these changes come changes in conceptions of what is and what is not humanly possible.²⁴

Still all of this is written with cognitive assumptions that can be critiqued by non-cognitivists, or those who do not believe there is any set of "justified beliefs" because beliefs are not the kind of thing that the notion of justification applies to. If there is no such set, then it is harder to critique people for holding beliefs that we have shown to benefit their positions even if they are harmful to others. That is why Frye's epistemology is irrevocably linked to her ethics, which present oppression as harmful and therefore a wrong that should not be perpetuated. Everything is contingent upon the belief that women are people.

In conclusion, I have articulated how cognitive authority is used as a mechanism to perpetuate the values of certain favored groups in society, and how the very existence of disfavored groups are often ignored in order to more successfully favor those who possess cognitive authority; furthermore, the knowledge that can be gained by the peculiar situation embodied by these disfavored groups, lesbians being the example used in this paper, can be a valuable asset for better understanding the system as it exists and as it tends to be oppressive. This can be helpful in the further process of societal transformation if deemed ethically necessary, which I believe it will. ■

23. Annis, 204-205.

24. Mary Tiles and Jim Tiles, "Idols of the Cave," in *Epistemology: The Big Questions*, ed. Linda Martin Alcoff (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 1998): 433.