

THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

Experience and Practice. Gendered Knowledge as a Challenge to our Epistemological  
Paradigm.

Being a Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor in Philosophy  
in the University of Hull

by  
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July 2000

To my parents, and to the memory of Ana Maria Gongora, my great-grandmother.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank Jonathan Dancy who supervised my thesis for two years in Keele, for his advice, criticisms and encouragement. And for trusting me with the GTA job that allowed me to begin my research.

I am grateful to Kathleen Lennon whom supported my idea of writing a thesis from the beginning, generously supervising it informally for two years, and formally (and patiently) for four years more. I could say a lot more in thanking Kathleen, but it would not be possible in the space available.

I am also indebted to colleges in Keele and Hull who offered comments and suggestions regarding my work. Particularly to Steve Wilkinson at Keele with whom I jointly taught several subjects. He was an excellent partner to work with. And also Paul Gilbert at Hull for being available with helpful advice on academic and professional issues.

Many friends have been there for me when I needed support, or just some fun. Writing this thesis would have been less enjoyable without them. I want to thank Phil Borrill for proof-reading my thesis. I did not always follow his advice, therefore the remaining mistakes are, probably, my fault.

My family, specially my parents and sisters have been a source of encouragement and support, I have to thank them for it.

Finally, I have to admit a debt of gratitude to Steve Burwood. He persuaded me that writing a thesis in a foreign language while doing some teaching was not a crazy idea. I still do not know why I believed him! I would not have been able to write it without his insistence and help, therefore, thank you.

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## INTRODUCTION

Feminist epistemology has two aims: to show the androcentrism present in certain paradigmatic accounts of what counts as good knowledge and to provide us with alternatives. In this thesis I will follow that tradition and I will argue for a new epistemological paradigm that avoids androcentrism and revises our concept of knowledge. I will support a theory grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology, but with influences of feminist empiricism and postmodernism.

In the first chapter of the thesis I will show how the conceptual links between gender, knowledge and reason have excluded women as reliable knowers. I will also show how at a symbolic level, given that the characteristics linked to femininity have been undervalued, we have obtained a distorted picture of what knowledge and reason are. I will use science to illustrate how exclusion on the basis of gender has taken place (both actually and symbolically).

The second chapter will be devoted to analysing the different types of feminist epistemology. In this chapter I will begin to show how feminists argue against the traditional links between masculinity, knowledge, science and reason. In the first place, I will talk about feminist empiricism, to show how feminists have tried to reinterpret concepts such as objectivity, in an attempt to obtain a knowledge that apprehends the world faithfully, and that includes different perspectives within it. Afterwards, I will analyse standpoint feminist epistemology. I will explain the classic position argued for by Harstock and point out its main problems. I will explain how she privileges women as epistemic agents, due to the fact that they occupy a marginal position, but also, due to their development of a political consciousness as feminists. Then, I will describe the way in which postmodernist philosophy has influenced feminist epistemology by making feminists aware of the dangers of essentialism and universalism. Finally, I will review some of the new versions of standpoint epistemology that aim to avoid the main problems that the early theory had to face. To conclude the chapter I will argue that even if feminist epistemologists offer valuable alternatives, there are some questions that remain unsolved. The first question is the use of experience, central to standpoint epistemology and also to



empiricist epistemology. This use of experience is very problematic from a postmodernist point of view. Second, the necessity of postulating the existence of communities that have those experiences in common.

In chapter 3 I analyse carefully Scott's arguments against particular uses of experience, and argue against her criticisms, even if some of her insights help me to postulate a concept of experience that withstands postmodern criticisms. I also argue, in opposition to postmodernism, that it is possible to have communities that acknowledge difference while still accepting that their members share some experiences in common. I rely on the work of some postcolonial feminist philosophers (Stone -Mediatore, Johnson Reagon) to support my arguments. I will review some of the ways in which feminists have used the concept of experience as the bases of feminist knowledge, and conclude that it is possible to use a non-naive concept of experience to ground feminist knowledge. I thereby have the basis to argue for a form of epistemology that is in the tradition of standpoint epistemology, but overcomes some of its difficulties.

In chapter 4, I will argue further for a change of paradigm in epistemology, in which practical knowledge is revalued. I argue for practical knowledge for two reasons: to explain how marginalized knowers can access parts of reality that people in the mainstream cannot access, and to show how our concept of knowledge is too close to propositional knowledge, excluding other types of knowledge from our analysis<sup>1</sup>. Both moves will help us to reinstate women as knowers in their own right, by changing the symbolic relations between knowledge and gender and also by explaining how in certain contexts women can be better knowers than males.

I continue with this project in chapter 5, arguing that accepting practical knowledge as a form of knowledge allows us to develop an epistemology which does not rely exclusively on propositional content. I engage with the work of McDowell, and I underline the importance of non-conceptual content in any epistemological inquiry. My support of practical knowledge, as well of other types of knowledge with a non propositional

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<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I argue against reductionist moves made by diverse authors: Snowdon, Mellor, Alcoff and Dalmiya



content, implies a revision of what counts as justification in epistemology, as well as a revision of the concept of rationality. I analyse the concept of justification in chapter 5, and expand on the arguments in chapter 6 where I also tackle the changes that are necessary in our concept of rationality. I claim that rationality has been defined as the opposite from intuition and feelings (which are in the realm of the feminine) and that this is a misrepresentation of how reason actually works. I support the idea that intuitions are based on a form of non-propositional type of knowledge which remain tacit, but that, being grounded in practices, can be justified within epistemic communities. Intuition has some of the characteristics of rational decision making. The opposition between intuition and reason is challenged. A pattern begins to emerge that makes clear that by changing one of the concepts in the equation (gender-knowledge-reason), we are forced to revise all the other related concepts. The concepts symbolically linked to the feminine begin to take a prominent position in our new paradigm of knowledge. In this chapter, works by Polanyi, and Fricker are used to support my claims. I also analyse critically some aspects of Kuhn's theory.

In chapter 7 I stress that the concept of knowledge that I am supporting is both personal and social. The social aspect of knowledge consists in being justified, articulated and produced socially. The personal aspects of knowledge that I have underlined are those related to the gaining of tacit, practical and experiential knowledge through participation in practices. I claim that our concept of expertise should include these individuals who having acquired their knowledge in a practical and experiential way, have not been traditionally considered to be reliable knowers. In this chapter I also tackle the issue of how to produce more objective knowledge by including the knowledge of subjects marginalized by our epistemological paradigm. Harding's theory on how to produce objective knowledge is analysed in detail. I argue that taking the experiences of marginalized people to ground knowledge will allow us to apprehend the world more fully. I centre my analysis on the role of women as privileged epistemic agents, in doing so I accept that "women" as a collective identity is the site of difference. Understanding across differences is a central issue in the debates regarding the possibility of collective identities, such as "women". It is also central for any epistemology that tries to encompass the views of people belonging to different marginalized epistemic groups. In this chapter I

begin to analyse the difficulties of understanding across difference and suggest some protocols to ease them (work by Lugones, and also by Seller is used to support my arguments). This issue is also relevant for the theory that I support in chapter 8, where I analyse the question of objective knowledge, because given that there is more than one community that has been marginalized, and that the members of communities are not identical, the issue of understanding across differences becomes central.

In chapter 8, the paradigm of knowledge that I have been supporting is clearly delineated. I argue for an epistemology able to account for a plurality of theories about the world, but that does not fall into relativism (theories put forward by Longino and by Haraway are analysed in this chapter, and used to support my views). The choice of theories will be made by taking into account questions such as: how the knowledge has been acquired, who is the knower, how the knowledge has been validated. In certain circumstances knowledge justified by practices can be more valuable than that formally grounded in theories that have been articulated “propositionally”. I claim that more attention should be paid to undervalued epistemic virtues, in addition to and as a way of realising that of empirical adequacy. In the paradigm of knowledge that I support, marginalized knowledges will be pivotal to epistemological progress because marginalized knowers can provide us with aspects of reality that will otherwise remain hidden, while also providing a critical aspect with relation to more dominant forms. Both characteristics allow the development of more objective knowledge.



# CHAPTER 1

## 0. Introduction

Feminist epistemology is a diverse enterprise, but amidst diversity, we can find a common origin for all its forms. Feminist epistemology has its origins in the realisation that science and other areas of knowledge were in a number of senses “masculine”. Feminist epistemologists engaged in critiques of science and knowledge because of their masculinist form while at the same time trying to develop accounts of knowledge that were more congenial to their own political and ethical agendas.

In this first chapter I will explain the ways in which the feminine has been symbolically linked with lesser types of knowledge, minor forms of rationality, and nature. In contrast, masculinity has been linked to theoretical knowledge, full rationality, and with science. Linking these concepts together has implied the positive evaluation of all the concepts that appear related to the masculine, and the devaluation of what it is related to the feminine, as well as having as a consequence the actual exclusion of women from science and from the most valued realms of knowledge. I will argue that it is necessary to change the conceptual links between these concepts if we want more adequate accounts of knowledge, reason, and of gender.

Science is the paradigmatic form of knowledge in our current society. I will analyse the concept of objectivity, most commonly associated with science, a concept which is closely united to the symbolic definition of masculinity. I will argue that this ideal of objectivity is flawed where it is defined both as the opposite to subjectivity and as requiring the independence of data and theories. I will also argue that this ideal of objectivity is neither present in actual science, nor desirable. I will show how science has reflected the values, interests of and prejudices of its creators, and therefore how it has been biased towards masculinist values. I will devote the last section of the chapter to analysing the different senses in which science can be taken to be gendered.



## 1. What is feminist epistemology?

The nature of feminist epistemology still is unknown to many in academia. It is often believed that feminist epistemologists are anti-epistemology, against reason, or that they argue for the existence of different ways of knowing for women. Even if there are examples of these types of theories in the area, feminist philosophers interested in epistemology have addressed the main epistemological questions that have been present in the history of the subject for centuries; and among them it is possible to find some that are closely related to mainstream epistemology, others that revalue suppressed traditions, and finally those that develop new ways of approaching their fields of study.<sup>1</sup> In this first section I will point out some of the characteristics that many of these theories have in common. This is not an easy task because on the one hand, there is a common political interest in the work of all of them, but on the other hand, just as in the work of non-feminist philosophers, theories on feminist epistemology can differ enormously from each other<sup>2</sup>. One of the most influential books in the area has the following statement in its introduction; *“Our title, Feminist Epistemologies, should alert readers that this new research program is internally heterogeneous and irreducible to any uniform set of theses. The feminisms that make up this new problematic are diverse, often having in common only their commitment to unearth the politics of epistemology.”*<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, even if heterogeneity is acknowledged, feminist work in this area has been classified under different categories. One of the earliest classifications was suggested by S. Harding<sup>4</sup> who distinguished between: feminist empiricism, standpoint epistemology and postmodernism. I will make use of these labels, even if many feminist theories could be considered to belong to more than one group. Feminist epistemological theories can also be classified together with the more mainstream epistemological theories: contextualist, coherentists, those who argue for naturalized epistemology, and so forth. There is not a unique methodological approach that unifies feminist epistemology. As S. Haack notices; *“Even apparent agreement, e.g., that feminist epistemology will stress the social aspects*

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<sup>1</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 101.

<sup>2</sup> J. Nelson and L. Hankinson Nelson (1994), p 487.

<sup>3</sup> L. Alcoff and E. Potter (1993), p 3.

<sup>4</sup> S. Harding (1986).



*of knowledge, masks significant disagreement about what this means.*"<sup>5</sup> Given the diversity of theories within the area, it has been argued that it is more appropriate to talk about feminist epistemologies rather than feminist epistemology.<sup>6</sup> Once we have acknowledged the diversity of theories under the general category of feminist epistemologies, I will proceed to signal what these have in common.

All feminist epistemologies have a common origin. Feminist epistemology emerges from the reflection about the theoretical consequences of recognizing the implicatedness of the subject in the production of knowledge. When feminists acknowledged epistemology as an area relevant to feminist analysis, they became aware of the masculinist bias present in our conceptions of knowledge and reason. The main aim of feminist epistemology was to make visible those androcentric biases. Nowadays, feminist epistemology has two main aims; the first is to criticize our current knowledge practices (particularly science); disclosing any traces of sexism,<sup>7</sup> and the second is to provide us with alternative practices or theories .

It has been argued that these aims, are not within the scope of epistemology, because genuine knowledge is value neutral and thus does not reflect the gender of the knower (this argument has been used by opponents of feminist epistemology as well as by those in favor of it.<sup>8</sup>) Science has been taken to be a good illustration of this general point; It has been maintained that science itself cannot be androcentric, merely the scientist producing the theories.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, most feminist epistemologists and a number of other thinkers,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> S. Haack quoted in J. Nelson and L. Hankinson Nelson (1994), p 487.

<sup>6</sup> A common mistake among those who argue against the merits of feminist epistemology or feminist philosophy of science is to take the many different theories available as if they were just a common enterprise. See, for instance, B. R. Gross (1994), p 438. Gross argues against the possibility of having a feminist science, and gives eight possible descriptions of what such science would be like. Many of them get discarded because they do not fit Harding's model.

<sup>7</sup> R. Bleier (1986), p 1, indicates some of the features that feminists have criticized in science: absolutism, authoritarianism, determinist thinking, cause-effect simplifications, androcentrism, ethnocentrism, pretensions to objectivity and neutrality.

<sup>8</sup> R. Bleier (1986).

<sup>9</sup> B. Gross (1994).

<sup>10</sup> K. Lennon and M. Whitford (eds) 1994, p 1 "Work within feminist epistemology therefore shares preoccupations and critical moments with other important strands of recent thought: the writings of Marxists and critical theorists, who for decades have argued that much of contemporary culture reflects bourgeois interests, other scholars who have pointed to the Eurocentrism of contemporary knowledge-production; radical philosophers of science, who have highlighted the role of value judgment in scientific practice; and, importantly for this volume, the theorists of what is now called postmodernism". L.



believe that the production and evaluation of knowledge reflects the values and interests of those who produce it, and that the production of knowledge has a close relation with power. Feminist epistemologists are interested in disclosing the presence of some of these values in science and in epistemology; not only in particular instances (such as individual scientific theories) but also on a more general conceptual level (why certain types of knowledge are not as highly regarded as others, for instance). Disclosing the role of values in the production of knowledge and the relation between knowledge and power has produced a change in our concepts of knowledge and of science. If we accept that knowledge is not value neutral, our traditional concepts of objectivity are in jeopardy. It is one of the main concerns of feminist epistemology to explore the possibilities that such an acceptance leaves open.

Other common concerns in feminist epistemologies are due to the fact that theorists have developed an awareness of the great diversity of voices that are part of their community. If in the early years of feminist epistemology there was a tendency to universalize the experiences of those women who did the theorizing as if they were representative of all women's experiences, nowadays, and due to the general influence of postmodernism and postcolonialism, feminists doing epistemology recognize the importance of diversity. There are, however, some important issues that any theory that attempts to include different voices has to address, and these are tackled by feminist epistemologies: how can different voices be articulated so as to form a coherent view? if obtaining a coherent view implies focusing on the commonalties and forgetting the differences, should we aim for such a view? should we attribute the same value to all perspectives or should we prefer some of them over others? Different feminist epistemologies answer these questions differently, but common to all the answers is a preoccupation with issues related to knowledge and power that derive directly from the existence of difference.

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Hankinson Nelson, (1995a), p 38, has argued that, even if some of the questions that feminist epistemology addresses have been considered irrelevant in traditional epistemology, there are other issues that are central to their "traditional" concerns. For instance, who is the primary bearer of knowledge and what the relationship is between epistemology and other theories, practices and interests. Finally, she also points out that "As the references to Dewey, Rorty, and Quine indicate, this view of epistemology is not uniquely feminist, although feminist analysis which reveal relationships between philosophical positions (including feminist positions) and specific socio-political contexts and interest further the use for it." (1995a), p44.



Finally, there is another characteristic that is present in feminist epistemology in general and that is the question of accountability. Theories are not just accountable to their particular epistemic communities (for instance, scientist to the scientific community), but rather to society as a whole. They consider that the consequences of accepting a theory have to be part of the evaluation of the theory. Epistemology is closely linked with ethical considerations.

Summarizing, there is a great diversity within the types of theories that can be classified as feminist epistemology, therefore it is more correct to talk of feminist epistemologies. All of them have a common origin, which was the acknowledgment of sexist biases in our definition and production of knowledge, and all of them try to offer viable alternatives. Apart from this common origin, feminist epistemologies also share a high degree of awareness of the issues of difference; of the relation between production of knowledge and power; and, finally, a preoccupation with the consequences of the acceptance of theories in relation to the societies that produce them.

## **2. Conceptions of Knowledge and Rationality as gendered.**

This section has been divided in two subsections, in the first one I will deal with the issue of gendered knowledge and in the second one I will explore the relationship between gender and rationality.

### **2.1 Gendered knowledge**

Epistemology is devoted to the definition and study of knowledge. Knowledge is contrasted with opinion, and with true belief. In order to have knowledge, a true belief has to be justified. What counts as justification is a central debate in epistemology. It is believed that a true belief is justified when it is acquired in an appropriate manner. The skeptic argues that it is impossible to justify our beliefs, and the traditional epistemologist tries to escape this conclusion. This is a very sketchy characterization of the main aims of epistemology, but it is enough to understand how in the core of epistemology there is a bias towards the study of a particular type of knowledge: the classic definition of



knowledge as true belief links, irremediably, the fate of knowledge with that of truth as it is expressed propositionally. Those types of knowledge whose content cannot be expressed in a propositional form either have to undergo a reduction that will allow us to analyse them as propositional, or they are excluded from our classical analysis of knowledge. If something cannot be put in a propositional form we cannot determine if it is true or not.

In the following chapters, I will argue for a more inclusive model of what counts as knowledge, so that practical knowledge is neither reduced nor excluded from our epistemologies. I will endow practical knowledge with some of the attributes that have been given to traditional propositional knowledge, such as being justifiable, and I will also argue for changes in our concept of knowledge, such as why truth should be the only virtue of epistemological inquiries

The heading of this section links knowledge with gender; an unlikely coupling for traditional epistemology, grounded as it is on the idea of a disembodied knower, of which Descartes is a champion. Descartes' methodological doubt is the paradigm of the epistemological search for knowledge, and he insists that this is a purely mental process that everybody can undertake. In principle, it does not matter who the knower is, if she follows the dictates of reason, she will reach universal conclusions. Nevertheless, as Elizabeth of Bohemia protested in a letter to Descartes; *"the life I am constrained to lead does not allow me enough free time to acquire a habit of meditation in accordance with your rules. Sometimes the interest of my household, which I must not neglect, sometimes conversations and civilities I cannot eschew, so thoroughly dejects this weak mind with annoyances or boredom that it remains, for a long time afterwards, useless for anything else."*<sup>11</sup>

Continuously, in the history of our western civilization, we have found that women have been excluded from certain practices of knowledge. A clear example of this is provided by the very small number of women that have made scientific discoveries. The exclusion has

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<sup>11</sup> G. Lloyd (1995), p 49 . Princess Elizabeth to Descartes, 10/20 June 1663, Translated by J. Bloom, in Descartes: his Moral Philosophy and Psychology, Harvester Press (1978), p111.



been both practical (women did not enter the public spheres where knowledge was produced) and symbolic. In this section I will concentrate on the fact that there are types of knowledge that have been considered “feminine” and less valuable, where others are privileged and taken to be “masculine”.

The distinction between feminine and masculine types of knowledge fits the general stereotypes of what is considered to be feminine and masculine in general; *“At the most general level, impersonal theoretical knowledge is coded ‘masculine’. Personal knowledge- the kind of knowledge that is inseparable from the knowers’s identity, biography, and emotional experiences- is coded ‘feminine’. Theoretical knowledge is thought to be masculine in part because it lays claims to objectivity, which is thought to be achieved through the rigorous exclusion from thought of feminine subjectivity - of emotions, particularity, interests, and values. These uses of gender symbolism have epistemic import because they structure a hierarchy of prestige and cognitive authority among kinds of knowledge, and hence of knowers, that is homologous with the gender hierarchy.”*<sup>12</sup>

The most immediate implication of this gendered characterization of knowledge is that masculine knowledge is privileged over feminine knowledge. In a later chapter of the thesis, I will argue that it is wrong to embrace theoretical knowledge as paradigmatic and claim that it is superior to more practical or personal types of knowledge because, in actual fact, both are intimately related. A further implication of the distinction between masculine and feminine types of knowledge is that emotions and feelings have been ignored in our analysis of our production of knowledge, which means that we have privileged an ideal that portrays knowledge as detached and impersonal, even if there are many examples that illustrate how in many cases ignoring non-detached and personal knowledge we cannot obtain a good picture of reality.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 63.

<sup>13</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 65-6, illustrates how “detachment” has distorted the studying of certain cognitive processes. For instance, she mentions a study by Hearne (1982), who explained how, unless we take into account the relationship built between animals and their trainers, it is impossible to understand the behaviour of the former. In relation to experimental psychology for the study of humans, she uses the work of L. Sherif (1987) to show how the gender of the researched/researcher, influences the research.



The same tendency that we find in our definition of knowledge is also present in our conception of rationality. We have defined rationality by opposing it to passion, emotions, and feelings. Furthermore, we have followed too closely the Cartesian model that separates the mind and the body, forgetting that we are embodied agents. In these dualist distinctions mind and reason are characterized as masculine, and emotions, feelings, and the body as feminine. This symbolic identification has had practical consequences, and as I have already pointed out, women have been excluded from certain types of knowledge and have been endowed with a different type of rationality.

## **2.2 Gender and rationality.**

In this section I will review the work of some philosophers to show how they have introduced gender differences in order to illustrate the existence of different types of rationality and knowledge, after which I will review the ways in which feminist writers have reacted to the exclusion of the feminine from full reason.

### ***2.2.1 Gendered characterizations of reason in our philosophical tradition.***

In our philosophical history there has not been a homogeneous definition of reason. For instance, the opposition of the rational mind to the body, as it appears in Descartes' philosophy, would have been foreign to the Greeks as a civilization. The radical separation between reason and feeling that we can also find in Descartes' philosophy would have been challenged by Plato. The relation of opposition between passions and reason is opposed by Hume; but, whatever the definition of reason that we have agreed upon, there is always a tendency in philosophers to postulate a cognitive difference for women, and full rationality has always been linked with masculinity.

In the work of many philosophers, there is a metaphorical association between women and lesser types of knowledge, or with different types of rationality. The consequence is that, when their discourses became allegorical, the feminine side of the soul (for instance) would represent irrationality; or when a distinction is drawn between higher and lower types of knowledge, in which one is more rational than the other, the feminine will be



associated with the later, and carry the lower evaluation. Lloyd has researched this area in detail and I will use a few examples taken from her work to illustrate this general point.

Let's take the philosophy of Philo. He distinguishes between reason and sense perception, and claims that proper knowledge consists in focusing on the knowledge provided by our reason instead of on the knowledge obtained through the senses. He describes the relationship between both types of knowledge by comparing them with the relations between the two genders. So as a woman can make men slaves through tempting them with pleasure, in the same way, if we are too fond of sense-perception we will just get knowledge of the mundane through our bodies and will forget to focus on proper knowledge; knowledge which is given by reason and which resides in the mind. The way in which he defines each term of the comparison is by opposing it to the other, the difference between them having an evaluative weight, so one of the terms is considered more valuable than the other. All the less valuable terms are seen as the negation of the more highly regarded ones. So elements are not just different, but also opposite and carry different values. His system establishes many dualities that are still present in our culture<sup>14</sup> (and that were there also before him), and that can be summarized as follow

-Men are associated with: reason, living, entire, free, sound, elder, good, genuine, tends to the divine order, the immutable, the blessed, the active.

-Women are associated with: sense-perception, lifeless, irrational, bad, slave, young, incomplete, diseased, foreign, clings to what is born and perishes, passive.

We should make a distinction between the allegorical relation between women and reason and the "actual" relation between them. Philo considered women to be rational, even if they were used allegorically to represent sense-perception in opposition to reason. Nevertheless, in his texts, he occasionally slips and takes literally the link between women and a lesser type of rationality. He argues that women are actually inferior to males, but that they can overcome their natural inferiority by denying what is feminine in them, so they are potentially as rational as males, just they have a more difficult route towards "proper" reason.

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<sup>14</sup> G. Lloyd (1995), p 25.



After Philo, and with the rising influence of Christianity in philosophy, there was a tendency to attribute full rationality to women. We can see this tendency in the philosophy of Augustine of Hippo whom, even if resisting some of the most misogynistic moves, still attributed a different, inferior, form of rationality to women. The inequality is explained in terms of their physical differences. The relationship is allegorically articulated in the following way: women are subordinated to males (due to their biology) as some forms of practical reasoning are subjected to more abstract ones.<sup>15</sup> So the allegory still reinforces the idea that there is a different, and indeed inferior, rationality for women. Women are considered to be helpmates, not made in the image of God, to represent passion, and are closer to the body than males. Women are rational but less so. The same message is also present in the work of Aquinas, for whom, on the one hand women are rational, but on the other hand, their reason is considered to be defective. The defect in their reason is not directly attributed to their biological differences, but it is allegorically placed in this realm.

There are also philosophers for whom male and female rationality is the same, but who believe that given the way in which society is organized, due to our division of labor based on gender, females are not given a chance to develop their intellects in the same way as males. I have already pointed out that Descartes, one of the advocates for universal rationality, thought that reason was present in all human beings and that all of them could follow his recommended rules for obtaining knowledge. But he acknowledged that women are not given the space in which they may devote their time to do it, so they are actually excluded from science. Descartes privileges a particular type of knowledge above all the others, which is obtained by a method from which women are excluded. So, effectively, women's knowledge is relegated to an inferior position.

There have also been a tendency to exclude women completely from the realm of reason, as we can see in the work Bacon. It has been often remarked that in the use of sexual metaphors by Bacon, to illustrate the domination of the scientific mind over matter, nature is characterized as feminine. According to Lloyd; *"The intellectual virtues involved in being a good Baconian scientist are articulated in terms of the right attitude to the feminine: chastity, respect and restrain (...) The metaphors do not merely express*

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<sup>15</sup> G. Loyd (1995), p 31.



*conceptual points about the relationship between knowledge and its objects. They give a male content to what it is to be a good knower.*"<sup>16</sup> Women are excluded from rationality, given that nature, as matter, is seen as lacking a mind, as a mechanism. If we compare this conception of knowledge with the Platonic version, in which the known (the forms) are abstracted from matter and contemplated by the mind, we can see how the Baconian project implies a transcendence of the feminine. Women are located outside the rational, in the realm of a mechanistic nature.

Up to this point I have argued that the feminine has been symbolically linked to lower types of knowledge, and that their relation to reason is considered to be more precarious than that of males. I have also claimed that the insistence on difference, this time not merely symbolic, was a means to theoretically ground the disequilibrium of power between the sexes. This has been done by "naturalizing" the sources of it, so women have been attributed a lesser rationality due to their closeness to the physical world, their closeness to their bodies, their biology, or their particular ways of life. Does this mean that our concept of rationality is so ingrained with our stereotypes of masculinity that we cannot include women in it?

### **2.2.2 Women and Reason**

Alcoff argues that the feminist critique of reason can be located within a long tradition that begins in the 18th century and includes the works of Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and the Frankfurt School. According to Alcoff, the feminist contribution to this strand of thought would be the addition of the dimension of sexual difference.<sup>17</sup> As I have already explained, Lloyd shows how the feminine has been symbolically excluded from reason in our tradition, so it is within the scope of feminism to try to reconstruct that concept, in order to accommodate women in the realm of rationality. In this section, I will show how, following the traditional view that biological differences are the bases for intellectual differences, some feminists have taken the body to be the source of irrationality in women. While some have argued that women can keep those tendencies on check, and

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<sup>16</sup> G. Lloyd (1995), p 17.

<sup>17</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 63.



therefore attain the same rationality as males, others have claimed that women should be proud of their irrationality and promote it. Some feminists have attributed different types of reason to women, and have argued that we should change our concept of reason to accommodate these. On a different line of thought, other feminists have claimed that women are actually outside reason, that rationality, and philosophy, as the product of reason, are androcentric, and that women cannot and should not enter that realm; but that this does not imply irrationalism. I will analyze all these different positions in relation to this issue.

First I will look at the assumptions underlying the claim that if women are to be rational in a proper (male) sense, then they have to lose their feminine attributes. Grimshaw points at two good examples of it: Wollstonecraft and De Beauvoir.

She explains how Wollstonecraft believed that women have to overcome natural obstacles to share the same degree of rationality as males. She claimed that women can attain “*a character as human beings regardless of the distinction of sex*”.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, rationality in women has to be achieved, it is not a given. She agreed with Rousseau<sup>19</sup> who thought that women are “*degraded by an excess of sensuality*”<sup>20</sup>, a tendency that should be overcome in order to attain rationality. Wollstonecraft disagreed with essentialist explanations and thought that this tendency to sensuality was just the product of the conditions that are prescribed to control female sexuality. According to Wollstonecraft, women have to be reeducated to attain reason. Instead of changing our concept of reason as detached from passions, she prefers to change our “nature” as women (or what was attributed to women as their nature).

Grimshaw also points out that De Beauvoir “*posited an ideal of autonomy and independence for women which can be seen, like Kant’s theory of moral worth, to encapsulate an ideal of masculinity*”<sup>21</sup> as well as thinking that the type of qualities and

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<sup>18</sup> J. Grimshaw (1988), p 25.

<sup>19</sup> The separation between women and rationality or certain types of rationality is not always considered to be negative. Rousseau, for instance, takes women to be moral models, because they are closer to nature than males. Due to this closeness, women are unable to attain complete rationality.

<sup>20</sup> J. Grimshaw (1988), p 24.

<sup>21</sup> J. Grimshaw (1986), p 46.



capacities traditionally associated with the masculine should be emulated by women, she also takes both female activities and biology<sup>22</sup> as an obstacle to obtain transcendence. Both theories maintain the link between reason and certain norms of masculinity, even if they accept that women can access it.

A second type of relation that can be established between women and reason is that of accepting the dichotomy, by saying that women are actually irrational, but considering irrationality as a positive trait: *“feminist theorists such as Daly and Griffin argue that if the ‘man of reason’ is associated not only with rationality but also with domination, the rape of nature and all the attendant evils of the modern world, then women are fortunate not to be a part of it. They argue that the ‘feminine’ values of caring, nurturing, relatedness, and even, in the case of Daly, mystery and spirituality (i.e., irrationality) should be privileged above that of the male. In short, they accept the dichotomy and go on to argue that we should reverse it by privileging what has hitherto been disprivileged: the feminine.”*<sup>23</sup> Effectively, this type of theory accepts that rationality is linked with masculinity and that women benefit from being excluded from it.<sup>24</sup> The problems with this approach are diverse: a) it has conservative implications because it accepts the dichotomy in the existent terms, so the feminine values, even if exalted have fixed connotations and one of them is their inferiority, and b) it entails universalism and essentialism because it implies that there is a feminine nature independent of historical and local variations.<sup>25</sup>

Nussbaum explains how some feminist writers<sup>26</sup> celebrate irrationalism in the form of anti-logic. These writers identify reason with logical thinking and argue against the basic laws

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<sup>22</sup> J. Grimshaw says that “In *The Second Sex* de Beauvoir often seems to see women’s biology as a burden, and despite her recognition that attitudes to things like menstruation and pregnancy are socially formed, she nevertheless often strongly conveys the impression that she sees them as intrinsically making it more difficult for women to achieve human transcendence.” (1986), p 119.

<sup>23</sup> S. Heckman (1990), p 41.

<sup>24</sup> I think that this type of theories have some traits in common with the contemporary tendency to criticise instrumental reason. For a brief account of this tendency in epistemology, see A. Tanesini (1999), p 213-214.

<sup>25</sup> This criticism is developed by J. Grimshaw (1986), p 17.

<sup>26</sup> M. Nussbaum (1994) mentions the work of R. Ginzberg (published by the American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy, vol 88, No.2 March 1989), but refers to a general trend amongst feminist writers.



of logic that they take to represent patriarchal oppression.<sup>27</sup> Nussbaum has criticized these attempts on philosophical grounds, by claiming that they use weak arguments<sup>28</sup>, and also on feminist grounds by arguing that they promote a picture of women that feminism has taken centuries to overturn, and that they do not advance the political goals of feminism (given that reasoned argument is the only way of justifying those goals).<sup>29</sup> Nussbaum is worried that the critique of reason is going to leave feminists unable to support their political and philosophical positions. Nevertheless she accepts that these critiques of reason not just the feminist criticism, are right when they point out that *“the role of human interest and desire in inquiry , and its cooperative or communal character, concerning, as well, the contribution of the emotions to good reasoning about personal and political choice.”*<sup>30</sup> Therefore, even if she favors reason, and the fact that women are as rational as men, she considers that there are some necessary changes to be made in our conception of reason. I will analyze the scope of the changes in more detail later on.

I have reviewed different positions in relation to women and reason: first, those who claim that reason is universal, and that women just have to be educated to attain it; then those who say that women are irrational; and finally those who argue that, even if women are rational and reason is universal, we should introduce changes in our concept of reason to include traits that have been considered ‘feminine’. Now I will introduce another possibility, the claim that men and women have different types of rationality.

There are feminist theorists who believe that women have different rationality not in a metaphorical sense but rather, actually, due to the different ways of life that women have led in most societies. They think that women develop a sensuous rationality and argue that it is desirable to distinguish between different types of rationality. By maintaining the difference, they are able to criticize and enlarge our ideas of what should count as reason, while at the same time they characterize women as rational. C.McMillan’s work exemplifies this type of theory. She argues that our concept of reason is too narrow, and that it does not allow us to distinguish between different types of reasoning; abstract

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<sup>27</sup> M. Nussbaum (1994), p 59.

<sup>28</sup> M. Nussbaum (1994), p 59.

<sup>29</sup> M. Nussbaum (1994), p 59.

<sup>30</sup> M. Nussbaum (1994), p 61.



reasoning and reasoning involved in practical knowledge. The latter type of reasoning is acquired and sanctioned socially and is displayed while engaging in certain practices. She argues that there are other activities, apart from doing science that involve knowledge and rationality, and claims that we should distinguish between the rationality found in scientific theories and the type that is non-formalizable and that involves the learning of traditions. On a similar line, she also argues for the inclusion of feelings in our accounts of ethical reasoning, and by doing this she is underlying the importance of feelings in our cognitive evaluations.<sup>31</sup>

I think that this move is important because when we acknowledge the existence of more than one type of rationality we challenge the oppositional nature between rationality and emotions, between reason and the body. This allows us to change the relations of opposition at the core of our conceptual organization, and the position of women will switch around with the new relations between the terms. I want to underline that these are not the conclusions that McMillan obtains. She maintains the traditional implications of femininity and masculinity, attributing different types of rationality to male and females, that are in accordance with the prototypes that we have analyzed in the previous section. Nevertheless, there are other philosophers that attempt to make the changes that I have indicated at the beginning of the paragraph. Miranda Fricker, whose work will be analyzed in detail in later chapters, has develop arguments to revise our concept of rationality on the grounds that I have indicated above. These changes will allow us to make new links between gender and reason which will change our conceptions of both.

As I have just indicated, I favor a revisionist view of reason; that is, I believe that reason is universal, but that its conceptual links need to be revised so as to include traits that have been excluded because they represented the feminine; traits which, in actual fact, are at the core of our rationality. The belief that we can change the concept of reason through philosophy has been challenged within feminism, by thinkers that have been classified as ‘radical’. In the following paragraphs, I will review the dispute between radicals and reformists that is at the center of the current literature on the issue of feminism and reason.

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<sup>31</sup> A review of McMillan’s views on rationality is given by A.Hardie(1983), and also by J.Grimshaw (1983).



Rosi Braidotti introduced the reformist/radical distinction (which has been followed by Lovibond, Grosz, Alcoff, and Tanesini). The radicals hold that there is a structural connection between reason and male power, and therefore, it is not possible to reform reason, while the reformists aim to change the concept of reason within the traditions of philosophy (even if they suggest changes to what it should be considered philosophical).

Radicals and reformists have adopted different strategies regarding embodiment. Braidotti is concerned with the idea of the self that appears in post-Cartesian philosophy. This takes the self to be transparent to itself, and that implies that human subjectivity and consciousness coincide. She is interested in showing how post-Freud, it is not right to maintain that characterisation of the self, and problematizes any philosophy that is grounded on it. The reformists agree with the radicals in the critique of disembodied reason, but they attribute a different role to the body. The radicals make a psychoanalytic reading of the relationships between the body and the mind, in which the body represents the unconscious and is the basis of desires and the real motivator for our actions, implying that the self has not privileged access to his or her reasons for action. And the reformists, even if they agree that the self is not transparent to itself and need the society to give meaning to its inner life, argue that agency is at the centre of our life, and that we can critically reflect on our reasons for acting.

The consequences of their different approaches towards the body imply differences in relation to philosophy. While radicals believe that women have to go outside of reason to find the symbolic feminine that it is suppressed in our current symbolic system, reformists think that we should use the traditional tools of philosophy such as argument and justification, in order to reform our concept of reason and enlarge it in such a way that will not exclude women or the feminine from reason.

Furthermore, radicals accuse reformists of missing the core of the problems because they do not acknowledge that reason is necessarily masculine, while reformists claim that to say that philosophy is the product of a masculine reason does not allow women to legitimise feminism as a political and epistemic option.



What is the alternative that radicals offer in place of our current use of reason? Lovibond claims that radicals take gender to be the basic structure of domination and reason as the product of the current sexual power structure,<sup>32</sup> which implies that women should be critical with the current ways of theorising and develop ways in which voices that have been silenced can be included. They argue that that theoretical positions should be nomadic and evolving, so as to include the voices of others. Nevertheless, it is important to underline the fact that radical feminists do not renounce theorizing and consider that feminists will be able to represent women and the world more adequately than other current theories even if they think that women will not speak as such unless “*they became the authors of a ‘feminist cogito’.*”<sup>33</sup> Thus, feminist women should contribute to the formation of a ‘feminine symbolic’.

Lovibond criticises the radicals because they do not live up to the standards they suggest are adequate for a feminine thinking. Furthermore, they contradict themselves when they argue for ‘nomadic’ theories while at the same time determine that there are certain forms of theorising that are more adequate for developing feminist agendas. Lovibond points out that Braidotti, for example, “*indulges freely - both in theoretical and in practical contexts - in the kind of value-judgement typical of truth-oriented philosophy.*”<sup>34</sup> According to Lovibond, Braidotti also criticises the work of other authors for their lack of coherence, and for shifting positions, which seems to be at odds with her own advice for theorising. She also uses the language of enlightenment modernism in her support of the rights of women. She has not emancipated from pre-modern conceptions of the subject, and finally, she is committed to the development of feminist political goals but she cannot justify her choice as desirable unless she is able to support it as non-arbitrary.

Despite the apparent differences, Alcoff argues that both projects (radical and conformist) have many things in common. for instance, both argue that our current concept of reason needs to be criticised and transformed.<sup>35</sup> The radicals, as well as the reformists, want to

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<sup>32</sup> S. Lovibond (1994), p 77.

<sup>33</sup> S. Lovibond (1994), p 78.

<sup>34</sup> S. Lovibond (1994), p 81.

<sup>35</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 68.



*“articulate a project that involves epistemic progress (...) a more representative truth, for women.”*<sup>36</sup>

She insists that to criticise rationality does not imply irrationality or arrationality. Reason has many forms, and reasoned argument is just one; *“a part of what is contained in ours or any other philosophical writings.”*<sup>37</sup> She says that we should break the rhetorics/philosophy distinction. Rhetorics, then, with its reliance on emotions and aesthetics over logical criteria, could be a way of getting closer to the truth, instead of a way to deliver a truth that has been already discovered; *“if truth is not separable from the dialogical process within which it emerges, then the rules of philosophical argument and of conversational argument (or persuasion) begin to emerge. For example, we might want to take into account the background of our partner in dialogue in terms of expressing meaning, knowing that the meaning s/he will hear through our words will partly be affected by her or his own horizon of interpretation. And to the extent meaning is connected to truth, this process will not be irrelevant to assessing either the justification or truth-status or our claims.”*<sup>38</sup> The analysis of the use of metaphors in philosophical texts shows us how they are used both to *“invoke unsupported premises that work to offer support for other premises in the text”*<sup>39</sup> and to structure an *“unstructured concept domain.”*<sup>40</sup> Pointing out the metaphors will make manifest such unsupported premises, and changing them will re-map our conceptual systems. Those uses involve a type of rationality that is different from that uniquely concerned with the validity of arguments.

Alcoff sees the above as a project for reconstructing reason that is supported by the work of the radicals, and not far away from the project of the reformists.<sup>41</sup> *“The work of the radical feminists contributes to this project of reformulating reason by teaching us to read differently, to analyse logical relations between propositions alongside the silent invocations of word choice and the implicit arguments advanced by metaphor. They help*

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<sup>36</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 68.

<sup>37</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 69.

<sup>38</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 71.

<sup>39</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 73.

<sup>40</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 73.

<sup>41</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 75.



*us to develop a simultaneous attentiveness to the emotional context of a text alongside its surface pronouncements, without eliminating either from efficacy over meaning.*"<sup>42</sup>

On the same line, of thought, Alessandra Tanesini<sup>43</sup> also suggests that radicals and reformist share the project of criticising reason, even if radicals make an "external" critique and reformists make an "internal" critique.

Still, there is an apparently irreconcilable difference at the heart of both types of feminism: their views on sexual difference. While reformists try to change the use of sexual difference in metaphors to inform reason, the radicals want to find a feminine symbolic, and this bring us back to their differences in the characterisation of the body. While Lloyd favours a view of the body that is close to Spinoza, and assumes that there are mental differences as there are sexual differences, she also claims that the mind is socially constructed and that therefore, the differences are not natural. But Braidotti, *"seems to assume that since bodies are sexually differentiated, this difference must imply that an embodied reason is also sexed."*<sup>44</sup>

Their positions regarding reason present two problems. In the first place, if women cannot think as women in the current symbolic system, then their experiences have to arise from a body essentially conceived. Braidotti herself accepts the essentialism in her position and claims that *"a feminist woman theoretician who is interested in thinking about sexual difference ... today cannot afford not to be an essentialist."*<sup>45</sup> This also implies that women's experiences cannot be expressed within the current linguistic resources. Lovibond argues that we can distinguish between *"discursive forces that do, and those that do not, adequately represent my experience as an embodied female subject"*.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, even if women's experiences are generally silenced, women occasionally succeed in expressing themselves. That is, even within the current masculinist symbolic system, we can talk. And, what it is more, we either *"remain within the dominant*

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<sup>42</sup> L. Alcoff (1995), p 75.

<sup>43</sup> A. Tanesini (1999).

<sup>44</sup> A. Tanesini (1999), p 231.

<sup>45</sup> Quotation in S. Lovibond (1994), p 78

<sup>46</sup> S. Lovibond (1994), p 80.



*symbolic system, or else forfeit the ability to communicate.”*<sup>47</sup>

The second question that arises is not directly related to their view on sexual difference, but rather, to their view on the self, and it is that of agency. If we deny the possibility of being able to take decisions and give reasons for our actions and choices, we seem to be precluding the possibility of politics. Tanesini points out that Braidotti has lately moved towards trying to think of a genderless rationality, by using Haraway’s cyborg as a paradigm of an agent that does not need to be endorsed with a particular type of unconscious tied to its gender. Tanesini claims that even if psychoanalysis is correct and our mental contents are not always transparent to us (that is, they are in need of interpretation), this does not mean that subjects cannot be conceived as agents, because *“their behaviours at least sometimes flows from their intentions.”*<sup>48</sup> She underlines that rationality is a feature that individuals possess because they belong to communities.<sup>49</sup> She claims that *“rationality should be understood in terms of communal practices.”*<sup>50</sup> Reflections on those practices can bring about changes in our concept of rationality. It is therefore possible to challenge our concept of rationality from within philosophy.

I believe that it is possible to change our concept of reason via philosophical dialogue, but I will argue that in order to do it, we have to change other related concepts such as knowledge. I will argue for changes in our epistemological paradigm that will allow us to recognize the importance of practices in the production of knowledge. By acknowledging that relating to the world appropriately is to count as knowledge, we will be able to account for a rationality that is defined in a broader sense than merely accounting for the validity of arguments. I will support the idea that rationality can be attributed on the basis of an appropriate engagement with the world. I will develop all these issues in chapters five and six.

### **3. Science and Objective Knowledge.**

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<sup>47</sup> S. Lovibond (1994), p 80.

<sup>48</sup> A. Tanesini (1999), p 227.

<sup>49</sup> A. Tanesini (1999), p 227.

<sup>50</sup> A. Tanesini (1999), p 227.



If there is a kind of knowledge that is held to be conducive to truth in our dominant culture is that of science and scientific knowledge.<sup>51</sup> It is widely believed (and not just by those uncontaminated by philosophy) that science offers an adequate picture of reality: that is, we think that scientific theories are true and represent the world as it is. Science has been defined as *“a systematic public enterprise, controlled by logic and empirical fact, whose purpose is to formulate the truth about the natural world.”*<sup>52</sup>

One of the main reasons why science has such an enormous degree of credibility is due to its claim of fitting an ideal of objectivity that can be characterized as *“an ideal that subjects all scientific statements to the test of independent and impartial criteria recognizing no authority of persons in the realm of cognition.”*<sup>53</sup> This means that any person could apply the scientific method and obtain confirmation for the theories that others have postulated by using the same methods. Any differences between different knowers is erased by the correct application of the scientific method. Therefore, objectivity in science is obtained by applying a method that erases any subjective bias that the scientist could inadvertently bring into his theories: objectivity is defined as the opposite to subjectivity.

Following the scientific method, any observer of a phenomenon, should be able to discern which of the available theories to explain it is the more appropriate. It is presupposed that there are “objective” grounds to prefer one theory over another. This implies that the observation of data (used as evidence to justify theories) is theory-neutral, that is, data and theories are independent from each other, so choosing between two rival theories is just a question of arbitrating which one better fits the evidence procured by observation.

Thus the objectivity of the knowledge obtained via the scientific method is grounded on two presuppositions, one that the observers should be interchangeable, and the second that data is independent from theories. Both presuppositions have been challenged and it has been argued that this particular ideal of objectivity is neither present in science, nor, in many cases, it is desirable either.

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<sup>51</sup> See H. Longino (1993), p 102 for an analysis of the relations between science and epistemology.

<sup>52</sup> I. Scheffler (1981), p 256

<sup>53</sup> I. Scheffler (1981), p 253



### 3.1 Objectivity v Subjectivity.

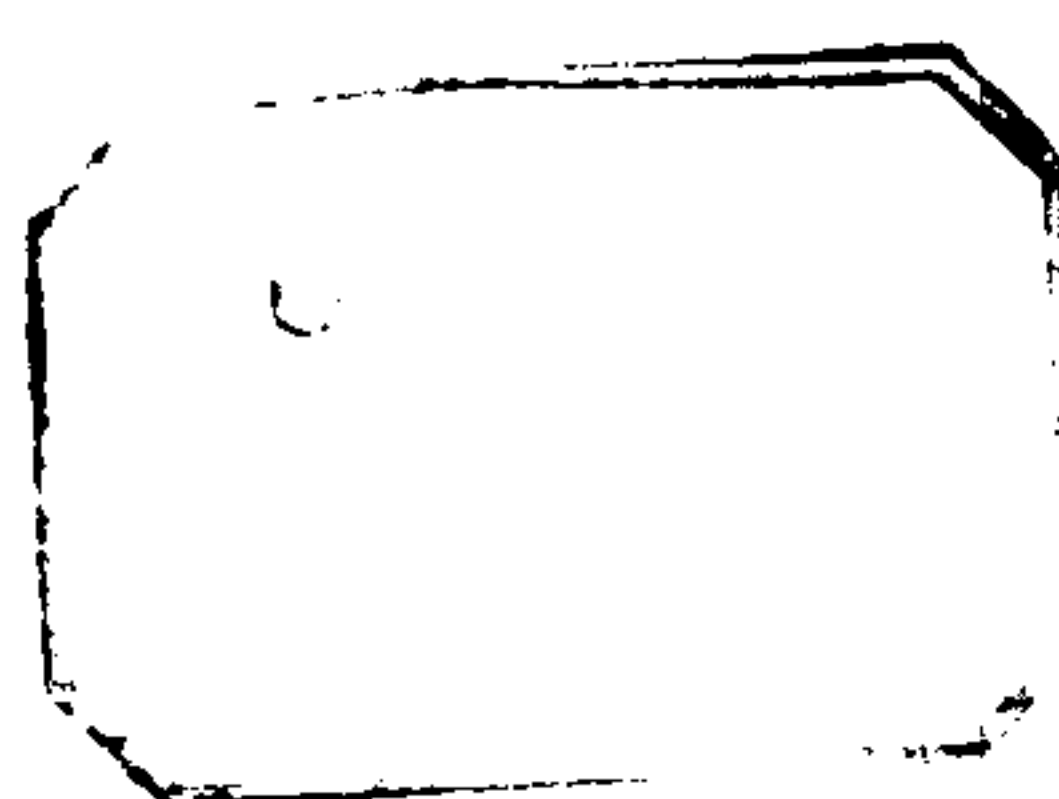
I will refer first to objectivity as the opposite of subjectivity. The subjectivity of the individual scientist is held in control by reference to independent checks. Impartiality is supposed to be attained by the elimination of subjective bias. Part of the scientific ethos consists in admitting that the beliefs held by an individual can be proven to be wrong under examination by the scientific community. As well as rejecting whole theories, the control of the community is supposed to remove prejudices that the individual could have brought to the investigation. This ideal of objectivity also implies that scientists have to “*acquire an impersonal regard for the judgments of others, for what matters is not who they are, but whether they properly voice the import of controlling standards.*”<sup>54</sup> Detachment and, therefore, interchangeability of individual scientists becomes a condition for objectivity.

Some of the stronger criticisms of this ideal of interchangeability, came from feminist theories. Feminist scholars with an interest in the role of women in science and also as the subjects of science, have pointed out that there are structures in the production of science that exclude women from science, and that our conceptual organization implies that women are less able to engage in particular types of knowledge. Thus, the ideal of interchangeability actually does not apply. Nevertheless, the fact that there is a gender imbalance in the scientific community does not imply that if more women were doing science their theories would be different to those put forward by males.

However, some feminists have argued that it makes a difference in the choice and development of theories if the scientist is a man or a woman. Women can produce scientific theories of the same quality as males, but the content of those theories could be different from that produced only by an all-male scientific community. This type of approach that acknowledges that the biography of the scientist can play a role in the production of theories is not unique to feminists in the study of science. The history of science teaches us about individuals who have solved resilient problems by approaching them in a new way, and many times the biographical references are the key when we try to elucidate the genesis of new scientific theories.

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<sup>54</sup> I. Scheffler (1981), p 253





In order to support the ideal of objectivity as interchangeability, and therefore, to avoid the interference of these biographical elements in the production of science, philosophers of science have distinguished between the context of discovery and the context of justification.<sup>55</sup> The context of discovery is that in which hypotheses are devised, and the context of justification is the process of their evaluation. In a traditional characterization of science, subjectivity is allowed to play a role in the first realm, but it is eliminated in the second one by adhering strictly to the method of science in the justification of theories. So it is possible to agree with those who claim that female scientists would chose to devote their time to study different realms of knowledge, or that will capture particular aspects of reality, without having to accept that they will do science in a different way. The gender of the scientist might influence the context of discovery, but not the context of justification.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that there are biases that do not disappear in the context of justification, and that the distinction between these two realms does not fit the history of science or the actual practices of scientists.

In relation with the second of these objections, I will point out that it is not clear that the justification of theories can be carried out following the scientific method and without accounting for factors such as the inventive imagination of the individual scientist. Occasionally, we encounter rival theories that do not suggest a particular test to decide between them. Devising and carrying out a test involves imagination, skill, and intuitive judgment.<sup>56</sup> If this is so, there are difficulties in adhering closely to an ideal method in the design and choice of experimentation. Consequently, it has been suggested that the context of justification should be limited to the assessment of evidence. Nevertheless, assessing evidence is relative to the results of tests and also implies non methodical skills and judgments of the type encountered in the context of justification.<sup>57</sup> Thus, there is no sharp division between characteristics or features of the context of discovery and those in the context of justification. Alex Bird offers an interesting example to illustrate this claim.

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<sup>55</sup> I. Scheffler (1981), p154 acknowledges that it was H. Reichenbach who first drew the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification in *Experience and Prediction*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, ch. 1, sec.1.

<sup>56</sup> See A. Bird (1998) p 260-2 for an interesting example.

<sup>57</sup> A. Bird (1998), p 262.



In 1989 two chemists claimed that they had demonstrated the low-temperature fusion of deuterium to form helium. This was a huge step in relation to the production of energy by cold fusion, so their experiment attracted great attention. Many other scientists reported the same results in their tests; therefore, the hypothesis was confirmed. Later on, they retracted their claims. Some of them thought that there could be other reasons to account for the results and determined that the results were not due to cold fusion, because there was a fault in the apparatus used for the experiment. But what make them suspect that the data did not support the theory in the first place if everything seemed to fit perfectly? Bird concludes that; *“the assessment of hypothesis against the evidence is not simply a matter of seeing whether the evidence is plausibly explained by the hypothesis, but also of considering whether there is reason to think that it is the best explanation of the evidence. To do that, it will be necessary to conceive of what the alternative explanations might be. But conceiving of possible explanations is part of what we called the “context of discovery”, which we said was not amenable to method. It is not always possible to distinguish the context of discovery from that of justification. Although the distinction may be a useful one, the fact is that for most of science, the two are bond up together; the one requires the other.”*<sup>58</sup>

The second argument against the usefulness of the distinction between the contexts of discovery and justification was that it does not eliminate certain types of biases; for instance, some theories are accepted because they support the prejudices of the scientific community that is judging them. There are biases that are not due to individual preferences, but rather, that reflect the main ideology of society and that are so ingrained in our systems of thought that they pass undetected.<sup>59</sup> Scientific method is unable to avoid this bias. Our conceptual system is shaped by our values and prejudices and it shows in our characterization of reality as it appears in our scientific theories (I will develop this line of thought in a later section). So objectivity as impartiality is not ensured by a method that is designed to make rational choices which should be unbiased.

### **3.2 Objectivity as the independence between theory and data.**

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<sup>58</sup> A. Bird (1998). p 262.

<sup>59</sup> See S. Harding (1993).



The previous criticism of science as value laden links with a second form of argument against our traditional conception of objectivity in science. As I pointed out at the beginning of the section, science is taken to be objective in a second sense because of the “*independence of empirical facts from the theories to which they are relevant as evidence.*”<sup>60</sup> If this were not the case, then the scientific community could not judge if a new theory is an adequate representation of the facts. Observation in science is taken to be theory neutral, so anybody could collect the relevant evidence to support our theories (and their values will not have any relevance in their decisions regarding the acceptance of theories). Empirical observation is the ultimate test for theories and therefore independent of any previous conceptions. It is therefore tacitly accepted that those who belong to the scientific community are able to have “*a common discourse and access to a shared world.*”<sup>61</sup> Without this presupposition a cross checking of theories or assertions would not be possible.

Science, as I have pictured it, is a cumulative enterprise that lead us to an increasingly complex and complete understanding of the natural world. But this view of science as cumulative and conducing to truth has been criticized in relation to the history of science. There have been many accepted scientific theories which have been replaced by others which had very little in common with their predecessors. Still, it is possible to argue that science is cumulative at the observational level, despite its lack of cumulativeness at the theoretical level. And also, that there is a *consistency of method* that unifies the practice of science.<sup>62</sup>

However, it has been argued that science cannot be cumulative at the observational level because observation is theory-laden, so if there are two communities of scientists with two different theories, and their observations are dependent on their theories, then we cannot use observation as a way of arbitrating between rival theories because; “*an appeal to empirical fact can only succeed where the parties to a dispute share the same ‘conceptual*

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<sup>60</sup> I. Scheffler (1981), p 252.

<sup>61</sup> I. Scheffler (1981), p 253.

<sup>62</sup> I. Scheffler (1981), p 257.



*organization' of their experience.*"<sup>63</sup> A very simple example provided by Hanson<sup>64</sup> will illustrate this claim. Kepler believed that the sun was fixed and the earth moved around it, while Tycho Brahe following Ptolemy and Aristotle, claimed that the earth was fixed and the sun was moving around us. Did they refer to the same thing when they talked about the sun, and also, did they see the same object in the east at dawn? Both of them could refer to their observations to support their theory, but because their theories conformed to their observations, we cannot consider their observations as cumulative! They had the same visual state but different visual experiences. Their retinal reaction is a physical state, but their seeing is an experience, and they had different experiences because even if their retinal reaction was the same, they interpreted it in a different way. Interpreting means having independent facts that count as evidence in one way or another, the difference with seeing is that the interpretation is inevitably intermingled with the seeing. *"Observation of x is shaped by prior knowledge of x. Another influence on observation rests in the language or notation used to express what we know, and without which there would be little we could recognize as knowledge"*.<sup>65</sup>

If we have several theories that fit the evidence, the way of choosing between them would be to obtain more evidence to resolve our doubts, but then it has been put forward that it is impossible to obtain such an evidence due to the undetermination of theory by evidence. The thesis of the underdetermination of theory by evidence *"holds that logically incompatible theories may fit all possible evidence. Alternatively, there may be pairs of empirically equivalent theories which, while not contradicting each other, use radically different theoretical notions"*.<sup>66</sup> As I have already pointed out, a traditional empiricist account of science, would find this thesis problematic because they rely on the idea that beliefs about the world can be verified by looking at the state of the world that will make them true. If the underdetermination of theory by evidence holds, then they have to justify why they prefer one theory over another without having recourse to facts of the world as evidence. The other possibility would be to show that it is not possible to have empirically equivalent theories that are in competition to one another.

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<sup>63</sup> S. Brown, J. Fauvell and R. Finnegan (1981), p 258

<sup>64</sup> Hanson (1981), p 249.

<sup>65</sup> Hanson (1981), p270.

<sup>66</sup> C. Hookway (1992), p 517.



Taking on board the claim that the meaning of observational terms depends on the theories in which they appear, Kuhn claimed that theories are incommensurable due to meaning variance: if each theorist is caught in her own theory, then communication between theories is not possible, as neither is in disagreement. Kuhn argues that terms such as ‘mass’ refer to different things in different theories.<sup>67</sup> So, in Newtonian mechanics theory we can say that mass can be conserved and in Relativistic mechanics that mass can be transformed, and we can say this without having to accept that we have contradictory claims about ‘mass’, because the meaning of mass in each theory depends on the rest of the theory, not a common “thing” that we call mass. If we accept, with Kuhn, that there is meaning variance when changing theories, rather than contradiction we have equivocation. The two theories are not logically incompatible and we do not have to choose between them. There is no logical incompatibility between theories, and we cannot rationally justify choosing one theory over another by making reference to observations.<sup>68</sup> The choice between theories is done by deciding which theory is closer to a set of values that the scientific community consider desirable.<sup>69</sup> It has been argued that Kuhn accepts that we can partially translate between paradigms, and this opens up the possibility that even if there is a certain dependence between theories and observation, we might be able to have neutral observational data. It would be thus possible to decide on purely empirical grounds which theory is better. A variation of this would be to say not that all observations are neutral, but that, given that theories are partially translatable, some observations are neutral. Even if we accept this move, however, theory choice is based partially on a choice of values that can be either local to communities or universal.

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<sup>67</sup> A. Bird (1998) says “the first is that a theoretical term has a sense which determines its reference; the second is that the sense of a theoretical term depends on the whole of the theory of which it is part. Together these add up to the view, roughly speaking, that the theory amounts to one big description of its intended reference. thus two distinct competing theories, will constitute rival descriptions which could not refer to the same thing. This is why Einsteinian mass and Newtonian mass cannot be the same thing, since part of the description of the later is that it is always conserved, and part of the description of the former is that it is not always conserved.” p 280.

<sup>68</sup> Kuhn argues that this meaning variance occurs only in the case of a paradigm shift. Theory change during normal science does not imply meaning variance.

<sup>69</sup> The thesis of the incommensurability of paradigms, does not imply the acceptance of the indetermination of translation, the indetermination of translation theory, put forward by Quine, is that any theory can be translated in more than one way into our language. The thesis, supported by Kuhn, that terms acquire their meaning within theories, would not be accepted by Quine. It is whole theories and not individual terms that have meanings therefore. “Einstein can come to see what Newton means by his terms.” A. Bird (1998), p 157.



H.Longino, one of the most prominent feminist empiricists, interprets Khun's examples of scientists seeing different things in the following way: they do not see different things, they see different aspects of the same thing. *"It is not, therefore necessary to say that the Aristotelian and the Galilean are seeing different things. Rather we can say that they are seeing the same thing but attending to different aspects of it".*<sup>70</sup> We can understand both theories if we articulate their background assumptions. And if we can do it, representatives of both theories could do it as well. She claims that the acceptance of theory ladenness of observation does not imply incommensurability.<sup>71</sup> She says that *"the relation between hypothesis and evidence is determined by background assumptions operative in the context in which data are being assessed."*<sup>72</sup> We have theories that are empirically grounded, and that attempt to describe the world as it is, but nevertheless, and due to the fact that observation is biased by the theory they do not apprehend exactly the same aspects of reality. If we want to have a complete picture of the world, we will have to find ways of comparing theories that seem contradictory; of finding what they have in common and how they complement each other. We should not forget that theory choice implies choice between the values and background assumptions that those theories embody, and that the criteria of selection is not only empirical adequacy. In a later chapter, I will offer two different ways of looking for a new concept of objectivity that embraces all these challenges: Harding's 'Strong objectivity', and Longino's own theory.

Science is a paradigmatic form of knowledge because it is believed that the application of the scientific method will provide us with an adequate representation of the world. One of the reasons why science is so well regarded is because of its ideal of objectivity that claims that subjective preferences and values are erased from the development of theories. I began by arguing that subjective values are present in science, by showing that interchangeability does not hold. It matters who develops the scientific theories; the biography of the scientist can explain why she was able to put forward a new view in science. In order to preserve objectivity in science while acknowledging the importance of some biographical aspects in the creation of scientific theories, a distinction between the

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<sup>70</sup> H. Longino (1990), p 54.

<sup>71</sup> H. Longino, (1990), p56.

<sup>72</sup> H. Longino (1990), p 58.



context of discovery and the context of justification was drawn. I argued that there are biases (those that support the prejudices of the scientist judging the validity of the theories) that do not disappear in the context of justification, and furthermore, that the distinction between the contexts of justification and discovery does not fit either with the history of science nor the actual practices of scientists. Therefore, there are subjective factors in scientific theories that are not erased by the application of the scientific method. I also argued that the second pillar of the ideal of objective knowledge, the independence between theory and data, did not hold either. If observation is not independent of theories, then it cannot be used as the final test to decide between rival theories. I argued that the choice of theories is done by deciding which one satisfies a set of values that are held by the scientific community. The implications of my arguments against the ideal of objectivity are clear: science is not objective in the ideal sense that I defined at the beginning of the section; it is biased toward values at work in the choice, justification and discovery of theories. It is important to make those values visible and to determine if those values favour society as a whole or just part of it. And finally, it is necessary to give a new meaning to “objectivity”.

#### **4. Gendered Science.**

In section 1, I pointed out that feminists developed feminist epistemology as a response to the masculinism present in our concepts of knowledge and in the practices of production of knowledge. Science is one of the most important types of knowledge and it has been analyzed in detail by feminists to disclose its sexist bias. It is evident that women have been excluded from science at a practical level, but is this enough to claim that science is masculinist? In order to prove that science is masculinist, I will explain how the exclusion of women from science, has affected the content of the scientific theories, and I will also show that there is a bias in many theories that support androcentrism. Furthermore, women have been symbolically excluded from science, therefore, all the characteristics that have been linked to femininity have been excluded from science, and this has given an inadequate idea of how scientific knowledge actually works. As a further implication, it has meant that women have actually been considered inadequate to produce science so, even if women entered science in greater numbers, women would still be considered as



less reliable in their production of knowledge.

I will analyze the following senses in which science is gendered and biased towards the masculinist: it is conceptualized as masculine; it is men who mostly do it; their experiences and values are generalized and taken to be universal; it has been ideologically used to naturalize power relations; and finally, its metaphors have reflected and modeled androcentric cultural stereotypes.

#### 4.1. Science conceptualized as masculine.

First of all, I would like to remark on the situatedness of this claim: to conceptualize science as masculine is the product of particular cultural and historical circumstances. Jordanova analyses the relationship between science and gender as available in our cultural heritage, and she claims that; “*We can never take term like ‘sexual’, ‘masculine’, or ‘feminine’ as either stable or self-evident. The job of the historian is precisely to recover the fragile and fleeting significances they take on*”.<sup>73</sup> These terms are defined partly by their metaphorical implications, some of which I will analyze in this section to show that as slippery as the definition of those terms is that of their relationship to science. The alliance between masculinity and science is contingent.<sup>74</sup> In a previous section I have explained why theoretical knowledge is supposed to be masculine: it is linked to objectivity, and objectivity is defined as produced by knowers who are detached from their emotions, particularities, interests and values. The ideal knower is disembodied and does not belong to a particular place or time. As I have already claimed, science is the paradigm of objective knowledge, and therefore, is more readily identified with this type of impersonal knowledge than with those more “feminine” types of knowledge that are based on biographical, emotional, and personal experiences. Feminine, unscientific knowledge, is produced by situated, embodied subjects, and according to our traditional classifications it cannot be other than subjective in its nature.

Jordanova examines western representational practices and claims that it is common in

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<sup>73</sup> L. Jordanova (1989), p 4.

<sup>74</sup> While, in our cultural tradition, science is considered a male realm, in other cultures it is considered to be a safe subject for women



such practices to represent nature as a female unveiling before science.<sup>75</sup> The conceptualization of science as masculine is closely entangled with the characterization of nature as feminine. The identification of women with their bodies and the claim that they are closer to nature than males is another constant in our culture. These metaphorical representations are easily understood by members of our culture because they have been used so often. Occasionally, the allegory takes place in the form of a nude female corpse being dissected, studied or contemplated by a male scientist, anatomist, or doctor. The implications of this type of representation are multiple. By representing knowledge as something that has to be attained by “unveiling” or “dissecting” nature (as represented by the female body) the idea that science is a way of exerting dominance over nature is reinforced. Science is male and nature female and the relations of domination between the sexes has a reflection in our conception of science. Jordanova underlines the relations of power that this representation evoke; *“science and medicine, since they claimed special truth states for themselves, were drawn both to personifications of nature as women and to the image or unveiling in order to represent their privileged relationship to truth and to nature. They thereby become the domains strong enough, as a power nexus, to grapple with the complex forces that nakedness unleashed”*.<sup>76</sup> The body reveals naked under the veil and it is desired and feared at the same time, but science is strong enough to handle nature and to show us the truth about it. This particular type of representation of nature as desirable and feared at the same time is related to the birth of modern science. And rises parallel to the conception of science as a coercitive force in Bacon’s work: *“Though Bacon rejected all other kinds of recognizable, established authority, he accepted and established male authority as integral to the practice and philosophy of science. Continuing a process begun at least in the 16th century (See chapter 3), Bacon elaborated the metaphors of science in sexual and gendered terms, with science as male and nature as females, a mystery to be unveiled and penetrated. Woman as a reproductive being embodied the natural, the disordered, the emotional, the irrational; man as a thinker epitomized objectivity, rationality, culture and control.”*<sup>77</sup>

I have pointed out that the identification of masculinity and science are just the product of

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<sup>75</sup> She focuses mainly on XVIII and XIX century representations.

<sup>76</sup> L. Jordanova (1989), p 94.

<sup>77</sup> R. Bleier (1986), p 6.



a particular culture, and the same can be said with this characterization of nature and its relation to the feminine. In the premodern period, nature was represented both as a nurturing mother and as the wild and untamable temptress.<sup>78</sup> As a result, there was a clear ambivalence in relation to nature, the identification with the motherly figure promoted respect towards nature while the characterization as a temptress created a desire to control and possess it.<sup>79</sup> The origin of modern science emphasizes the desire of domination over a nature that is taken now not to be organic and active, but passive and mechanical.<sup>80</sup>

The consequences of this characterization of science are twofold. On the one hand, the idea that women are not naturally suited to produce scientific knowledge is reinforced, and therefore, women are excluded from science. On the other hand, the ideal of scientific knowledge wrongly establishes that the production of science has all the traits of “masculine knowledge” and none of the feminine ones. At the beginning of the section I claimed that these conceptual relations are contingent. Our culture does not acknowledge that science lacks the type of objectivity that it claims for itself, and it ignores the historical origin of the ideal of objectivity as detached knowledge.<sup>81</sup> I will argue for a change in the conceptual relations that we have established between gender, science, and knowledge.

#### **4.2. The predominance of male scientists.**

In section 3 I claimed that the production of scientific theories is closely linked to the idea of interchangeability. Through this scientists are able to transcend their biases and produce “objective” knowledge. Therefore, it should not matter who produces the theories. This seems to be the ideal situation for the participation of women in science. Nevertheless, science is a male dominated activity. There are many different factors that contribute to support the exclusion of women from science, but I will argue that the fact that the feminine has been metaphorically linked to lesser forms of rationality, and that women have been attributed different forms of cognition, have had an influence in the actual

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<sup>78</sup> S. Heckman (1990), p 113.

<sup>79</sup> C. Merchand, (1980).

<sup>80</sup> S. Heckman (1990), p 114-115.

<sup>81</sup> R. Bleier (1986) says that “Neutrality is believed to be an inherent and defining feature of science. It is an interesting paradox, however, that even the idea itself of objectivity and social neutrality as a characteristic or even requirement of science is not an inherently logical, internal achievement of modern science, but rather the product of social and political forces in the 17th century.” p 5.



participation of women in science.

The scarcity of female scientists has deserved further study, and it has been explained as a product of biology, such that women are naturally less able to do science, or by claiming that they are more geared towards caring for their families and therefore not likely to pursue a career as scientist. The facts that women are excluded from science because the concept of masculinity is closely linked to that of the scientists, and because the scientific institutions are designed to fit the type of life style traditionally pursued by males, are overlooked. I will look at these two factors.

#### *4.2.1 The making of the modest witness.*

Haraway claims that being a modest, invisible, witness is the mark of the scientist. By being a “modest” witness, the scientist is able to legitimize his observations; *“This kind of modesty is one of the founding virtues of what we call modernity. This is the virtue that guarantees that the modest witness is the legitimate and authorized ventriloquist for the object word, adding nothing from his mere opinions, from his biasing embodiment. And so he is endowed with the remarkable power to establish the facts. He bears witness: he is objective, he guarantees the clarity and purity of objects. His subjectivity is his objectivity.”*<sup>82</sup>

Boyle is taken to be the founder of the “experimental way of life”, which consists of a mixture of private and public witnessing. During his life time it was also established that even if everybody could watch (in a “laboratory” environment), not everybody could be a witness, because just certain types of people can “testify”. The workers in Boyle’s laboratory were not able to testify because they worked for him, and were not independent. Equally, Shapin notes how women could not be witness/scientists either because *“subsumed under their husbands or father, women could not have the necessary kind of honor at stake”*.<sup>83</sup> Haraway points out that E.Potter explains how the making of the scientist, at the time, was closely linked to the making of masculinity: *“Elizabeth*

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<sup>82</sup> D. Haraway (1997), p 24.

<sup>83</sup> D. Haraway (1997), p 27.



*Potter, however, has a keen eye for how men became man in the practice of modest witnessing. Men-in -the -making, not men, or women, already made, is her concern. Gender was at stake in the experimental way of life, she argues, not predetermined.”*<sup>84</sup>

The activities and way of life of scientists challenged the role of males in the society of the time. Therefore, in order to accentuate the adequacy of such an activity for males, the image/virtues of scientist must be remarkedly “virile”. Therefore, women were not inadequate to be scientists because of their inferior intellect, but rather because the manhood of the scientist has to be enforced with the exclusion of women from science.

#### ***4.2.2 Contemporary reasons for exclusion.***

Nowadays the exclusion remains but, as I have already said, it is attributed to biological facts. It is broadly accepted that women are less naturally inclined to science, to such a degree that, even parents and teachers that try to encourage girls to go into science do it in ways that, underline the differences.<sup>85</sup> Patantucci points out, as a result of her empirical study of the situation of women in science that women have more difficulties surpassing the social prejudices against the alien role of women in science than actually doing the scientific work. Pattatuci has collaborated with women from all paths of science and has found that *“not one woman in this group cites mastering the large body of technical material inherent to succeeding in science as an overwhelming task. However, a majority indicate that the lack of institutional support and the relentless application of social stereotypes about women are the least distracting and the most suffocating to their success in the field”*.<sup>86</sup>

The prejudices and the structures of science are the two main problems that women have to face when, despite the odds, they decide to pursue a career in science. In relation to the

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<sup>84</sup> D. Haraway (1997), p29.

<sup>85</sup> Parents have lower expectations for their daughters than their sons in maths (Entwisle, D. C. and Baker, D. P. (1983). Even when recognized, women’s achievements in science are characterized as serendipity rather than natural ability (Frieze, Whistley & McHugh, 1982). This attitude makes girls feel inadequate. E. Anderson (1995) indicates that “Teachers and counsellors discourage girls from pursuing mathematics and the ‘natural’ sciences (Curran 1980, 30-32). The classroom climate in mixed gender schools favours boys. Teachers pay more attention and offer more encouragement to white boys than to girls, solicit their participation more, and expect them to achieve more, especially in mathematics courses (Becker 1981, AAUW 1992).” p 58

<sup>86</sup> A. M. Pattatucci (1998). p 8.



prejudices that they encounter, we can see how the old characterization of women as less able and as different epistemic agents is still accepted, so women in science are **taken to be** less capable than their males colleagues and have less institutional support while they are in university.<sup>87</sup> Once they have finished their degrees and continue their careers despite all the obstacles, they will find that they “*get lower pay, less research support, jobs in less prestigious institutions, lower-ranking positions, and positions that assign more and lower level teaching (Austin and Bayer 1973, Fox 1981)*”.<sup>88</sup> In general, and being faithful to the tradition established at Boyle’s time, women as scientists encounter less respect and credibility than their male colleagues.<sup>89</sup> In relation to the second problem that women in science have to face, that is, the institutional obstacles, it is worth noticing that these are multiple, but derived mainly from the way in which the work is organized. For instance, women often complain that life in the laboratories is geared towards those who have not got any family responsibilities. If women were institutionally allowed to remain in science, it is very likely that we would witness important changes in the production of knowledge.<sup>90</sup>

A direct implication of the prejudices existent in the practice of science due to be a male

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<sup>87</sup> “Graduate schools present women with informal barriers or cost to advancement, including sexual harassment and exclusion from networks of male mentors and colleagues often vital to the advancement of aspiring academics (Reskin 1979, Rose 1989).” E. Anderson (1995), p 59.

<sup>88</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 59.

<sup>89</sup> See E. Anderson (1995), p 59, for examples of how the gendered division of theoretical labour implies a gendered structure of epistemic authority.

<sup>90</sup> In actual fact, women scientists have brought in values that have made them critical with the way in which the work is organized. Pattatucci (1998) explains how, when the career of a woman scientist suffered because she refused to spend all her time in the lab as the head of the project demanded, she argued that there are other things in life that are valuable apart from science. She complained that male scientists do not have to make a choice between other valuable things in life, such as families and their work because they rely too much on their partners to organize the rest of their lives. There is a culture in scientific laboratories that science is first and personal life second, so scientists have to be available at anti-social times. It is taken for granted that this ethos will be adopted by everybody and they do not make adequate arrangements to provide people with the spare time that they are entitled to have. This attitude is only possible because scientists have an ingrained sense of the fairness of the division of labour, so while they can dedicate their lives to science, their female partners take care of the private spheres of their lives. But, of course, this does not apply to female scientists whom, even when they work in “male environments”, are still expected to behave as women; i.e., to be the ones taking care of the family and of their husbands (scientists). A consequence of which is that they cannot cope with the timetables involved in such a way of doing science and give up doing science and change it for the teaching of science. Women scientists have also complained about other structural failures of the scientific project, for instance, they claim that research is done in laboratories, at the lower level of the pay scale and the profession, and that anybody who intends to have a job higher up needs to dedicate all their time to getting money for the projects, to the detriment of their own research. Given that they like doing science instead of being managers or fund raisers, they have preferred to stay at that lower-paid professional level, rather than go up in the hierarchy and lose their contact with research.



dominated environment is signaled by Anderson who claims that scientific theories put forward by women have been rejected just because women are considered to be less able scientists. The difficulties that McClintock faced in her career due to gender discrimination are used by Anderson as an example to illustrate how the “*gender structure of theoretical labor and cognitive authority sometimes slows the progress of knowledge.*”<sup>91</sup> She claims that the gender of the inquirer affects the content of the theories.<sup>92</sup> Therefore, excluding women from science will preclude our access to particular theories. It seems obvious then that women should not only promote reforms so as to include a way of evaluating research projects that are gender-blind; but, also, they should promote the wider participation of women researchers because they can provide us with different theories. She disagrees with those who claim that women have a different way of knowing; but she still thinks that women can provide us with alternative theories

Despite the symbolic representation of women in our conceptual system, there are many women that decide to pursue a science degree and a career as scientists. But all along they feel that the fact that they are women is a hindrance to their prospects. The symbolic exclusion of women from knowledge and reason has an important role in their exclusion from science: it is considered natural that they will not be able to fit their private lives with the public realm of science. We should challenge the way in which science is made, because the work is organized in ways that support masculinist values. Disentangling the concept of femininity from others that impede the access of women to all the realms of knowledge will be helped if we begin changing the structures of science to allow women to pursue their careers. Also, it will help the work of women to be recognized as produced by epistemic agents as valuable as their male colleagues.

#### **4.3 The naturalization of power relations.**

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<sup>91</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 60.

<sup>92</sup> “The gender of the researcher is known to make a difference to what is known in certain area of social science. In survey research, subjects give different answers to questions depending on the perceived gender of the interviewer (Sheriff 1987, 47-48). The perceived race of the interviewer also influences subjects’ responses. It is a highly significant variable accounting for subjects’ responses to questions about race relations (Schuman and Hatchett 1974). In anthropology, informants vary their responses depending on the gender of the anthropologist. In many societies, male anthropologists have less access to women’s social worlds than female anthropologists do (Leacock 1982). The race of the researcher affects access to social worlds as well. Native Americans sometimes grant Asian anthropologists access to religious rituals from which they ban whites (Pai 1985) E. Anderson (1995), p 61.



Science is masculinist because it has been used to naturalize our ways of life and to support current power arrangements. There are many theories that legitimize positions of domination based on sexual differences.

One of the most common examples of this type of theory is the biological reductionist approach to gender differences. As I showed in section 2.2, where I analyzed the relationship between gender and rationality, there has always been a tendency to exaggerate the importance of the differences between the sexes and to argue that physical differences imply psychological differences. As early as in the Aristotelian texts the ‘natural’ differences between the reason of men and women were considered to be due to their biological differences. To be ‘different’ implied that that women were considered naturally inferior and under the protection of males. The echoes of that type of argument can still be found in current scientific theories that postulate that cognitive differences between men and women are the product of biological differences such as different sizes of the brain or the specialization of different parts of the brain (it is argued by some that those differences are the product of hormones). Behavioural differences between the sexes are also given a biological bases, and those naturalizing moves are supported by observation of animal behavior and also by drawing inferences from more ‘primitive’ societies. Such reductionist theories are used to support the view that males are better at particular types of cognitive pursuits than women due to their biology, and that traits such as aggression and competitive behaviour also have their roots in biology. The gender division of labour has its roots in biology.

Some of the theories used to support these views have been discarded as example of straightforward bad science, while others are the product of normal science, but include a clear ideological androcentric bias.

An example of bad science that illustrates how sexist prejudices can bias research is that of Paul Broca. He measured human cranial capacity to show how women and ‘inferior’ races had smaller brains and also less intellectual abilities. While collecting evidence to support his claims, he conveniently ‘forgot’ that women in general have smaller body weights, and



so the size of the brain should be measured with reference to the volume of the whole body. He also left out of his research cases of geniuses with small brains, and of “savages” with big brains.<sup>93</sup> Another common example of bad science is sociobiology. The claims made by sociobiology that women’s gendered role as child rearers and homemakers has its origins in genetics has been discarded by feminist and non-feminists who “*point to [its] faulty methodology, insufficient evidence, uninformed generalization, and [its] use of hidden assumptions*”.<sup>94</sup> In a classic work that critically analyses the attempt to reduce gender differences to genetics, Rose claim that “*We will review these apparently scientific claims to explain the current gender division in society and will show that they represent a systematic selection, misrepresentation, or improper extrapolation of the evidence, larded with prejudice and based in poor theory, and that, far from accounting for present divisions, they serve as ideologies that help to perpetuate them*”.<sup>95</sup>

There are other theories that, even if they are the product of normal science, are unacknowledgedly biased towards certain values: scientific theories embody the values of those whom produce them, so if they are produced by a sexist community they will be biased towards sexist values. This bias will affect the results of the theory, because it will explain just certain aspects of reality. A good example of how facts get selected and misinterpreted can be found in the history of primatology, as Bleier points out; “*Except for Japanese field workers, primatologists in the 1950s and 1960s could not see what female primates were doing; and even if they could see something, their hypothesis, observations and interpretations were clearly constrained by the cultural concepts available*”.<sup>96</sup> The observations of primates suggested that they reproduced our social arrangements; but with the entry of more women in this area of knowledge, primatologists began to be aware that certain social behaviours in primates were ignored, while other behaviours, that supported the prejudices of the observers, were given central importance. This example illustrates that male observers were focusing on particular aspects of the relations between the primates while female ones were focusing on others. This shows that we can have

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<sup>93</sup> N. Leys Stepan (1996).

<sup>94</sup> S. Heckman (1990), p 122. Heckman gives a list of works that support this claim: (Blle, 1979, 1984, Leibowitz, 1978, Reed 1978; Hendler, 1976, Fausto Sterling, 1985, Lowe and Hubbard, 1983, Lewontin et al 1984, Gould 1986, Kitcher 1985).

<sup>95</sup> S. Rose, R. C. Lewontin, L. G. Kamin (1984), p 135.

<sup>96</sup> R. Bleier (1986), p 3.



different descriptions of the same reality, both of them informed by the values of the observers. Both theories are biased towards preferred values or preconceptions, but the difference between the early theories produced by male primatologists and the later ones produced by female primatologist is that while the former thought that their observations were objective, the latter acknowledged both the bias in the previous theories and the bias in their own theories.

In this section I have explained how there have been different types of theories that have tried to justify our current gender imbalances of power by relying on naturalizing moves in science. I have argued that these theories are either the product of bad science, and therefore cannot be taken seriously as scientific theories, or that when they are the product of normal science, they bear the mark of those who produced them, and are therefore biased towards masculinist values.

#### **4.4 The use of metaphors in science.**

One of the reasons why science has been considered sexist is due to the use of certain metaphors in the making of science. I will use an example taken from biology to show how the values ingrained in our society guide our observations. The following example shows how gender stereotypes have influence our biological models: our cultural stereotypes dictate that women are passive and males active; the biology of reproduction has been tainted with this image, and scientists have been describing the interrelation between the egg and the sperm in such terms as to fit with the above description. They were expecting biology to fulfill their expectations with such a force, that they were blinded to other readings that could fit the "facts" better. So they described the egg as passive and inert, and could not see it behaving in any other way until changes in our perception of the gender roles changed. Then other theories where developed in which the egg plays a much active part in reproduction.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, even if the egg was accepted as playing a more active role, new cultural stereotypes took the place of the old ones: the egg was depicted as a femme fatale that victimized the sperm. These metaphors

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<sup>97</sup> E. Martin (1996).



tainted the observations of the scientist and were used to naturalize our current gender arrangements.

In this section I have argued that science is masculinist in many different ways. Does this imply that feminist women have to give up doing science and produce alternative types of theories? This is a possibility that has been supported by some, but there are many other feminist scientists and feminist theorists that believe that it is possible to make non-masculinist science. I will examine this second possibility in the next chapter.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that the conceptual relations between gender, reason, and knowledge have symbolically excluded women from the realms of full rationality and proper knowledge. In traditional epistemology knowers are supposed to be disembodied and interchangeable and therefore, gender considerations are taken to be irrelevant. Nevertheless, the symbolic characterization of women as lesser epistemic agents has had an influence in our actual epistemic practices.

I analyzed in detail the ideal of science as objective knowledge to show that even in the production of a knowledge that is supposed to be produced without taking into account the biographical differences of scientists, the ideal of objectivity as detachment does not work. The scientific method cannot avoid the inclusion of values that will bias the choice of certain theories over others. Therefore women, symbolically excluded from knowledge, are also practically excluded from the production of science because they are considered to be naturally not adequate to produce this type of knowledge and so their values and experiences are excluded from science as well.

The exclusion of women from science is just an example of how they get marginalized from any cognitive pursuit that is considered epistemologically valuable. Feminist epistemology was born so as to disclose the androcentric bias in our concepts of knowledge, reasons and science, and to provide us with alternatives. In Chapter 2 I will explore the main tendencies in feminist epistemology, and I will explain how they try to



remedy the actual deficiencies in our science and epistemology.



## CHAPTER 2

### 0. Introduction.

In the first section of the previous chapter, I argued that there was a variety of feminist theories in the area of epistemology and I suggested different ways of classifying them. In this chapter I will review three of the most important tendencies in feminist epistemology; empiricist feminist epistemology, feminist standpoint epistemology, and postmodern feminism. Most of the theories that I will mention have been influenced by the three strands of feminist epistemology, and some of them could be classified in more than one category. In this thesis I will argue for a revised type of standpoint epistemology, which contains influences from the other two types of feminist epistemology.

### 1. Empiricist Feminist Epistemology

When Harding introduced the term feminist empiricism in *The Science Question in Feminism* in 1986, she referred to what she called ‘spontaneous feminist empiricists’, women scientists who had pointed out masculinist biases in science. They were part of the scientific community and believed that these particular examples of androcentric theories were the product of an inadequate use of the scientific method; “*Feminist empiricists argue that sexism and androcentric biases can be eliminated by stricter adherence to existing methodological norms of scientific inquiry; only ‘bad science’ or ‘bad sociology’ is responsible for their retention in the results of the research.*”<sup>1</sup> Therefore if the methods of science were properly followed, biases will be eliminated. Spontaneous feminist empiricists supported the classic ideal of scientific objectivity that I have portrayed in the previous chapter.

Nowadays, feminist empiricists point out that there are many social factors that influence the production of theories that remain unacknowledged because the scientific method does not apply to the context of discovery. They also show how the context of justification is not value free. Furthermore, one of their main claims against traditional science is that even if individual biases can be eliminated by applying scientific methods, cultural based

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<sup>1</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 111.



biases cannot. Androcentrism does not get eliminated from adhering to the scientific method when it appears, for instance, in the identification of research projects. So feminist empiricists have explored different methods that could form part of our current scientific practices and would allow us to identify and to correct ideological biases in the theories.

Feminist empiricists support the idea that all knowledge is biased, that all knowledge reflects the values of those who produce it but they also claim that politically motivated research can help the development of alternative research programs. I will illustrate this claim by using an example from the previous chapter. If we look at the metaphorical representations of the egg and the sperm, we can see how not all ideological bias should necessarily be avoided. A social movement such as feminism could help to discover the active role of the egg in reproduction earlier than it would have been discovered if the traditional role of women had never been challenged. We can see how feminist women involved in the investigation could have noticed the bias in the investigation and also could have introduced different metaphors in order to construct other models that would help the scientist to see the facts in other light, noticing behaviors that would have passed unseen.<sup>2</sup> Biased knowledge "tainted" by politics becomes epistemically valuable because it allows the knowers to be more critical of current models and also to produce different alternatives. It is obvious how the production of theories that makes use of metaphors that are agreeable to feminism will have two outcomes; first, they will offer an alternative to theories with masculinist metaphors, a novel way of seeing the world, and second, they will help to point out the sexist biases in theories.

If all knowledge is biased, then we cannot say that bad science is biased science. Does this mean that feminist empiricists are forced to accept that androcentric theories offer a valid alternative to feminist ones? I have claimed in a previous paragraph, that feminist empiricists aim to disclose and correct biases in scientific theories, but this seems to be a very problematic project, given that their evaluations are also biased towards their preferred political agenda. Feminist empiricists agree that there is not a neutral ground

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that being women is not enough by itself, it is their ideology as feminists that allows them to envision other alternative ways of conceptualizing human biology and to see the flaws in the current one. I will develop this point in more detail in the next section on feminist standpoint epistemology.



from which to choose theories, but they think that there are several criteria to help us decide between rival theories. I will analyze them in turn.

Feminist empiricism differs from the common description of empiricism, if we define it as “*a doctrine that imposes a priori substantive restrictions on the kinds of entities and concepts that can ultimately figure in science.*”<sup>3</sup> According to Anderson, the empiricism that we can find in feminist theories does not make a priori decisions about the content of theories, and is “*promiscuous in its permissible ontology and opportunistic in its methods and models. Any hypothesis or method is permitted that advances the goals of discovery and explaining more phenomena consistent with the constrain that the theories produced seek empirical adequacy.*”<sup>4</sup> Feminist empiricism is more open than the traditional one in its ontological commitments, but insists, as traditional empiricism does, on the fact that theories have to display an **empirical adequacy**. This means that experience provides the evidence to support our theories.

The most commonly supported type of empiricism is ‘modest empiricism’, which is defined by Anderson (following Nelson and Longino) in the following way; “*I shall call empiricism the view that experience ultimately provides all the evidence we have about the world (Nelson 1990), or more modestly, that observation provides the last defensible evidence we have about the world (Longino, 1993a): not thought processes operating independently of empirical evidence can rule out any conceivable hypothesis about the world*”<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, the first step to decide whether or not a theory is the product of good science is to ponder its empirical adequacy. As an example of bad science, I could cite Broca’s theory on the cognitive differences between sexes and races based on the measuring of skulls. The reason why it is bad science is because it did not adhere to the method of science, given that he ignored data that would have jeopardized his theory. He produced a bad theory not because he was motivated by a racist and sexist agenda, but rather, because he ignored evidence available to him. His theory was not empirically adequate.

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<sup>3</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 51.

<sup>4</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 52.

<sup>5</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 51.



Any empiricist would agree with the above claim, so what it is that distinguishes feminist empiricism from a minimal non-feminist empiricism? The following example will help to clarify that question. In the dispute that has arisen in respect to the development of tools in the primitive societies, two different rival theories have been given; one favors the males in the society, as the tool users and the other the females. Given that the use of tools had a great importance in human evolution, much more is at stake than it appears at first sight. Some feminist scholars<sup>6</sup> have accepted that both rivals use the same physical remains as evidence, and that both seem to be equally well supported. How do we chose between them? the choice seems to be more ideological than merely epistemological, but as Longino puts it very clearly, "*men are in the world in one way, women in another; on what possible grounds other than gender loyalties can we decide between these conflicting accounts?*".<sup>7</sup>

Feminist empiricists want to chose the feminist biased theory over the androcentric theory on a firmer basis than mere loyalty to their values, but is this possible? One obvious advantage of the theory supported by feminists is that it was developed as an alternative to a traditional view in a scientific area, and in doing so, it made us revise some broadly accepted premises. It has a critical value that helps underlie the biases of the androcentric theory. Also, and given the political origins of feminism, its followers are more likely to acknowledge the biased nature of their own theories, and according to feminist empiricists, it is this realization that allows their theories a better chance of being objective; "*their central claim is that an unabashedly value-laden yet rigorous empiricism, informed by feminist ideology, can produce more adequate knowledge than standard methods ignorant of their specificity, and of their complicity in a sex/gender system, can produce. In short, an informed political commitment can yield a better empiricism.*"<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, if the first criterion for a good scientific theory was its empirical adequacy, the second one is its acknowledgment of the values that it encloses. In order to be able to

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<sup>6</sup> H. Longino (1996).

<sup>7</sup> S. Harding (1986), p 137.

<sup>8</sup> L. Code (1992), p 138.



produce good scientific theories, it is necessary to analyze the context in which knowledge is produced, and to revise our concept of objectivity, to account for the existence of values within scientific theories. Feminist empiricists have approached those challenges in two different ways, which I will explain in the next paragraphs and it is to these that I now turn.

First, I will summarize the project of those who can be classified as ‘naturalized epistemologists’, whom are mainly interested in analyzing knowledge from a sociological point of view. They believe that knowledge is situated and aim to disclose the ways in which knowledge is socially constructed. Then, I will explain how ‘contextual empiricism’ also analyzes the ways in which knowledge (science in particular) is produced, and how it offers alternative ways of organizing the production of science in order to obtain more objective knowledge. I will show how both of them support the view that feminist science can produce better theories than androcentric science.

Many feminist theorist have been classified under the label of ‘naturalized epistemologists’<sup>9</sup>, which has its origin in the mainstream trend towards considering epistemology a branch of sociology or psychology (within this trend, some feminists follow closely Quine’s empiricism). Feminist research within this branch of epistemology pays special attention to gender: *“Feminist epistemology can be regarded as a branch of social epistemology that investigates the influence of socially constructed conceptions and norms of gender and gender-specific interest and experiences on the production of knowledge.”*<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, feminist epistemology aims to more than merely **describe** the process of production of knowledge, it also has political goals that are in tension with a merely descriptive stance. This tension has been considered a problem because: *“How can naturalized epistemology, which studies how knowledge claims are actually produced support normative views about how we ought to produce knowledge claims?”*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Theorists who think of feminist epistemology as a social branch of naturalized epistemology include: Nelson (1990), Harding (1986), Potter (1993), Tuana (1992), Antony (1993), Duran (1991). The classification is made by E. Anderson (1995).

<sup>10</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 54.

<sup>11</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 54.



It has been argued that feminist empiricism can make normative<sup>12</sup> claims in two ways. First, by looking critically at our belief formation, feminist empiricism can point out that some of them have been formed in an unreliable way, so that feminist epistemology can act in a similar way to double testing in medical experiments.<sup>13</sup> They can put forward norms that will help us recognize and eliminate sexist biases in science. Second they can promote theory formation according to feminist values.

Nevertheless, they still have to argue why a feminist theory will be desirable over an androcentric one. Anderson suggests that given two empirically sound theories, we should be able to choose between them on the bases of which one is more useful or interesting. She says; “*empirical adequacy provides the fundamental and common standards for comparing all theories. But a theory can be empirically adequate without being interesting or useful*”<sup>14</sup> But this merely postpones the question. How do we choose which values are going to be used to judge which theory is preferable? It is possible to think of a theory as useful and interesting, but that theory can bring about the loss of rights of some members of a society. Should we prefer it over another which is less useful, less exciting, but that promotes equality?

The theory supported by Longino, ‘contextual empiricism’, can offer an answer to this question. But before I explain how she responds to it, I will point to a couple of central characteristics of feminist empiricism. Apart from a commitment toward experience as the provider of evidence to support theories, two other theses have been considered central to feminist empiricism: that observations are theory laden, and that theories are underdetermined by empirical data.<sup>15</sup> Adherence to these theories allow feminist writers to

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<sup>12</sup> E. Anderson (1995) “feminist epistemology has generally been better at identifying the ways gender is implicated in our knowledge practices than at explaining how these findings should affect our evaluations of the practices or the theories they produce (Longino 1993a). Naturalized epistemology provides a framework for developing such explanations.” p57.

<sup>13</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 55.

<sup>14</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p 56.

<sup>15</sup> A. Tanesini (1999) “The starting point of these new forms of empiricism are two theses whose importance in empiricist philosophy has been highlighted by Quine: observations are theory-laden, and theories are underdetermined by empirical data. The first states that observations are not conceptually independent of theories because the latter provide those concepts which are necessary for observation. (...) The second claims that theories are underdetermined by empirical data; that is, there will always be more than one theory which is compatible with all the available empirical evidence. This thesis has been taken to refute foundationalism, since it claims that experience is not enough to guide our choice of one theory over another. It is not clear whether this is correct, but in any case this thesis, if true, would show that



argue that there is more than one possible theory that can explain data, and therefore, it validates the claim that it is possible to offer alternatives to androcentric theories. But, if all observation is theory laden, how can we resort to it to chose between rival theories? By supporting that data is theory laden, we are forced to deny that it is possible to access a 'view from nowhere' from which we can compare existent theories and decide among them. This seems to be a crucial problem for feminist theorists, who claim that feminist theories are more desirable than androcentric ones. This is a central area of concern for feminist epistemology, and to solve this difficulty, feminist epistemologists put forward new concepts of objectivity.

Longino agrees with all the above claims, that theories have to be empirically adequate, that theories are underdetermined by data, and finally, that observation is theory laden. She believes that one must appeal to factors other than logic and observational and experimental data as grounds of hypothesis choice.<sup>16</sup> She argues that our choice of theory is biased by our contextual values, and that we should make the biases visible in the process of theory choice. She insists that the way in which the values that will rule our choice of theory are selected, has a bearing in the epistemic evaluation of the resultant theories. She explains how the criteria to determine theory choice are local, so it is possible that different epistemic communities will favour different theories when confronted with the same choice. So, for instance, while Khun offered five factors for theory choice in "*Objectivity, Values and Theory Choice*" she offers six alternative virtues taken from the works of feminists; virtues that will help us choosing theories more according to feminist politics. To the question of what is feminist about these virtues she has argued that for political reasons women might find more interesting certain virtues instead of others. Nevertheless, those values or virtues can be continuously revised, that is why she calls her theory 'epistemic provisionalism'.

Despite the differences, it is always possible to judge if a theory is empirically adequate or not. This is helped by the feminist support of minimal empiricism, that allows for ontological diversity and also, by Longino's social approach to science. This underlines

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empirical evidence is not sufficient to determine uniquely the choice of the best theory." p 98.

<sup>16</sup> H. Longino (1994), p 475.



that “*scientific method includes more than just the comparison of hypothesis statements with (reports of) experiential data, in principle and activity of individuals. Hypothesis testing itself consists of more than the comparison of statements but involves equally centrally the subjection of putative data, of hypotheses, and of the background assumptions in light of which they seem to be supported by those data to varieties of conceptual and evidential scrutiny and criticism. Conceptual criticism can include investigation into the internal and external consistency of a hypothesis and investigation of the factual, moral and social implications of background assumptions; evidential criticism includes not only investigation of the quality of the data but of its organization, structuring, and so on.*”<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, her support of local criteria for theory choice seems to weaken the feminist strategy, that aimed to disclose androcentrism in science and prove that it precluded the development of better alternatives (I will discuss this issue later). For the moment, I will point out that it has been suggested that giving a list of epistemic virtues is not doing epistemology; but she can argue that reflecting about their status and relationships is epistemology.

In summary, I would say that Longino seems to offer an answer to the question that naturalized epistemologists left unanswered: the choice of theories will be made according to virtues that are publicly chosen. With respect to why feminist theories should be preferred to androcentric ones, she would argue that any theory that is obtained with the inclusion of agents belonging to different epistemic groups is preferable to one that excludes them. The inclusion in science of people belonging to different epistemic communities brings different values into research projects and favours objectivity. Feminist theorists have been more attuned to the incorporation of different voices, and therefore have a better chance than androcentric theories in producing objective knowledge. Nevertheless, we should not forget that Longino argues for pluralism. I will return to Longino’s work in chapter 9, where I will analyze her theory in more detail.

As a conclusion to this section on feminist epistemology, I will say that central to feminist

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<sup>17</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 111.



epistemology is the fact that many of its proponents are mainly interested in pointing out the androcentric biases in science and other areas of the production of knowledge (some of them using the tools provided by sociology and other social sciences). All of them acknowledge that all knowledge is situated and aim to signal the ways in which biases in knowledge are supported and produced. Some feminist empiricists are also interested in changing our scientific method to account for the situatedness of knowledge, and to allow us to pursue a more adequate type of objective knowledge, one that allows for diversity.

## **2. Standpoint epistemology**

In the previous section I showed how feminist empiricist philosophers claimed that all knowledge is biased, and how feminists could provide us with alternative theories to those biased towards androcentrism. The fact that women can produce theories that include a different perspective is taken for granted, it is not explained. Standpoint epistemology aims to explain how it is that women can have an alternative perspective. I will review feminist standpoint epistemology in this section, divided into the following subsections: 2.1 the origins of standpoint feminism, 2.2 the division of labor as the basis for standpoint, 2.3 abstract masculinity, 2.4 feminist standpoint.

### **2.1 The origins of standpoint feminism.**

I have been taking for granted that belonging to particular groups provides those subjects with different views of the world. I have asserted that women will be more capable than men in spotting the masculinist bias in scientific theories. But why should that be so? there are many women that think that feminism is unattractive and that do not feel any desire to support any feminist view on scientific theories. There are also some men that are quick to point out masculinist biases and to support alternatives.<sup>18</sup> Standpoint feminists have been

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<sup>18</sup> E. Martin (1996) gives examples of female biologists who endorsed the valorisation of the male reproductive system while at the same time diminished the importance of the female one (p 104). They also maintained the myth of the passivity of the egg. For instance, Gerald Schletter and Hellen Schletter “liken the egg’s role to that of sleeping beauty”(p 106). She also points out how “one depiction of sperm as weak and timid, instead of strong and powerful- the only such representation in western civilisation, so far as I know- occurs in Woody Allen’s movie Everything you Always Wanted to know about Sex\*\* but were Afraid to Ask”(p 107).



mainly interested in developing theories that explain the genesis of that special point of view in women that will allow them to avoid the masculinist bias in knowledge, even if they clearly establish that not all women have a feminist standpoint.

Standpoint epistemology was born in the seventies when a number of feminist women began to write on a cluster of topics which were closely related. They were grouped together for the first time by Sandra Harding in an attempt to systematize the increasing number of theories that were appearing in the field, but they do not consider themselves members of any group or school.

The basis of standpoint epistemology was an article by Nancy Harstock in which she made a feminist use of the Marxist notion of standpoint. Marx claimed that our belonging to either the ruling class or the oppressed class influenced our representation of the world. He argued that the representation of reality that those who belong to the ruling class have is distorted but is imposed on the rest of society as if it were the only possible one. Marx privileges the perspective of the oppressed group, which he calls a standpoint.<sup>19</sup> Harstock gives a feminist aspect to this notion by claiming that, given that a standpoint is the product of a different 'material life activity', and that women's work in every society differs systematically from men, women as a group fulfil the necessary characteristics to be attributed a standpoint.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> N. Harstock (1983) claims that a standpoint is a privileged epistemic position that can be characterized as follows:

“(1) Material life (class position in Marxist theory) not only structures but set limits on the understanding of social relations. (2) If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that the vision of each will represent an inversion of the other, and in systems of domination the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse. (3) The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false. (4) In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations. (5) As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role.” p 284.

<sup>20</sup> The notion of standpoint that Marx offers is not, as such, useful to feminism because, as Harstock (1983) points out, Marxism has not taken into account the sexual division of labour. This is the move that she wants to make. “The sexual division of labour forms the basis for such a standpoint and will argue that on the basis of the structures which define women’s activities as contributors to subsistence and as mothers, once could begin, though not complete, the construction of such an epistemological tool.” p 285.



## 2.2 The division of labour as the basis for standpoint.

As I have already signalled, the basis for a standpoint are the differences in the way in which the material life is structured. Harstock argues that in all societies there is a sexual division of labour. She emphasises that it is not just the social dimension of women's lives that grounds the feminist standpoint, but that biology also plays an important role in the acquisition of this standpoint.

What are the material circumstances that allow women to develop a standpoint? According to Harstock, they are twofold because women contribute to the subsistence of capitalism in two ways: Firstly producing objects when they work outside their houses and/or producing 'use values' in the home, and secondly, reproducing men and other women. In relation to the first productive activity, there are clear similarities between the work of women and men when they work for wages, so in this sense, women and men share the same material life activity. Nevertheless, and due to the fact that women also have to do work in the house, there can be established differences between men and women's work.<sup>21</sup> Women work longer hours, more time is devoted to produce use-values and their production is structured by repetition in a different way than that of men's.<sup>22</sup> These differences in the productive activity result in the intensification of class consciousness in women and provides them with a more concrete view of reality.

The second productive activity in which women are involved is in reproduction. This second kind of 'labour' is the one that produces the main differences between a male and a female view of the world: "*the female experience in reproduction represents a unity with nature which goes beyond the proletarian experience of interchange with nature.*"<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>21</sup> N. Harstock (1983) claims that women's contributions to subsistence "like that of the male worker, is in contact with material necessity. Their contribution to subsistence, like that of the male worker, involves them in a world in which the relation to nature and concrete human requirements is central, both in the form of interaction with natural substances whose quality, rather than quantity is important to the production of meals, clothing, etc., and in the form of close attention to the natural changes in these substances. Women's labour both for wages and even more in household production involves a unification of mind and body for the purpose of transforming natural substances into socially defined goods. This too is true of the labour of the male worker." p 292

<sup>21</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 292.

<sup>22</sup> N. Harstock (1983), "In the case of women, when they do their housekeeping this involves repetitious cleaning." p 292.

<sup>23</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 293.



unity is due to the fact that *"women's bodies, unlike men's, can be themselves instruments of production: in pregnancy, giving birth or lactation, arguments about a division of mental from manual labour are fundamentally foreign."*<sup>24</sup> Harstock points out that in the female body *"There are a series of boundary challenges inherent in the female physiology which make it impossible to maintain rigid separations from the object world. Menstruation, coitus, pregnancy, childbirth, lactation, all represent challenges to bodily boundaries."*<sup>25</sup> In pregnancy, for instance, the experience of fuzzy boundaries is specially evident *"Women experience others and themselves along a continuum whose dimensions are evidenced in Adrienne Rich's argument that the child carried for nine months can be defined 'neither as me or as not-me'."*<sup>26</sup>

She also claims that the more complex relational world is reinforced by the process of socialisation.<sup>27</sup> Women acquire certain skills when mothering or being raised by other women that are transferable to the area of paid work.<sup>28</sup> The female view of the world - mainly relational- is characterised by: unity with nature,<sup>29</sup> their relations with other human beings are more varied and deeper than those that males form,<sup>30</sup> unity of mind and body.<sup>31</sup>

Motherhood is one of the basis for a standpoint, but given that motherhood is not something common to all women, then not all women can share this feminine view of the world. Harstock could answer that she is not talking about the 'experience' of being a mother, but rather about the institution of motherhood. It is the fact that all women have been raised by other women, and as "future" mothers, that makes women have a different perspective of the world. Accordingly, the fact that women are the ones in charge of child rearing has important consequences for the psychological make up of children. She uses

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<sup>24</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 298.

<sup>25</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 294.

<sup>26</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 298.

<sup>27</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p295.

<sup>28</sup> N. Harstock.(1983) points out how "interestingly, much of women's wage work- nursing, social work, and some secretarial jobs in particular- requires and depends on the relational and interpersonal skills women learned by being nurtured by someone of the same sex." p 293.

<sup>29</sup> N. Harstock (1983) says that "The female experience in reproduction represents a unity with nature which goes beyond the proletarian experience of interchange with nature." p 293.

<sup>30</sup> N. Harstock (1983) "In addition, the process of producing human beings, relations with others may take a variety of forms with deeper significance than simple co-operation with others for common goods." p 294.

<sup>31</sup> N. Harstock (1983) "Finally, the female experience in bearing and rearing children involves a unity of mind and body more profound than is possible in the workers instrumental activity" p 294.



the object relations theory to show that the process of differentiation of the child from the mother is different for girls and boys. This process “*reinforces boundary confusion in female egos and boundary strengthening in males*”<sup>32</sup> and it is more conflictual for boys than for girls because girls are very close to the model with which they have to identify, while boys have to identify with an abstraction (the father is not present) and so negate the model that is closer to them. The result is that “*mother and son experience the other as a definite ‘other’*. [While] *The experience of oneness on the part of both mother and infant seems to last long with girls.*”<sup>33</sup> As a result, “*the boys must identify with an abstract, cultural stereotype and learn abstract behaviours not attached to a well-known person. Masculinity is idealised for boys whereas femininity is concrete for girls.*”<sup>34</sup> Therefore, the end result of the sexual division of labour is that women and men grow up with different boundary experiences, and this means that they relate in a different way to themselves, others, and the world. thus we have on one hand “abstract masculinity”<sup>35</sup> and on the other hand feminist standpoint.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.3 Abstract masculinity.

The object-relations school of psychoanalytic theory established that there are certain psychological characteristics that are typically masculine and others that are typically feminine. It could be argued, however, that the objects relations school of psychoanalysis is an example of naturalising gender differences that are taken for granted in our cultural tradition. The values that are symbolically linked to masculinity are those that are acquired inescapably by males, while those symbolically attributed to females became part of the

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<sup>32</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 294

<sup>33</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 294.

<sup>34</sup> N. Harstock (1983), p 295.

<sup>35</sup> N. Harstock (1983) characterises abstract masculinity in the following way “First, the male experience is characterised by the duality of concrete versus abstract. Material reality as experienced by the boy in the family provides no model, and is unimportant in the attainment of masculinity. Nothing of value to the boy occurs with the family, and masculinity becomes an abstract ideal to be achieved over the opposition of daily life. Masculinity must be attained by mean of opposition to the concrete world of daily life, by escaping from contact with the female world of the household into the masculine world of public life. This experience of two worlds, one valuable, if abstract and deeply unattainable, the other useless and demeaning, if concrete, mind/body, culture/nature, ideal/real, stasis/change. And these dualism are overlaid by gender: only the first of each pair is associated with the male.” p 297.

<sup>36</sup> “The female construction of the self in relation to others leads in an opposite direction toward opposition to dualism of any sort, both with other persons and with the natural world.” N. Harstock (1983), p283.



female psyche also irremediably.

There are several problems with the objects relations theory: it universalizes a certain type of explanation as valid, it is historically inaccurate, and it does not acknowledge that it relies on a concept of masculinity that it is historically situated.

The objects relation theory has been used to give a universal account of the formation of male and female psychologies. But this was not the aim of its creator, Chodorov, who criticises Freud for not being aware of the situatedness of his theory of psychoanalysis.<sup>37</sup> Chodorov's theory has been used to argue that abstract masculinity is the product of women being in charge of childcare instead of the product of women being in charge of children **within a particular society**. An example of this type of misinterpretation is offered by J. Flax who argues that philosophy bears the marks of women being primary carers, without taking into account that philosophers have lived in very different historical and social circumstances and therefore have been raised in very diverse ways.<sup>38</sup> Grimshaw argues that Flax's reliance on female child care as the bases of abstract masculinity is historically incorrect; *"one might instance moral peasant households where the care of young infants often devolved on older siblings; households where children were brought up by slaves or wet nurses; families during the earlier phases of western industrialization, when both parents often went to work in factories as a matter of course. In all of those situations, the sort of symbiosis between mother and infant assumed by many versions of object relation theory would have been impossible."*<sup>39</sup> Those philosophers were also raised in societies with very diverse views of what constitutes being a male, for example. Thus the concept of masculinity in Plato's time was very different to that current nowadays.

By supporting the view that males and females have different psychologies universally (not symbolically) but as a matter of fact that can be empirically proven, the differences between types of masculinity are erased. What counts as masculine has changed through history and it even varies within the same society for different social classes<sup>40</sup>. What we

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<sup>37</sup> J. Grimshaw (1986), p 57.

<sup>38</sup> J. Grimshaw (1986), p 58.

<sup>39</sup> J. Grimshaw (1986), p 69,70. Grimshaw comments are directed towards Flax (1983).

<sup>40</sup> J. Grimshaw (1986) mentions how P. Willis' (1977) study on working class boys showed how in their view masculinity was linked to sexual prowess, manual work and toughness, while middle class boys (L.



would classify today as abstract masculinity is the product of particular historical, cultural and social circumstances that make us attribute certain characteristics to males. If we do not take this into account, we are naturalizing the current gender differences present in our own society. The formation of feminist standpoint and abstract masculinity is not explained by claiming that child rearing practices is the origin of both of them. It also fails to explain why it is women and no men that take responsibility for it.<sup>41</sup>

As a way of concluding this section, I would assert that the objects relations theory does not hold, therefore it is not possible to use it to ground the epistemological differences for which standpoint epistemology argues. Nevertheless, I think that Harstock's seminal theory can still be defended on other bases. I will argue that it is possible to argue that women develop a particular standpoint because there are distinctive spheres of activity occupied by males and females, without having to adopt the view that they produce different types of psychological make ups. I also want to distance myself from early standpoint theories by asserting that we should acknowledge that there have been, and still is, cultural and historical diversity about what women do and that therefore it is not possible to say that there is a universal female point of view. Once I have made those remarks, I will analyse the concept of standpoint in more detail, because I think it still has many workable characteristics.

## **2.4 Feminist standpoint.**

The notion of feminist standpoint relies on several assumptions: the first one is that due to their different material conditions, women can experience the world differently from men, and what it is more, they can see that parts of the commonly accepted representations of the world are distorted. The concept of experience has a central role in the theory, as well as that of the possibility of developing a more accurate representation of the world. Second, it is worth noticing that not all women have this particular perspective. Standpoints are acquired, as part of a process of analysis and political awareness. The bases for this particular sort of knowledge are the experiences and the lives of women; but

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Hudson, 1967) believed that maleness was linked not so much to manual work as to certain types of intellectual activities (sciences).

<sup>41</sup> J. Flax (1990), p 47.



these have to be articulated at a later stage to form a feminist standpoint. Third, it is the sexual division of labour that allows women to have different experiences.

All these assumptions are controverted, and I will make a brief comment on the main difficulties faced by the theory:

The notion of **experience** is particularly problematic. Postmodernist writers have signaled how we should avoid a naive use of “experience” that implies that marginalized people have a direct access to the world, unmediated by their conceptual systems. It is important to stress that Harstock claims that a standpoint is not “natural” but rather it is acquired. So, at least at first sight, she does not make a naive use of “experience”. Nevertheless, she also says that feminist standpoint reflects the “real social relations.”<sup>42</sup> Her position is considered contradictory because, it is not clear how it is possible that women that have acquired a particular standpoint can see the real social relations in an unmediated manner. Postmodernists claim that if reality is constructed, if it is conceptually mediated (discursively mediated), then it is not possible to access a non-discursive reality. A further difficulty for standpoint theory is that it presupposes that there are experiences that are common to all women, without taking into account the diversity that exists between women from different social classes, races, sexual orientations and so on. Gender is naturalized by adopting this theory because it make us believe that there is a unique feminist viewpoint.

It has been argued that taking labour as the bases to explain the origins of feminist standpoint is inadequate: *“labor is still seen as the essence of history and being human. Such conceptions distort life in capitalist society and surely are not appropriate to all other cultures.”*<sup>43</sup> J.Flax claims that taking the division of labour as the main cause of women's oppression is problematic because it distorts or excludes other kinds of activity that do not fit the definition of labour but that can also be seen as causes of the oppression. Sexuality is one of these activities.

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<sup>42</sup> S. J. Heckman (1997).

<sup>43</sup> J. Flax (1990), p 47.



Standpoint epistemology claims that differences in the material activities produce epistemic differences. Heckman notices that if “ *activity is epistemology: women and men create their own realities through their different activities and experiences. If this were the whole story, however, then both truth and reality would be multiple, even “relative”, and Harstock is very concerned to avoid this conclusion.* ”<sup>44</sup> This is a good point; if reality is constructed through experiences and activities, then all the constructions should have the same epistemic status, ie all of them are partial and none should be privileged. We cannot consider one more true than any other because there is no way of comparing both of them with an external, separated, unconstructed reality which stands as a criterion by which to judge which one is a better picture of it.

Regarding the use of the concept of experience, I will argue in the next chapter that it is important to avoid a naive use of experience, one that implies that it is possible to have an unmediated view of the world. I will also argue that there are non-naive uses of experience that allow us to ground the view that marginalized groups can perceive aspects of the world that are not captured by our current conceptual systems. I will support the view that it is the involvement in alternative practices that allows them to apprehend different aspects of the world and/or acquire alternative epistemic abilities.

Being in a marginalized position allows those in that situation to be critical with the accepted knowledge, because they are aware that it does not include aspects of the world that are available to them, and also allows them to put forward alternatives that are not within the reach of those who are at the center of the epistemic communities. So the knowledge of those on the margins is valuable for their critical and creative possibilities. In this sense, it can be judged to be more desirable than the knowledge of those at the center of the epistemic practices.

In relation to the criticism put forward by Flax, maybe the division of labour is not the only reason why it is possible to acquire a standpoint, but I will argue that the participation in different practices is necessary to acquire a standpoint. The division of labour has implied that diverse members of society partake in different practices, so in this sense, the

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<sup>44</sup> S. J. Heckman (1997), p 343.



division of labour will have as a consequence different epistemic practices. Gender is not the only way in which human beings get divided into different epistemic groups, and gender is not the only axis of oppression. Therefore, given that there is a diversity of axis of oppression and a diversity of epistemic communities, it is necessary to accept the multiplication of standpoints. Nevertheless, pluralism does not imply relativism. Given that those at the margins have a privileged epistemic perspective in the two senses indicated above, their point of view will be preferable to the ones that are in the mainstream epistemic communities.

Jaggar notices that, from a Marxist point of view, all knowledge is partial because its categories reflect the interests and values of a determinate social group. She wonders if this forces Marxists to adopt a relativist epistemology given that "*our world view is necessarily linked by our class origins and truth is relative to class*"<sup>45</sup> or if rather there are "*rational criteria capable of justifying the preference for one standpoint over another.*"<sup>46</sup> She favours the solution offered by Luckacs who recognises the importance of society in shaping the systems of thought while, at the same time, accepts that the adequacy of theories depends also in certain way on an "external reality". Luckacs opts for a realist epistemology that at the same time acknowledges the social influences that shapes knowledge. His view on epistemological privileging is summarised as follows: "*the standpoint of the proletarian is epistemologically preferable to that of the bourgeois, because it drives the working class to demystify the myths of bourgeois society and to develop a new world view that will reveal more clearly the real regularities of social life and the underlying causes of those realities, including the causes of its own domination.*"<sup>47</sup>

Harstock claims that there are similar experiences shared by women and by working class males, due to the similarity of some of their work load; but I have also stressed how women's labour allow them to have particular experiences as well. Harstock considers that there are some important differences in content in women's representation of the world. She does not claim that their representation is completely opposite from that of men or

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<sup>45</sup> A. Jaggar (1988)

<sup>46</sup> A. Jaggar (1988), p 363.

<sup>47</sup> A. Jaggar (1988), p 362.



that it is even very different in all its detail. What she claims is that women are better off than men when we try to describe which are our social relations. They could share the same representation of certain parts of the world and differ in others. I would like to expand the scope of the knowledge to which women can have access. I will argue that women can experience aspects of the world that remain hidden to men; therefore, the knowledge possessed by women as a result of their activities is not just about envisioning more just social relations.<sup>48</sup>

Summarizing, in this section devoted to feminist standpoint epistemology I have argued against the use of objects relation theory as the bases of a feminist standpoint. I have also pointed at some of the problems that the classic form of standpoint has to solve. In a later section I will explain how standpoint theorists have tried to overcome these problems.

### **3 Postmodernism and feminist epistemology.**

Postmodernism and feminism have had a difficult but productive relationship. While, on the one hand, it can be argued that postmodernism represents a threat to the mere possibility of feminism, on the other hand, its criticisms have given us a different way of doing feminist theory. In this section, I will explore both aspects of the relation between postmodernism and feminism. This section will be divided in three subsections: 3.1 Feminism versus postmodernism, 3.2 Deconstructing the category “women”, 3.3 Towards a feminist postmodernism.

#### **3.1 Feminism versus postmodernism**

If we take on board the remarks of postmodernist writers against feminism, we would have to accept that, for about twenty years,<sup>49</sup> feminist theories reflected the views of white, middle class, western women. Women who were unable to recognize the

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<sup>48</sup> I would like to follow D. Smith (1997) who claims that “The knowledge people have by virtue of their experience is a knowledge of the local practices of our everyday/everynight worlds. It is for the most part what Michael Polanyi (1967) called ‘tacit knowledge’ - a knowing that is the very texture of our daily/nightly living in what we know how to do, how we go about things, and what we can get done” p 394.

<sup>49</sup> From the 60s to the 80s.



situatedness of their discourses and who had a tendency to present their knowledge as universal. Feminist scholars would have fallen into what has been called ‘God’s eye view’: attempting to produce knowledge that transcended the perspective of particular knowers. They would have also embarked in a project present in scholarship since the Enlightenment that consists in an *“attempt to reveal general, all encompassing principles which can lay bare the basic features of nature and social reality.”*<sup>50</sup> These criticisms against feminism have been embraced by many postmodernist writers.

Postmodernist philosophy is characterized by its critical attitude towards more established philosophical traditions. There is an ongoing debate within feminist theory on the mere possibility of encompassing feminism and postmodernism. As I have already said, postmodernism accused early feminist theories of trying to offer single cause explanations to explain complex phenomena such as the nature of gender relations. *“It is on the metatheoretical level that post-modern philosophies of knowledge can contribute to a more accurate self-understanding of the nature of our theorising. We cannot simultaneously claim (1) that the mind, the self and knowledge are socially constituted and that what we can know depends upon our social practices and contexts and (2) that feminist theory can uncover the truth of the whole once and for all. Such an absolute truth apprehended by an empty (historic) mind and perfectly transcribed by/into a transparent language. The possibility of each of these conditions existing has been rendered extremely doubtful by the deconstructions of post-modern philosophers.”*<sup>51</sup>

Postmodernist criticisms against transcendental knowledge focus not only on the existence of more than one narrative able to explain particular aspects of reality, as well as in the situatedness of all knowledge claims, but also question the criteria of justification of knowledge. These criteria of justification are part of particular traditions, and do not have universal value.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, they claim that the mere existence and imposition of these

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<sup>50</sup> L. Nicholson (1990), p 2.

<sup>51</sup> J. Flax (1990), p 48.

<sup>52</sup> See L. Nicholson (1990), p 4, and also Nicholson and Fraser (1990), who illustrate this tendency by giving an example taken from J. F. Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* “For example, scientists no longer look to prescriptive philosophies of science to warrant their procedures of inquiry. Rather, they themselves problematize, modify, and warrant the constitutive norms of their won practice even as they engage in it. Instead of hovering above, legitimation descends to the level of practice and becomes immanent in it.” p 23.



criteria in deciding what counts as knowledge has helped developing particular “regimes of power” so in the name of ‘science’, authority has become exercised in a variety of ways.<sup>53</sup>

The postmodern challenge to many of the traditional boundaries of what counts as knowledge has fostered an interest in local knowledge and has also favoured the view that discourses that were marginalized should be revalued. As I pointed out in chapter 1 section 2.1, feminists have showed that our current conception of knowledge is biased toward androcentric values, and that it unfairly marginalizes certain types of knowledge. This is because they do not fit their ‘ideal’ and disclose that our current criteria of justification are unable to account for some of the ways in which we warrant our knowledge claims. So, at least in these areas, feminists are very close to the postmodern project. Nevertheless, and even if feminism has always had a tendency to support alternative ways of knowledge, the tendency toward relativism that is clearly present in postmodernism has worried some feminist theorists.

I have already showed how feminist empiricists have argued that, even within a multiplicity of theories, we should have criteria by which we decide which theories are more desirable, and some of them even argue that these theories that are biased towards certain values (e.g those agreeable to feminism) are of greater epistemic worth. I have also shown how feminist standpoint epistemologists argue that, by their own origins, some theories are closer to the truth than others.

A further difference between postmodernism and feminism is that, according to the former, feminists, by postulating that gender difference allows women to acquire privileged knowledge, are sanctioning a distinction that marginalizes women: “*The argument here is that a notion of gender as basic merely serves to reify, rather than to critically contest, transform and escape the imposed myth of difference, while ignores other crucial and as yet subjugated areas of difference.*”<sup>54</sup> Postmodernists considered feminism essentialist, because gender is naturalized by making us believe that there is a unique feminist view point. “*It presupposes gendered social relations in which there is a*

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<sup>53</sup> L. Nicholson (1990), p 4.

<sup>54</sup> C. DiStephano (1990), p 65.



*category of beings who are fundamentally like each other by virtue of their sex- that is, it assumes the otherness men assign to women.*"<sup>55</sup> Also, by privileging gender as the main site of oppression, other axes in which oppression are exercised are ignored; such as race, sexual orientation, or social class.

These are two of the most important postmodernist arguments that have influenced feminist theory: there is more than one axis of oppression (power pervades all human relations), and gender should be deconstructed because it is one of the categories that furthers women's oppression. I will comment on the first of these points, and leave the second to be discussed in the next section.

Even if feminists in general and feminist epistemologists in particular did not acknowledge sufficiently the differences between women to begin with, later on there have been efforts, both in standpoint and in empiricist epistemology, to deal with the multiplicity of marginalized discourses that have been made explicit by postmodernism. Feminist scholars have now accepted the existence of more than one axis of oppression. Nevertheless, it is important to notice that this move has procured further problems for their theories because the multiplication of standpoints makes it difficult to privilege one position over another. Furthermore, it is difficult to judge which are epistemically reliable. As Longino puts it very clearly, *"On what grounds can one social location or affective orientation be judged epistemically superior to another?"*<sup>56</sup> The lack of a universal system for the validation of knowledge makes it impossible to judge which theories are better than others.

A solution to the problem could be to attempt to encompass different voices in the production of theories in order to account for diversity, but this move has encountered the opposition of members of marginalized groups. It has been argued that the acknowledgment of a diversity of discourses occasionally takes the form of academic "tourism" in which we believe that we can transcend our own perspectives and see from the point of view of others. As a result members of the ruling classes have considered themselves fit to produce knowledge from the point of view of the other. Flax summarizes

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<sup>55</sup> J. Flax (1990), p 56.

<sup>56</sup> H. Longino (1996), p 270.



the problem when she says that the problem is “*whether it is possible to seek and possess empowering knowledge without expropriating the power of others. Is seeking knowledge inevitably an attempt of domination? And are there criteria of knowledge other than the ability to control the phenomena about which one seeks knowledge?*”<sup>57</sup> A related problem is that of thinking that the point of view of marginalized groups is “innocent” without taking into account that all points of view are situated. In later chapters of the thesis I will explain how this difficulty can be avoided.

In this section, I have signaled how the criticisms that postmodernism directed towards early forms of feminist epistemology have had a considerable influence on the area. Representatives of different epistemologies have tried to encompass difference within their theories, try to avoid essentialism and universalism, and attempt to avoid single cause explanations in accounting for marginality. Postmodernism has changed the rules within feminist theorizing, and its influence has been critical but positive. Nevertheless, in the next section, I will analyse one of the aspects of postmodern thinking that could undermine feminism as a political option.

### **3.2 Deconstructing the category “women”.**

The postmodern critique has been useful in making feminists aware of essentialist and universalist tendencies while talking of “women”, but it is important to remember that this is still a central concept to keep if we want to maintain the political content of feminism.

It has been claimed that failing to consider women as a collective supports the current patriarchal oppression, and that any intellectual project which attempts to weaken such a category must be embraced with caution. S.Bordo acknowledges that in early feminism there was a tendency to universalize claims that were only true locally, and that the narratives that they produced at the time are now taken to be “*reductionist, totalizing, inadequately nuanced, valorizing of gender difference, unconsciously racist and elitist.*”<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, she says that giving up the original aims of feminism and renouncing talking

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<sup>57</sup> H. Longino (1996), p104.

<sup>58</sup> S. Bordo (1990), p 135.



about gender in an attempt to surpass the binary distinctions is flawed as an strategy because: *“not only are we thus diverted from attending to the professional and institutional mechanisms through which the politics of exclusion operate most powerfully in intellectual communities, but we also deprive ourselves of still vital analytical tools for critique of those communities and the hierarchical, dualistic power structures that sustain them.”*<sup>59</sup> Harstock is also deeply suspicious of the postmodern attempt to dissolve the categories that are useful in contesting the status quo, and she wonders *“Why it is that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic?”*<sup>60</sup>

Harstock considers that we forget too often that postmodernism is, according to its own logic, just one intellectual movement among others, and as such the product of particular historical circumstances. Therefore, its normative recommendations should just be taken to be one set among many others.<sup>61</sup> It is not compulsory to accept their claim that the only alternatives are either to adhere to the enlightenment tradition or to give up the attempt to produce a *“systematic and accurate knowledge of the world”*<sup>62</sup>

Harstock claims that this aim is particularly important for feminists, who, being aware of the differences between women and their experiences, still want to be able to talk about their commonalities, and make sense of the world as it appears to women. She says that *“we still need to name and describe our diverse experiences. What are our commonalties? What are our differences? how can we transform our imposed otherness into a self-defined specificity?”*<sup>63</sup> According to Harstock it is possible to talk about women as a group without denying the differences between women. In order to do it, alternative ways of conceptualizing identities have been developed by marginalized

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<sup>59</sup> S. Bordo (1990), p 139.

<sup>60</sup> N. Harstock (1990), p 164.

<sup>61</sup> I have claimed that postmodernism argues for local knowledges but, by doing that, they are prescribing the correct approach to knowledge claims, a normative dimension that mimics the universalist tendencies present in traditional epistemology, so they “represent the transcendental voice of the Enlightenment attempting to come to grips with the social and historical changes of the middle- to- late twentieth century.” N. Harstock (1990), p 164.

<sup>62</sup> N. Harstock (1990), p 171.

<sup>63</sup> N. Harstock (1990), p 171.



voices.<sup>64</sup> The mere origin of this new concept of identity, together with the fact that women have been a marginalized group would guarantee that feminists will be able to make a non-totalizing discourse.<sup>65</sup> Bordo supports the view that feminism is not a “totalizing” theory among others, because it was produced by those who were not located at the center of cultural power. In actual fact, *“As an ‘outsider’ discourse, that is, a movement born out of the experience of marginality, contemporary feminism has been unusually attuned to issues of exclusion and invisibility.”*<sup>66</sup> She believes that the danger in current feminism is not that of supporting totalizing theories, or of falling into essentialism but, rather, to be paralyzed by anxiety of doing so.

Bordo can be taken as an example of an attempt to ground identity on the experiences of women. She suggests that women’s reproductive role can be the material basis for a collective identity, even accepting the cultural and historical diversity of it.<sup>67</sup> Even if accepting that experiences of gender are shaped by multiple influences such as race, class, age, etc she thinks that it is possible to find many commonalities in the experiences of different women. She links the concept of being a woman with that of survival, she is interested in *“the changing meanings of female otherness for women, as we attempt to survive, in historically unprecedented numbers, within our still largely masculinist public institutions.”*<sup>68</sup> She is aware of the centrality of gender in the shaping of our world, so she says that *“in a culture that is in fact constructed by gender duality, however, one cannot simply be human.”*<sup>69</sup>

In the next chapter, I will analyse the viability of the project put forward by Harstock, and supported by Bordo: the formation of collective identities by taking into account the view

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<sup>64</sup> S. Bordo also considers that we have to maintain our concept of women, even if we should try to account for diversity. She claims that, if we are going to take difference seriously, we have to accept the limits of our own embodiment. Given that we are inescapably embodied and located in particular situations, we will always be able to see only from our particular locations, so we will always ignore some of the axes of oppression and select others, despite all our precautions. We should not forget, either, that close attention to difference does not guarantee the appropriate representation of difference because we might fall into an exaggerated underlining of difference that might result in constructing the other as “an exotic alien.” S. Bordo (1990), p 141.

<sup>65</sup> N. Harstock (1990), p 171.

<sup>66</sup> S. Bordo (1990), p 141.

<sup>67</sup> S. Bordo (1990), p 146.

<sup>68</sup> S. Bordo (1990), p 148.

<sup>69</sup> S. Bordo (1990), p 152.



of writers from marginalized groups. I will discuss the possibility of finding women's common experiences, the role of the concept of survival in the formation of collective identities, and the centrality of gender in our culture. Postmodernists and writers from marginalized groups had problematized this project, but I believe that it is possible to reach an agreement between the need of preserving the use of "women" as a collective identity, as it is argued for by Harstock and Bordo, and the changes that are necessary to introduce in such a concept to avoid essentialism and universalism, as suggested by postmodernist and postcolonial writers.

### 3.3 Towards a feminist postmodernism.

Many postmodernist women have taken on board some of the difficulties that postmodernism posits for feminism; but, even so, they have claimed that it is possible to encompass both. N. Fraser and L. Nicholson argue that it is possible to develop a feminist and postmodernist theory. They underline the common elements in both theories, and their characterization of a postmodern feminism is compatible with many of the most recent theories in feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint epistemology: *"postmodern feminism need not abandon the large theoretical tools needed to address large political problems (...) theory here would be explicitly historical, attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and period and to that of different groups within societies and periods (...) postmodern feminist theory would be non-universalist (...) it would replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity, with plural and complexly constructed constructions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others (...) would be pragmatical and fallibilist (...) In short, this theory would look more like a tapestry composed of threads of many different hues than one woven in a single color."*<sup>70</sup>

To conclude this section, I will point out that the postmodernist critique has been useful in constructing better feminist theories. Nevertheless, I think that it is important to avoid the tendency of postmodernism to dissolve categories that are central to feminism. We can

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<sup>70</sup> Fraser and Nicholson (1990), p 35.



change the content of the categories, but it is necessary to maintain them.

#### **4. Rethinking Feminist Standpoint Epistemology.**

There have been several attempts to develop theories that can be considered within the feminist standpoint tradition, but that avoid the problems that classic standpoint presented.<sup>71</sup> At the beginning of the chapter I claimed that, in this section, I will deal with some of these problems. I will argue that, even if we acknowledge that there is more than one axis of oppression, and that power imbalances imbue all our relationships, it is still possible to argue that some perspectives are epistemologically privileged over others. I will be putting together one of the central concerns of postmodernist thinkers (acknowledging diversity) with the main claim of standpoint epistemology (marginalized discourses are epistemically privileged). By acknowledging difference, I will accept the existence of a diversity of points of view, and I will argue that plurality does not imply relativism. I will introduce a theory that argues that the bases of objective knowledge are the experiences of marginalized people, and I will sketch the difficulties that obtaining such a knowledge has to face.<sup>72</sup>

At the beginning of this chapter I argued that nowadays it is difficult to classify feminist epistemologists under a single category within the area. In this section I will analyse the work of three feminist philosophers whose work is taken to be versions of standpoint feminism, but that shows the influence of the other two types of feminism.

##### **4.1 S. Harding.**

S. Harding's theory accounts for diversity, and the situatedness of knowledge and, also, it privileges the knowledge of those in the margins. Therefore, her work has traces of

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<sup>71</sup> A summary of these problems is: As a feminist theory, it has been charged with not acknowledging that there are several axes of domination. Therefore, it was unaware that gender is not the only important variable for analysing oppression. It was guilty of universalism because it did not take difference into account, and it was also essentialist because it naturalized gender differences. From an epistemological perspective, it has been argued that their use of experience is inadequate and that it is necessary to explain the formation of a feminine point of view without recourse to the object relation theory.

<sup>72</sup> As I have already said, I will leave the question of experiences and the details of how to form collective identities for the next chapter.



postmodern and post-colonial thought and of standpoint epistemology. She has also been classified as a follower of naturalized epistemology, a category that it is usually included within feminist empiricism. Harding is a good example of how the different strands of feminist epistemology can influence each other.

Her work has been very influential, mainly for the development of a new concept of objectivity that she calls Strong Objectivity. Her main premise is that all knowledge is biased, and that the only way of obtaining proper objectivity is by becoming aware of the values that our knowledge supports. In order to do that, we should study the contexts in which knowledge is produced, to disclose the values at play in the context of discovery, and we should take into account the experiences of those who are at the margins. As Harding says, *"starting from the perspective of women's lives makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry."*<sup>73</sup> Her theory is very valuable because she tries to encompass the existence of different discourses in order to produce more objective knowledge. Her concept of objectivity is very different from that traditionally linked to disembodied and interchangeable knowledge.

Despite the many contributions of Harding's theory to feminist epistemology, I will argue against some of her presuppositions. My main argument will be directed at her claim that everybody can produce knowledge starting from the lives of marginalized people as well as they do themselves. I will argue that there are limits to the type of knowledge that we can obtain from the lives of others. I will support the view that there are types of knowledge that can be produced only by those actually living those lives. I will devote chapter 5 supporting my claims. In the next section, I will summarize the views of a feminist philosopher who supports my conclusions.

#### **4.2 P. Hill-Collins.**

P. Hill Collins work is close to that of early standpoint feminists, while, at the same time, she recognises some positive elements in the work of postmodernist, taking on board some of their criticisms against standpoint feminist epistemology, mainly in relation to

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<sup>73</sup> S. Harding (1986), p 150.



concept of power. She believes race and gender are not the only aspects that oppress black women, there are other axes of oppression such as class, age and religion, that have an influence in the position that black women have in society. She also argues that *"depending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed."*<sup>74</sup> Therefore, we should shift from an "additive" model of oppression, that is from a model that sums up to how many axes of oppression each individual is subjected, to a model that stresses the interlocking nature of oppression.

P.Hill-Collins is aware of the pervasive nature of oppression, but she also claims that there are epistemic positions that are privileged over others. The belonging to these epistemic groups is the product of marginalization. Marginalization always occurs when there are groups that are defined as outside the norm. Individuals who are considered to be outside the norm, are aware of their difference. This awareness takes place in the daily negotiations with themselves and others to find their own space. By doing so, they are made more aware than those who belong to the norm of the mechanisms of exclusion.

The experiences that will give rise to the Black feminist consciousness are those of lack of fit between what they are supposed to be and their lives. They became particularly able to point out the way in which race structures our culture and society and, therefore, they develop critical skills that are very valuable if we want to obtain objective knowledge of the type argued for by Harding. Hill Collins points out that as well as a critical stance, *"Like other subordinate groups, African-American women have not only developed a distinctive women standpoint but have done so by using alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge."*<sup>75</sup> Marginalization provides marginalized subject with a critical stance, and with alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge.

Some writers, such as bell hook claim that all Black women are Black feminists, because she considers that *"living as Black women provides experiences to stimulate a Black feminist consciousness."*<sup>76</sup> In this case, the oppression that Black women have to confront

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<sup>74</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990), p 225.

<sup>75</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990), p 202.

<sup>76</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990), p 19.



is what provides them with some experiences from which a feminist consciousness arises. All black women have the necessary experiences to develop an special point of view, a particular knowledge. Hill Collins argues that these experiences are not sufficient in themselves *"being Black and female may expose African-American women to certain common experiences, which in turn may predispose us to a distinctive group consciousness, but it in no way guarantees that such a consciousness will develop among all women or that it will be articulated as such by the group."*<sup>77</sup>

As I will explain in the following paragraphs, Hill-Collins considers that black women are the **only ones capable of producing black feminist knowledge**. This is a central difference between Harding and Hill Collins. I agree with Hill-Collins, but by doing so, I have to face one of the main problems for standpoint epistemology: an epistemology that privileges the standpoint of the marginalized has to face the problem of diversity. There is more than one axis of oppression, so which is the one that should be privileged?. If we accept that more than one group should be privileged, then, we have to decide how to articulate together the different discourses that have been marginalized.

It has been argued that the common experience of being oppressed allows the member of the different oppressed groups to understand better each other's situations. For instance, being a black woman in a racist society provides you with good grounds to develop a feminist interest. Apart from facilitating the recognition of other marginalized stances, the existence of more than one marginalized discourse is necessary for the development of each one of them. Hill-Collins, claims that a standpoint has to be acquired, that the experiences of individuals have to be articulated within a social group, but the appropriate conditions for this to happen do not always occur: *"African-American women as a group may have experiences that provide us with a unique angle of vision. But expressing a collective, self-defined Black feminist consciousness is problematic precisely because dominant groups have a vested interest in suppressing such thought."*<sup>78</sup> In order for a black feminist thought to develop it is essential a collaboration with other groups of women, first, to articulate their identity as a collective, and to allow the necessary political

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<sup>77</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990), p 25.

<sup>78</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990), p 25.



climate to develop in order to be able to express their consciousness, and second, they need the collaboration of other groups to become aware of the biases in their own theories.

Hill Collins work states that black feminist knowledge can be produced only by black feminist women. Nevertheless, she is aware that black women as a group would benefit from the collaboration of other groups. Therefore, it seems that even if there is more than one axis of oppression, we can find common ground between the different marginalized groups that allows them to cooperate. In the next section, I will point out some of the difficulties of understanding across differences. But if we could find ways of understanding across differences, and of forming alliances between different groups, the production of feminist knowledge would benefit. I will argue in the next chapter, that the collaboration between different women's groups is not only desirable on epistemic grounds, but also necessary for the formation of "women" as a collective identity.

#### **4.3 D. Haraway.**

D. Haraway attempts to merge postmodernist and standpoint feminism. She argues that all knowledge is situated knowledge, produced from particular locations which are defined culturally, socially, and historically, but that also depend on particular forms of embodiment. In agreement with S. Harding, she claims that, if we are going to attempt to obtain objectivity, we cannot forget the situated nature of knowledge and we have to accept the existence of more than one point of view. As she puts it very clearly "*feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge's.*"<sup>79</sup> In a later chapter I will spell out the consequences of the embodied nature of our knowledge, but now I will simply underline that it implies abandoning the ideal of objectivity as interchangeability, and also puts some limits on the dream of being able to see from the point of view of any other situated knower.<sup>80</sup> In this sense, there are clear differences between the work of Haraway, and Harding's work.

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<sup>79</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 581.

<sup>80</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 583 "all these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another's point of view."



I have already signaled that Haraway is close to the standpoint epistemology idea that those who have been subordinated have a more desirable epistemological perspective. She claims that *"the subjugated have a decent chance to be on the god trick and all its dazzling-and therefore, blinding-illuminations. 'Subjugated' standpoints are preferred because they seem to promise more adequate, sustained, objective transforming accounts of the world."*<sup>81</sup> Nevertheless, she stresses how their insights are not the product of a more natural, innocent, less constructed set of experiences, but rather, due to the acknowledgment of their own fragmented identity. She thinks that there are no innocent points of view, all our perceptions are grounded on *"translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life."*<sup>82</sup>

We should privilege the perspective of the oppressed because of their critical and creative potential but we must be aware of two important issues, first, we should not romanticize these locations, they are also open to critical reassessment and second, given that it is not possible to see from the perspective of the "other", we cannot benefit from their epistemic findings unless we engage in a serious dialogue with them, with all the difficulties that this entails. At the center of epistemology should be the development of ways in which the conversation between different theories is made possible.<sup>83</sup> We cannot see from the point of view of the other, but the communication is possible because we all belong to more than one group, so we can find common ground with at least some of the knowers who belong to other groups.

Regarding the question of the formation of collective identities, Haraway attempts to escape the essentialism present in other types of standpoint by arguing for a concept of identity (group identity) based on coalition, instead of claiming that belonging to groups is a question of being identical members. This concept of identity allows for differences between the group members. And it also relies, as it was the case with P. Hill-Collins, on the collaboration between the members of different epistemic groups. I will analyse this concept in detail in the next chapter.

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<sup>81</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p584.

<sup>82</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 583.

<sup>83</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 584.



Even if it is possible to find common ground between different communities and the theories that they develop, we still have to face the question of relativism. Do we choose between different theories or do we give the same value to all of them? Haraway provides us with an interesting answer.

In previous sections, I have explained that if we want to obtain more objective knowledge, we have to rely on the theories provided by different epistemic groups, so I have focused my analysis mainly on the relations between the knowers. This is the type of theory favoured by standpoint epistemologies, who are mainly interested in disclosing the ways in which knowledge is mediated by power relations. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the chapter, when I explained feminist empiricism, I underlined the importance that empirical adequacy has for some feminists: this type of theory is mainly interested in the relations between knowledge and the world, so a good theory will represent the world faithfully. Haraway adopts a position that diverges from both of them.

On the one hand, she shares an interest ,with feminist empiricists, in the empirical adequacy of theories, because she claims that our discourses about the world have to be, in a sense, faithful to it. But on the other hand, she rejects the traditional picture that considers the objects of knowledge as inert and passive, so she envisions the world as an agent. She claims that *"Situated knowledge require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic in his unique agency and his authorship of objective knowledge."*<sup>84</sup> According to Haraway *"Accounts of a 'real' world do not, then depend on a logic of 'discovery' but on a power-charged social relation of 'conversation'. the world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favor of a master decoder. the codes of the world are not still, waiting only to be read. The world is not raw material for humanization."*<sup>85</sup> She conceives the world as a trickster with an independent sense of humor, so it escapes our best efforts to conceptualize it. She claims that, from some perspectives, those of the subjugated, it is possible to obtain more faithful representations of the world, but, given that the world is an agent, it is important to

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<sup>84</sup> D. Haraway, (1988), p 593.

<sup>85</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 593.



remember that we cannot completely apprehend it once and for all, because the aspects that it is showing in a determinate moment might be changed later on. Therefore, from some positions we can see some aspects of the world, and from other positions, other aspects. One description can be more appropriate at a particular moment, and less appropriate at another. Also, if we take into account that subjugated positions are not innocent, we have to favour diversity, in order to be able to point out the biases in our own theories.

## **5. Conclusion.**

In this section I have analyzed the three main tendencies in feminist epistemology. I have shown how the influence of other types of feminist epistemology has changed earlier forms of standpoint epistemology. I have also shown how, nevertheless, the bases of it feminist standpoint epistemology are still widely accepted, so many feminist accept that: Material differences produce epistemic differences and those at the margins have a privilege perspective.

In this thesis I will offer epistemic arguments to support both claims. I will also try to solve some of the difficulties that I have highlighted in the new forms of standpoint epistemology: I will show how it is possible to ground knowledge on the experiences of marginalized groups without making a naive use of experience, I will explain how it is possible to have collective identities that do not further the oppression of those who belong to these groups. I will support my claim that it is not possible to produce knowledge from the point of view of marginalized people unless we are one of them, and finally, I will try to offer protocols to smooth the difficulties of understanding across differences, which is central to obtaining objective knowledge.



## CHAPTER 3

### O. Introduction.

In the previous chapter I summed up the three types of feminist epistemology. I focused mainly on standpoint epistemology and tried to support a theory that escaped the criticisms directed against it. I left out of it two of the main questions that standpoint epistemology has to face: its use of experience, and the formation of collective identities. Both questions are related and I will try to solve them together.

In this chapter I will develop a concept of experience that would satisfy the requirements of postmodernism. I will argue for a concept of experience that does not essentialize the knowers, that accounts for difference and that acknowledges that human perception is mediated by concepts, that is, I will be talking of a non-raw concept of experience.

Once I have defined a usable concept of experience, I will argue that it is closely knitted with the formation of collective identities. I will analyse diverse ways of using experiences as the bases for collective identities.

Finally, I will recall the different ways in which experience has been used in feminist theories as the bases of knowledge to see if it is maintainable as an epistemological basis.

### 1. A “*naive*” use of experience as the basis for marginalized knowledge

In previous chapters I have explained how feminists and other theorists have argued that our scientific theories consistently use the experiences of the ruling groups as the basis for an objective universal view of the world. This tendency is present in the social sciences as well as in literature, history, etc... Early feminist theories attempted to introduce the experiences of women in mainstream academy and culture, by writing from the point of view of women, or by searching for the work of women that has been undervalued and forgotten. They have done this reconstructive work in two ways: by analysing the methodologies used in our sanctioned ways of producing knowledge to determine if they



could be changed to account for a more plural view of reality; and also by keeping the current methodologies and simply adding those different perspectives to the current body of knowledge. Therefore, while some feminists have explored the ways in which knowledge is produced and validated in order to introduce changes in the processes, others decided that in order to obtain a better picture of reality what was necessary was to produce knowledge from the lives of those that have been ignored in the past by following the current methodologies or by introducing slight variations.

In this section I will refer to the work of J.W.Scott, who criticises foundationalist accounts of knowledge which are grounded on experience. She argues against the current rewriting of history by making use of the narratives of subjects that belong to marginalized groups, because it has been assumed that those narratives give us a glimpse to a more real way of looking at the world. It is easy to see how her criticisms can be used to argue against feminist standpoint epistemology, or against any other epistemology that uses the experiences of those who have been oppressed as the basis to ground a better knowledge of reality. Scott uses an excerpt taken from the biography of the gay artist S.Delany to illustrate (and criticise) the use of experience in a foundational way.

S.Delany's account of his first visit to a bathhouse in 1963 is an example of how experiencing the world in a new way (in this case "seeing it"), helps the subject to make sense of aspects of the world that seemed incomprehensible before, given his previous preconceptions. In a sense, his experience precedes his conceptual organisation, because it is the basis of a new way of explaining the world. His experiences as a gay man are the material for a different narrative on the lives of homosexual people. Delany reports that in the 1950s he shared the common held belief that homosexuals were (in his own words) "isolated perverts", therefore when he saw many gay people together in the bathhouse, he had for the first time a sense of the political power derived from being gay. He said that *"the first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies"*<sup>1</sup>, it is this "seeing" that enables him to comprehend the relationships between his personal activities and his politics. Delany's description of how he acquired a conscience of the sexual politics involved in being gay, can be taken to be foundational because his

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by J. Scott (1991), p 775.



account seems to imply that “ *Knowledge is gained through vision, vision is a direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In this conceptualisation the visible is privileged. Writing is then put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission- the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral), experience.*”<sup>2</sup>

Scott argues that the incorporation of those experiences within history is positive because a point of view that has been hidden from history becomes visible and it is made obvious that particular groups have been marginalized, but it is negative because while historians accept that those experiences have an evidential value just in the light of prevalent discourses, the mere fact of using them at all perpetuates the discourses that excluded them in the first place. Furthermore, experience is mediated by our language, and the subject who has acquired a language is constituted by it, her vision is tainted by her language. So if we ground our epistemology on an “unmediated” experience we are not accounting for how language has structured the epistemic subject in the first place<sup>3</sup>. If we want to produce accounts of reality that include the experiences of those who have been excluded, we have to avoid taking those experiences as natural and focus in exploring the ways in which they have been generated as different and also the ways in which the language that supports them constructs the subjects as different. She claims that “*The project of making experience visible precludes analysis of the workings of this system and of its historicity; instead, it reproduces its terms.*”<sup>4</sup>

The most direct consequence of taking those experiences as “raw” and the knowers as unmediated by discourses, is that both the knower and the experience are naturalised in their difference. Scott claims that , “*the evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world.*”<sup>5</sup> In the example provided by Delany, if we take his experience as foundational, we are

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<sup>2</sup> J. Scott (1991), p775.

<sup>3</sup> J. Scott (1991) argues that “*questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subject are constituted as different in the first place, about how one’s vision is structured - about language (or discourse) and history- are left aside*” p 777.

<sup>4</sup> J. Scott(1991) .p 779.

<sup>5</sup> J. Scott (1991). p777.



naturalising the homosexual subject as different because : *“homosexual practices are seen as the result of desire, conceived as a natural force operating outside or in opposition to social regulation.(...) Because this kind of (homosexual desire) cannot ultimately be repressed-because experience is there- it inverts institutions to accommodate itself”*<sup>6</sup> Scott’s remarks are very reasonable. The example provided by Delany shows how the experience of entering a room in which gay people is the majority is enlightening just in the context of a preconception of what being homosexual implies (at the time, implied to be isolated). Delany experienced being part of a marginalized group as empowering because he experienced his homosexuality in that historically mediated light. This is a vision that it is just possible within the constraints of a discourse that portrays homosexuality as outside the norm. Delany’s experience cannot be taken to be raw, or to be meaningful outside of discourses.

Scott considers that if we acknowledge that experience is not transparent and that subjects are discursively constructed, we can make a positive use of “experience”. She would read Delany’s account in the following way: *“Another kind of reading,(...) sees this event not as the discovery of truth (conceived as the reflection of a prediscursive reality), but as the substitution of one interpretation for another. Delany presents this substitution as a conversion experience, a clarifying moment, after which he sees (that is, understands) differently. But there is all the difference between subjective perceptual clarity and transparent vision; one does not necessarily follow from the other even if the subjective state is metaphorically presented as a visual experience.”*<sup>7</sup>

Her position can be summarised in the following way: experience is not transparent, it is mediated by our discourses and by the situated nature of individuals. In reporting the experiences of marginalized individuals we have to avoid supporting the structures of oppression that make them marginal in the first place, therefore we should avoid naturalising them. Focusing on those experiences make us forget that the important issue to clarify is how those experiences have been constituted. And finally, what those

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<sup>6</sup> J. Scott (1991),p 794.

<sup>7</sup> J. Scott (1991),p 779



experiences report is not a true view of the world, but rather another interpretation of the world.

## 2. Problems with Scott's concept of experience.

I disagree with the last two assertions. First of all, I disagree with her claim that by focusing on the experiences of those who are at the margins, we cannot engage with the causes of marginalization critically. I think that once we are aware that subjects are constituted discursively, we can rely on experience as the basis of knowledge claims without perpetuating the discursive processes that produce those experiencing subjects. In actual fact I will argue that the production of those claims will destabilise the ruling discourses. Second, even if I agree with her characterisation of experience as mediated, I think that some of the experiences of marginalized subjects are not adequately described as alternative interpretations of the world. They are not just an interpretation among others, but rather, I believe that they are more accurate descriptions of certain aspects of the world. Scott's characterisation does not capture the disruptive influence that experience can have in our discourses .

In this section I will argue that it is possible to make a different use of "experience" in epistemology, that avoids characterising it as "raw", and also, that allows us to use it as disruptive of existent discourses.

Scott accepts that even if experience and epistemic subjects are discursively mediated, and their relation with the world is somehow dependent on their discourses, there is still scope for some indeterminacy. First, she accept that the world is not completely captured by our language. Scott argues that even if there is a certain amount of linguistic determinism, in the sense that our experiences are mediated by language, there is still a realm of irreducibility that she calls the *literary* : "*the kind of reality I have in mind would not assume a direct correspondence between words and things, nor confine itself to simple meanings, nor aim for the resolution of contradictions. (...) rather it would grant to "the literary" an integral, even irreducible status of its own.*"<sup>8</sup> Second, she accept that

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<sup>8</sup> J. Scott (1991), p 794.



experience can be disruptive of our preconceptions. *“subjects are constituted discursively and experience is a linguistic event (it does not happen outside established meanings) but neither is it confined to a fixed order of meaning. Since discourse is by definition shared, experience is collective as well as individual. Experience can both confirm what is already known (we are what we have learned to see) and upset what has been taken for granted (when different meanings are in conflict) or to resolve it - that is what is meant by ‘learning from experience’. through not everyone learns the same lesson or learns it at the same time or in the same way).”*<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, even if she accepts those elements of indeterminacy, I find her concept of experience too dependent on language and discourse. In this thesis I will argue that even if there seems to be a direct correspondence between our words and the world that they describe, occasionally, we are able to sense that both do not fit completely, I will therefore support the view that our experiences are not completely determined by language. I will also claim that experience can upset what it is taken for granted, not because experiences can be subsumed under different descriptions bringing “together” different pre-existent meanings that create a sense of startlement in the knower, but rather because experience can make us aware that the existent discourse is insufficient to capture aspects of reality that became salient to us through our engagement with the world<sup>10</sup>. I will offer arguments to support the view that marginalized subjects are more able to capture those aspects of reality than those belonging to non-marginalized groups. Finally I will argue that it is possible to use the experiences of marginalized groups without reinforcing the discourses that marginalized them.

### **3. Experience as linguistically mediated.**

I have said that Scott acknowledges a distinction between concepts and the reality subjacent to them, and that she also accepts that there is a certain indeterminacy between our descriptions of the world and the world itself, but that nevertheless, she links the

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<sup>9</sup> J. Scott (1991),p 793

<sup>10</sup> In chapter 5 I will argue that we have conceptual and non-conceptual mental content, both of them are linked together in our perception of the world, so even if we are able to capture aspects of the world that are not completely captured by our concepts, our perception is never of “raw” data.



linguistic and the extralinguistic too closely together. Her account is specially unsatisfactory when she classifies the experiences of marginalized subjects as mere “interpretations”. In this section I will offer some arguments to support my claim that her account is unsatisfactory, while still retaining some of the positive traits of her characterisation of experience.

First of all, I will show how important it is to avoid collapsing experience into language. In order to explain the disruptive nature of experience it is necessary to keep this difference in perspective.

S.Stone- Mediatore makes an important point against Scott’s reading of Delany’s work which reflects the problematic approach to experience that poststructuralists offer: *“Delany’s experience is constituted in his interpretation of experience, yet the interpretation is guided by his experience and reflections on these. When Scott describes the memoir as ‘discursive production of knowledge of the self’ she recognises one side of the paradox, the constitutive role of language. But she overlooks the experience that enables Delany to use language in the particular way he does. The short shift that Scott gives to this motivating experience is evidence of her failure to explicate ‘subjective perceptual clarity’ or to explain the relation between Delany’s experience and his writing, Scott cannot distinguish the text’s value from other representations of the gay identity or the sexual revolution; it is merely the substitution of one interpretation for another.”*<sup>11</sup> Even if we accept that Delany’s experiences as a gay male are mediated by the ruling discourses about homosexuality, it is important to realise that his experience in the bathhouse was challenging those discourses, and the challenge was not perceived as a logical clash between two different interpretation of the same fact, but rather it was perceived as a revelation that the preconceptions that he had about homosexuality were unsuitable to describe what he was experiencing. And this awareness would allow Delany to search for other types of discourses that would account for his experiences. When Delany entered the bathhouse he did not have an alternative discourse to inform those experiences, even if this does not mean that he had a completely unmediated experience.

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<sup>11</sup> S. Stone Mediatore (1998), p 121.



What makes Delany's experience so valuable from an epistemological point of view is precisely that it challenges the discourse that constituted it in the first place, it shows how normative heterosexuality cannot account for the way in which the world can be experienced by non-heterosexuals. Delany's experiences show to us gaps in our descriptions of reality that would be unaccounted for otherwise.

Second, what it is overlooked in Scott's discourse is that Delany is constituted as the sort of subject that can have those experiences not just by the discourses that construct him as a gay male (who is also black and married), but rather he is primarily constituted by the material circumstances that make him the recipient of those inscriptions in the first place. His experiences could not be had just by anybody that happens to enter the bathhouse, they are the product of a particular type of embodiment in particular social and historical circumstances. And this implies, on the words of Stone Mediatore, that Scott fails to contextualize effectively the linguistic practices. *"When Scott defines experience as an epistemological phenomenon constituted by local discursive practices, she abstracts knowledge practices from the broader political and economic systems in which knowledge circulates. To be sure, Scott intends to 'situate and contextualize language', and she sometimes acknowledges that discursive practices sustain and are sustained by an extradiscursive 'reality' However, she stops short of specifying what it is that we situate and contextualize language in relation to, or explicating all that she lumps under 'reality'. Leaving this extradiscursive world vague, she can dismiss as positivist any attempt to associate experience or consciousness with a structurally determined social location."*<sup>12</sup>

Later in the thesis I will explain how those experiences are socially constituted, even if not linguistically determined, and I will support my claim that their epistemological worth is closely dependent on the fact that they have been produced in those particular contexts. I think that it suffices now to say that Scott's failure to contextualize the production of the discourses make her unable to explain how Delany's experiences escape the hegemonic discourses challenging linguistic determinism. In order to do it, she will have to explain how they are mediated by the particular situation of Delany as a knower, which is what

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<sup>12</sup> S. Stone Mediatore (1998), p 126.



constitute them as particularly valuable epistemically. Unless she develops a concept of experience that does not collapse into language, she will be unable to explain why this position is epistemically valuable. And she has to explain it because she accepts that there is a perceptual clarity in Delany's account, which accounts better for what it is being seen than other possible interpretations. Mediatore points to this particular problem in Scott's theory : "*The problem is that all readings are as good as any other, it is not possible to explain why Delany's experience is more clear than any other, or why it should be preferable. She cannot explain why Delany's description of the Turkish baths will make us perceive a tension between his conceptual system and his experience, or how it is possible to feel this tension in the first place.*"<sup>13</sup>

#### **4. A non-naïve use of experience as the grounds of marginalized knowledge.**

I favour a revaluation of the experiences of subjects who belong to marginalized groups. This experience is mediated by language, but also mediated by their embodiment, and by the economic and social structures of the world that they inhabit. Taking on board some of the points that Scott was making, I will argue that belonging to particular groups is not enough for the subjects to have epistemically valuable experiences. In order to be able to articulate them, they must be conscious of their non-natural status. Individuals who belong to marginalized groups can develop this awareness of having been constructed by discourses due to their locations, that allow them to see the gaps in our conceptual system and make them deeply critical of our hegemonic descriptions of the world. The experiences narrated by the marginalized subject is neither transparent, nor innocent, but it contains the seeds of change within it.

One of the most important criticisms that were put forward by Scott regarding the use of experiences of marginalized groups to ground knowledge was that it precluded an analysis of the process of formation of collective identities. She insisted that we should avoid *naturalising the subjects* that belong to those groups because they are constructed by discourses that make them marginal. In the previous section I argued that Delany's

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<sup>13</sup> S. Stone Mediatore (1998), p 122.



experiences were the product of his particular embodiment and cultural and historical location: he had this particular experience because he was a gay male. The attribution of identity on the basis of material circumstances seems to fall into the naturalising move that was so rightly criticised by Scott.

The first step in the search for a non-naïve type of experience will be to find a definition for collective identities that do not reproduce the mechanisms of oppression that marginalized those subjects in the first place. Mohanty analyses two different ways of constructing identities that provide the basis for common experiences, which are offered by R.Morgan and by B.Jhonson Reagon. Both of them try to relocate women's experiences at the centre of feminist theory, while acknowledging that gender is both produced and uncovered by feminist discourses.

#### A) *Common experiences as the basis for identities.*

R.Morgan, editor of the influential book *Sisterhood is Global*, presents the formation of groups (in her case of women as a group) as the product of sharing common experiences. In the book that she edited it is suggested that “*universal sisterhood is produced (...) through specific assumptions about women as a cross-culturally singular, homogeneous group with the same interests, perspectives and goals and similar experiences.*”<sup>14</sup> She considers that women have a shared world-view due to a common condition, experienced by all females, which is the suffering inflicted by a universal patriarchy. According to R.Morgan, what binds women together is their experience of oppression as females: “*Morgan assumes universal sisterhood on the basis of women's shared opposition to androcentrism, an opposition which, according to her, grows directly out of women's shared status as its victims.*”<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, women have the role of truth tellers, given their special access to those experiences “*women have some kind of privileged access to the 'real' the 'truth', and can elicit 'trust' from other women purely on the basis of their being not-male.*”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>C. Talpade- Mohandy (1998), p 257. Further arguments in C.Talpade-Mohandy(1988).

<sup>15</sup>C. Talpade-Mohandy (1998), p 260.

<sup>16</sup>C. Talpade- Mohandy (1998), p261.



There are a number of problems with this approach to collective identity and also with her account of experience. In the first place, by accepting that all women have a common experience of oppression, she is letting herself open to the accusation of essentialism that we have explored in the previous chapter. I have already said that in order to be able to make use of the experiences in the production of knowledge the knowers have to be aware of their own situation as marginalized subjects, so not all women will be aware of the oppression that they suffer, and therefore, not all of them will be able to make use of those experiences to create a different world view. R.Morgan presupposes in her work that in order to create a global sisterhood we have to identify with all women, and this implies erasing important differences, and actually implies the exclusion of those women that are unable to identify with the majority. Finally, as I will analyse in the next section, the experience of oppression is too vague and too general a concept to be useful to articulate any meaningful epistemological claim.

## B) Coalition identities.

B.J.Reagon claims that feminism was born out of the awareness of the oppression that women suffer. Due to its origin, feminism it is able to create a 'safe place' for some women, while at the same time, it necessarily enforces a policy of exclusion that keeps out some women that are also marginalized for being females. B.J.Reagon considers that this is the dynamics of any group that has its origin in the acknowledgement of oppression, they always offer a home for some and exclude others that have a right to belong to them. She compares the belonging to those groups with "feeling at home". By that she means that being a member of those particular groups provides the members with a sense of safety which can be obtained by keeping outside those who are a threat. The creation of secure nurturing spaces allow their members to grow, producing a sense of security to the members, that make them feel that they can accept in their groups some of the outsiders that seem to have a right to belong. Those were excluded in the first place because they were different. The inclusion of "difference" in the safe spaces, has the important consequence that *"the room does not feel like the room anymore. And it ain't home no more. It is not a womb no more. And you can't feel comfortable no more. and what happens at that point has to do with trying to do too much in it. You don't do no coalition*



*building in a womb. (...) Coalition work is not work done in your home. coalition work has to be done in the streets.”*<sup>17</sup>

In relation to the women's movement, it is clear that the acceptance of different groups of women have put a lot of strain in the viability of the feminist project, it seems that trying to make a common “home” for different groups is an almost impossible task. Reagon says that trying to make a “home” for all women is not the right move because it is in the nature of homes that others are excluded. The alternative is to make coalitions, but we should take into account that it is not possible to make coalitions inside homes, making coalitions is a dangerous business, it is radically different from the globalizing move of sisterhood supported by R.Morgan: *“That is the nature of coalition. You have to give it all. It is not to feed you; you have to feed it. and it's a monster. It never gets enough. It always wants more. So you better be sure you got your home someplace for you to go so that you will not become a martyr to the coalition.”*<sup>18</sup> Reagon depiction of coalition underlines the difficulties of the task, while at the same time, exposes its inevitability *“you do not go into coalition because you just like it. the only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive.”*<sup>19</sup> Survival is the central issue for Reagon, it is not the experience of a common oppression, but rather the commonality of struggle that will allow women to form coalitions. This has interesting epistemological implications, and Mohanty points them out in that in relation to Reagon's suggestion *“instead of separating experience and politics and basing the later on the former, she emphasises the politics that always define and inform experience.”*<sup>20</sup>

While in the first model of group identity the commonality of experience was presupposed and that was the basis for the grouping of women, in this model it is the sense of belonging to a group that permeates those experiences. The experiences are not previous to the coalition making, but rather are informed by it.

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<sup>17</sup> B.J. Reagon (1998), p 245.

<sup>18</sup> B.J. Reagon (1998), p 246.

<sup>19</sup> B.J. Reagon (1998), p 242.

<sup>20</sup> C. Talpade-Mohanty (1998), p 266.



c) Mohanty on the politics of location.

Mohanty analyses both models and argues for the creation of what she calls a “politics of location”. The acquisition of a particular political identity, such as being a woman, or being gay, or being black, is a process that mixes experiences that are taken to be personal, together with the intervention of groups and theories or discourses that shape those. She says that “ *For me, a comparative reading of Morgan’s and Reagon’s documents of activism precipitates the recognition that experience of the self, which is often discontinuous and fragmented, must be historized before it can be generalised into a collective vision. In other words, experience must be historically interpreted and theorised if it is to become the basis of feminist solidarity and struggle, and it is at this moment that an understanding of the politics of location proves crucial.* ”<sup>21</sup>

At the beginning of this section I claimed that being the member of a marginalized group is not enough to provide the subject with the experiences that will ground different theories, but rather, it is central to this possibility that the subject recognises the belonging to a particular group which provides the basis to make sense of those experiences. I would agree with Mediatore who agrees with Mohanty’s view that “*critical knowledge and political consciousness does not follow automatically from living in a marginalized social location: they develop only with the struggle against oppression, when this struggle includes the work of remembering and renarrating obscured experiences of resistance to, or tension with, social and cultural norms. Such experiences are not transparent or prior to language, for they contain contradictions and take shape in reaction to culturally given images and stories. Therefore, the narration of such experience is no mere reporting of spontaneous consciousness. On the contrary, it involves rethinking and rearticulating obscured, often painful memories, and forging connections between those memories and collective struggle. Mohanty’s insight is that this arduous and creative process of remembering, reprocessing, and reinterpreting lived experience in a collective context- and not the mere substitution of one interpretation or another- transform*

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<sup>21</sup> C. Talpade-Mohanty (1998), p 269.



*experience, enabling one to claim subjecthood and to identify with oppositional struggles.*”<sup>22</sup>

The basis for the formation of group identities is to become aware of the many axes of domination that cross our lives, because out of the paralysis that this realisation causes, we will become aware that we are constructed by the discourses that support those axes of domination, and out of this knowledge, and the experiences that this situation procures, we can begin creating common identities. The process is described by G. Anzaldua, who finds herself defined by different categories that seem to contradict each other. She inhabits different worlds, and she finds difficult to negotiate a coherent self out of all of them: *“Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught between los intersticios, the spaces between the different world she inhabits”*<sup>23</sup> her reaction is refusing to construct a coherent self that will make her decide between different possibilities therefore; *“She begins to create herself as intersubjective in a space and a place in the interstices of multiple and simultaneous conflicting power structures in which to carry on conversations, with herself and with others, and to strategize”*<sup>24</sup>. Having fragmented identities means that we belong to more than one group, so we have commonalities and differences with the members of different groups. Fowles explains how Anzaldua and other post-colonial writers propose that we should at the same time accept the simultaneity of borders and also try to mingle them *“Recognition of simultaneity of the conditions of oppression and privilege, together with mingling of imposed differences or ‘borders’, can be used to construct intersubjectivity in ways that make persons available for answering the political calls of the Combahee River Collective, the Bridge writers, Bernice Johnson Reagon, Audre Lorde, and Anzaldua herself to link struggles with different others. Mingling, as a form of “playful ‘world-traveling’” prepares one to venture from “home” into the streets for the purpose of engaging in coalition politics with the many “different others” constituted by the simultaneity of oppressions and privileges under complex domination.”*<sup>25</sup> This is the basis for group identities, that will allow us to have a feminist standpoint that does not rely in universalist premises *“She wants us each to give an*

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<sup>22</sup> S. Stone-Mediatore (1998), p125.

<sup>23</sup> G. Anzaldua quoted by D. Fowles (1997).

<sup>24</sup> D. Fowles (1997), p 117.

<sup>25</sup> D. Fowles (1997), p 118.



*account of our responsibilities in contributing to what is oppressive and privileging, to talk our stories of consciousness raising, all speaking and listening to one another, all recognizing that no one of us, not even all of us together, can have full knowledge of 'the problem' or 'the solution'. Conversing in such a way would be tantamount to engaging a feminist materialist standpoint of intersubjectivity.”*<sup>26</sup>

Andalzua's work is used by Fowles, who argues that by using Andalzua's theory it is possible to build upon Harstock's standpoint feminist theory to include the different perspectives of women within it. By reinterpreting Marx's theory choosing gender instead of class as the ground of a privileged perspective, Harstock underlined the commonalties between women instead of the differences, in a similar line to the one taken by R.Morgan in section a. According to Fowles, Harstock made this mistake because she relied in Marx's "philosophy of the subject."<sup>27</sup> Marx's philosophy of the subject has been analyzed by Benhabib and implies that the subject who was the center of traditional epistemology is substituted by a "collective singular" in which individuals are defined by what they have in common, erasing important differences.<sup>28</sup> Benhabib's analysis of the theory of the subject offers us a the solution that allows us to have a collective identity that allows for difference, while keeping her theory grounded in Marxist theory. The key is his perspective of sensuous finitude that is also present in Harstock. Harstock claims that reality "*itself consists of 'sensuous human activity' practice.*"<sup>29</sup> This means that reality and the individuals are historical and socially constructed. We should apply that view about reality to our view about social relations, the acknowledgment of plurality that make us realize that there is not a single privileged perspective. Fowles reaches the same conclusion as Mediatore and Reagon: we have to make coalitions between different groups in order to obtain a collective identity. In a further chapter I will explore the difficulties of making those coalitions between different groups, but for now it suffices to signal that Andalzua gives some rules to work on those alliances<sup>30</sup>: first we have to make

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<sup>26</sup> D. Fowles (1997), p 117.

<sup>27</sup> D. Fowles (1997), p 113.

<sup>28</sup> D. Fowles (1997), p 113.

<sup>29</sup> D. Fowles (1997), p 112.

<sup>30</sup> Those are summarized by D. Fowles as follows "*First is to remember 'that coalition work attempts to balance power relations and undermine and subvert the system of domination-subordination that affects even our most unconscious thoughts' (...) second is a set of related points, that the assumptions of common ground, singular sisterhood, and need for unity are false. Indeed, 'for you may have to accept*



sure that the coalition's main aim is to subvert the structures of domination; second, we should not sacrifice difference in order to get unity even if this means not getting solutions for the problems; and finally, women of color, and those in the margins have to lead the way.

At the beginning of the section I claimed that I would argue for the existence of a non-naive use of experience as the basis of marginalized knowledge. One of the most important issues that I had to face in order to avoid Scott's criticisms was to prove that it is possible to avoid naturalising the subjects that belong to marginalized groups by being aware that group identity is partially constructed by the hegemonic discourses. I have argued that group identities are not natural groupings, but rather, are acquired. The basis for the formation of a collective identity is the awareness of fragmentation at the level of the self. Individuals became aware that they are defined in relation to different axes of oppression that allow them to align with people belonging to different groups. Collective identities help the subject to make sense of experiences that do not seem to fit the hegemonic conceptual systems. By constructing those experiences within the group, the identity and the sense of belonging are strengthened. Both identities and experiences evolve in a dialectical manner. Neither are given, nor are they completely apprehended by discourses.

One of my criticisms against Scott was that she was unable to explain the disruptive nature of certain types of experiences, in particular, the disruptive nature of the experiences of people who have been kept at the margins. Most of my thesis will be devoted to explain how and why this disruption happens and how it is articulated. I will begin by claiming that experiential knowledge has been unfairly marginalized from our accounts of knowledge, as a first step to explain the nature of those experiences whose epistemological value I am trying to justify. Another of my arguments against Scott was that she collapsed reality into language, in the next section I will begin to sketch a theory that will allow us to establish a

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*that there may be no solutions, resolutions or even agreement ever. The terms solution, resolution and progressing and moving forward are Western dominant cultural concepts'(...) third appears to be the set of moves that constitute feminist identity politics and that foreclose the probability of white women marginalizing and stripping us of our individuality' 'All parties involved in coalitions need to recognise the necessity that women of colour and lesbians define the terms of engagement; that we be listened to. that we articulate who we are, where we have come from (racial past), how we understand oppression to work, how we think we can get out from under, and what strategies we can use in accomplishing the particular tasks we have chosen to perform" D. Fowles (1997), p 108.*



gap between them, without falling into the trap of believing that it is possible to have “raw” experiences.

## **5. The use of experience in feminist epistemology.**

I have claimed that it is possible to ground epistemology in the experiences of those who are at the margins while avoiding the criticisms that have been leveled against it. The type of experience that I have in mind is not completely captured by conceptual schemes, but it is not “raw” experience either. It is an experience that is meaningful from particular perspectives, in that it is invisible from others. The concept of experience that I am referring to is grounded in practices that need communities to sanction them. I have argued that it is possible to talk about epistemic communities without naturalizing the subjects, and that resisting the tendency to naturalization in our theorizing, includes avoiding essentialist and universalist claims.

In my review of different types of epistemology I claimed that, according to feminist empiricism, women can contribute to science with a particular perspective that will allow them to see facts that are not salient to male scientists. I explained that feminist empiricism presupposes this perspective, without explaining why we should have it. Standpoint feminist epistemology explains how this particular perspective (standpoint) is acquired. The basis for the knowledge produced by women is that, given that they are involved in particular practices, they undergo certain experiences which allow them to have some knowledge that others cannot.

In my discussion of standpoint epistemology, I argued that material differences produced differences in experiences, and that privileged knowledge is the product of marginality. In the previous section, I have supported feminist standpoint against the criticisms labeled against it from postmodernism. In chapter 2, I also claimed that, in order to produce more objective knowledge, it is necessary to take into account the perspective of the different groups that are at the margins. I accepted the multiplication of subjugated knowledges, but insisted that it is not possible to see from any other perspective, apart from our own.



Those at the margins have a privileged perspective, which it is not possible to share unless one belongs to their community. The knowledge that this perspective procures for them is based on particular experiences, so it becomes clear that unless a knower has undergone these, he cannot obtain that knowledge.

I explained how those experiences are not raw, and how the belonging to those groups or communities is not “natural”. Both collective identities and experiences are constructed in an interlocking process. I argued that part of the process of the articulation of those experiences consists in the gaining of a consciousness by the members of those groups. Equally, standpoint epistemology insisted that not all women developed a feminist standpoint.

I will argue, in the rest of the chapter, that in order to be able to ground a feminist knowledge on the experiences of women, we have to show how experiences have a dual aspect. On the one hand there has to be a **personal** implication, because in order to have some types of knowledge is necessary to undergone certain experiences and therefore, it is also necessary to partake in particular practices, and on the other hand, I will insist on the importance of **communities** to be able to articulate the experiences and justify the practices. By linking the two aspects of experience together, we will be able to avoid the recourse to “naive” experience as the basis for knowledge: experiences will be had and reconstructed within communities, and the articulation of those will be part of the process of the formation of collective identities or communities.

The end result is that only women can produce women’s knowledge, and that not all women can produce feminist knowledge; just those who have undergone a process of political awareness. I will first examine some of the examples of women’s experiences that have been used in feminist texts to see if they fulfill the necessary characteristics to ground feminist knowledge, and at the end of the chapter, I will assess the claim that just women who have a political awareness can produce women’s knowledge.



In the following sections I will look at some of the examples of women's experiences that have been used in feminist texts. First I will argue, in (5.1), that, even if some of the uses that standpoint epistemologies made of experience were not adequate for grounding a feminist epistemology, there are some aspects of the theory that are very valuable. I will argue that standpoint epistemology can use a concept of experience that encompasses both the personal and the communal aspects of experience, and also that their reliance on marginalized knowledge is central to any feminist epistemology. Then I will analyze other two alternatives. The first one (5.2) focuses on the personal aspect of experience, on the relation between the knower and the experience, and takes experiences to be qualia, and the second possibility underlines the social aspect of experience, and argues that it is possible to ground women's knowledge in women's lives (5.3).

## **5.1 The use of experience in classic standpoint feminism.**

I will argue that there are three aspects of experience as taken by classic standpoint epistemology that are valuable: In the first place, I will argue on the importance of centering our inquiry on marginalized knowledge, by developing further the idea put forward in the previous sections, that oppressed subjects, due to their marginal status are aware of a disjunction between reality and our descriptions of the world. In the past, I have relied on the experiences of Delany to illustrate this point. Now, I will use the work of some feminists (5.1.1). Then I will explain a further element present in early standpoint epistemology but one that has been commonly overlooked, is that, by focusing on the role of communities as the site to develop particular knowledges, feminist standpoint epistemology can avoid the claim that it uses experience in a "naive" way (5.1.2). Finally, in (5.1.3) I will agree with feminist standpoint epistemology, that oppression triggers the development of alternative knowledge, but I will argue that it is not the *experience* of oppression the one that grounds this knowledge but rather that it is the involvement in particular practices that produces epistemic agents with particular characteristics.

### ***5.1.1 The gap between experiences and our conceptual systems.***



It has been argued that it is desirable to include women in science on the basis that, by bringing their experiences into science, they will be able to create new theories, and that they will be more able to point to masculinist biases in theories. The same reasoning could be applied to any other kind of knowledge. I have already pointed out that it is necessary to explain *how* women can use their experiences to ground new knowledge, and I hinted that standpoint epistemology can help us understand the process. In this section I will explain my claim in more detail. I will use examples taken from feminist texts that do not belong to standpoint epistemology, but which can be explained from such a perspective.

Early feminism stressed that the experiences of women have too often become invisible and even distorted in the eyes of the males describing our common world. Charlotte Perkins Gilman offers a good example of it in her biographical novel, *The Yellow Wallpaper*<sup>31</sup>. This work has been interpreted as a description of the feelings of a woman suffering from postnatal depression in a time in which postnatal depression was not diagnosed as such. The author tell us about her efforts to remain sane by resisting the traditional cure for it. The doctor (who is also her husband) rules that she has to be in bed without any distractions such as books, or even paper to write. She needs to read, write and talk to people, but all her needs, her desires, her intuitions about how to overcome the temporary depression were completely ignored.

There are a few senses in which we can say that women's experiences did not fit with the conceptual system of the time. First, they experienced a cluster of "symptoms" that have been classified under the common name of post-natal depression before they were defined as such, and many of them felt that the prescribed cure was not adequate for their needs. I am not arguing that postnatal depression is a natural kind just waiting to be discovered, but rather, that there were women suffering from a cluster of symptoms for which an adequate description or cure was not given, and who would have suggested a different way of treating it if asked about their opinion. Post natal depression as an experience is not "raw", it is socially defined, and its scope changes with time, from a time in which it was not properly distinguished from other types of depression, to the present, in which

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<sup>31</sup> There are many editions of this work, but J. Bates Dock's critical edition (cited in the bibliography) is particularly useful.



many males are also being diagnosed as suffering from it. Nevertheless, the fact that its definition and treatment change does not mean that it did not have a sort of existence before it was diagnosed as such, and that women suffering from it were aware of the fact that they were undergoing a process that was unlike any other “disease” that was recognized at the time.

The second sense in which her experience did not fit with the common apprehension of reality was the frustration that she experienced when she was denied the possibility of doing those things that she felt were more adequate to help her out of that situation, the feeling of impotence when trying to confront or resist the well established ways of subordinating women (whatever the intentions of those in charge, who would claim that they were only trying to protect them). She felt that she knew what she needed, but her opinion was discounted as that of a person unable to take charge of her own life. She resisted the doctor’s advice and devised ways of keeping herself busy, and realized that this was the proper way of getting over her state. Her opinion was not taken into account because she was not valued as an epistemic agent. The sort of knowledge that she got, experiential, was considered to be inferior to the theoretical knowledge that the doctor had.

If we compare Gilman’s experiences with that of Delany, we can see that there are some factors in common. In the first place, both of them experienced particular situations in a way that did not fit their expectations, given that the conceptual systems that they were using were too limited. In the second place, they handled the situations that they were facing in a way that was not in the “script”, in a novel way, and in both cases there is a resistance to the established ways.

At the beginning of the section I claimed that standpoint epistemology could help us to understand how women can use their experiences to create new theories and to point out masculinist biases in current theories. The example used in this section has showed how the accepted treatment and description of postnatal depression in Gilman’s time was challenged by the way in which the episode was lived by women. Because of the way in which society was organized, women’s opinions on the matter were not taken into



account, so their experiences did not fit the accepted description of the world. According to standpoint epistemology, this disjunction is the first step to being able to produce alternative ways of perceiving the world. Note that it is just a first step. We cannot claim that Gilman was putting forward an alternative theory.

Harstock claimed that, due to their particular place in society, women were able to apprehend the real nature of social relations, and because of it she has been accused of supporting the idea that women can experience the world as if it were “transparent”, without acknowledging that all our experiences are mediated by our conceptual systems<sup>32</sup>. Nevertheless, we should not forget that according to Harstock, standpoints are acquired, which means that subjects do not “directly” experience alternative ways of conceptualizing the world, but rather, they are first aware that there is a disjunction between their accepted conceptual systems and the world as it is presented to them in their everyday lives, and then, by the means of belonging to a community, they make sense of their experiences. I will analyze this process in detail in the next section.

### *5.1.2 The role of communities.*

In the previous examples, both Gilman and Delany have experiences that challenge the common descriptions of the world. The “content” of their experiences clashes with the expected content. But, in other occasions, the experience that feminists have described is more vague. It is similar to a feeling of alienation, or estrangement. They have talked about the feeling that there is a gap between the world as it is represented by most of the people around us and the way in which we perceive it. Instead of trying to challenge the common representation of the world, a usual response to this kind of feeling is that of personal inadequacy, so it is common when people feel that their view of reality does not “fit”, to pretend that everything is OK (making a more or less conscious effort).<sup>33</sup>

The feeling that there are aspects of the world that are not captured by our current descriptions of it is something that people find difficult to communicate to others. But

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<sup>32</sup> See S. Heckman (1997).

<sup>33</sup> This pretence can be maintained to a certain degree, but not completely, because it might surface in the form of out of character behaviours, such as the ones cited by B. Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*.



even if it is not possible to tell others how it feels, there are other ways in which it is possible to express this inadequacy. An example of it is offered by N.Scheman who describes the process that Alice, a housewife who joins a consciousness-raising group, goes through. Before she joined it, she found her life satisfying, but there were certain aspects of it that she could not understand, and that make her feel guilty. When she joins the group, things begin to make sense, she is able to point out where those oddities lie, and why she is feeling what she is feeling. She just becomes "*gradually more aware of those times when she felt depressed, or pressured and hurried, as though her time were not her own. However, she didn't believe her time ought to be her own, so in addition, she felt guilty. She would sometimes snap at her husband or children, or cry without quite knowing why(...) She didn't think she had any reason to feel this way; she never took the bad feelings as justified or reasonable.*"<sup>34</sup> Later on, she finds out that "*the guilt and the depression are a response to and a cover for those other feelings, notably feelings of anger. Alice is urged to recognize her anger as legitimate and justifiable in this situation.*"<sup>35</sup> Before, Alice thought that nothing in her situation could account for her feeling of anger. Therefore, she would not call it anger, she would just feel unsatisfied and guilty. Scheman points out to what degree emotions depend on society. They are not merely inner states of persons and that "*what is primarily keeping us as women from acknowledging our anger is an inability to interpret our feelings and behavior in the proper political perspective.*"<sup>36</sup> When Alice finds herself in the appropriate political environment, then she becomes able to see how angry she was feeling, and how appropriate her feelings were.

It is important to notice that the group of women is the right environment because "*in the group, women she has grown to know and to like confess to similar feelings.*"<sup>37</sup> Women have had the same experiences, have had the same feelings, and have experienced the inadequacy of our concepts for expressing it. They recognize that we must challenge the accepted use of anger if it is going to be useful for expressing how those women were feeling. This validation of the conceptual change can only be done within a group, which

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<sup>34</sup> N. Scheman (1993), p 25.

<sup>35</sup> N. Scheman (1993), p25.

<sup>36</sup> N. Scheman (1993), p25.

<sup>37</sup> N. Scheman (1993), p29.



provides us the reassurance that a single person lacks when she has to confront her "inadequate" feelings with the insufficient vocabulary with which we classify our feelings and behaviours.

I have tried to show, in the light of Scheman's work, how the feeling that there is a gap between the world and our own experiences can be productive if it is approached within a sympathetic community. It can help us to validate the feeling that we get, of seeing the world from another angle, and assure us that we are seeing things that outsiders to the group cannot access. It is clear now that the type of experiences that are being referred to are not "raw" or unmediated. Alice's experiences were mediated by an inadequate conceptual system, and that is precisely why she felt that she did not "fit". Therefore, her response to her environment was one of frustration, of anger, and she felt that her feelings were inadequate. The belonging to a group of women persuaded her that anger was the appropriate response, and that the concept "anger" had to be enlarged to account for what she was experiencing. The articulation of Alice's feelings is not comparable to the naming of a "private" feeling, but rather, an example of the way in which communities help to make sense of the world as it is lived by their members. Alice's experiences combine clearly the two elements that I considered valuable in experience as the basis of new knowledge: they have an element of personal involvement, and they are articulated within a community.

I want to bring attention to my previous discussion of experience and the making of collective identities. Alice's material circumstances were shared with a number of others. This is the basis for their experiences. The formation of women as a political collective identity is closely linked with the evaluation/naming of the experiences that women were having. Equally, those experiences were partly shaped by the political process.

### *5.1.3 Marginalization as the basis for privileged knowledge.*

I have been arguing that marginalization allows epistemic agents to occupy a privileged perspective because it allows them to sense a gap between concepts and the world as it is lived by them, which makes them more critical and also provides them with the basis for



new knowledge. This might look like a contradiction with my arguments in section 4, where I claimed that oppression was not adequate as the basis of feminist epistemology. I said that the experience of oppression lacks any epistemological *content* that can be useful for grounding new knowledge, and that, given that there are many axes of oppression, most social actors can be said to be oppressed in one way or another and therefore, to be privileged epistemic agents.

I will solve the apparent contradiction by claiming that, even if the feeling of oppression in itself is not the basis of privileged knowledge, oppression and marginalization are at the basis of experiences, practices and alliances that provide knowers with epistemological advantages.

I have already claimed that one of the reasons why the point of view of the oppressed is valuable is because of its critical edge. It provides the knowers with a feeling of inadequacy between practices and discourses that can produce a change in the representation of the world. It is this context in which feminist standpoint epistemology claims that there are certain groups that have a privileged epistemic position. But there are also **alternative contents** that only those who belong to particular groups can access, given that some of the experiences that ground knowledge are the product of special practices in the lives of particular groups. Those practices are **sanctioned** and **justified** within those groups, and this implies that standpoints are acquired as part of a process of belonging to groups, having particular experiences and making sense of them in the community.

As brief summary of section 5.1, I would say that it is possible to argue on the line of standpoint epistemology, that women's experiences can be the basis of a privileged knowledge, and that those experiences are not natural kinds, so they are not there just waiting to be "perceived". Women can perceive aspects of reality that make them realize that our common conceptual system is limited, and some of the practices in which women are involved are the basis for alternative knowledge claims. Those experiences are not raw. They do not offer a direct access to the world, but rather, they need to be made sense of within a community. Those experiences are not due to biology or are taken to be



“natural”, they are experienced by constructed subjects, and they are themselves also mediated by practices and discourses. I think that it has been made sufficiently clear how the personal and the communal aspects of experience link together in standpoint epistemology. This will be even more obvious when I explain some other alternative uses of experience that will illustrate purely “personal” or “social” ways of conceptualizing experience.

## **5.2. Experiences as qualia.**

There is a second interpretation of experiences as the ground of knowledge, and it amounts to the claim that those experiences are due to the fact that women can have first person knowledge of certain events, which is unavailable from other points of view. Among those experiences, we can mention those of giving birth to a child, premenstrual syndrome, and menopause. Given that, traditionally, the experiences of women have not been taken into account when approaching those issues from a medical perspective, it is legitimate to argue that, if we want to understand all those phenomena properly, we should include the insight that women could offer into them. Obviously, this analysis is very close to the one that I made in the previous section, where I argued for the existence of those experiences. Nevertheless, there are different ways of characterizing those experiences, and some of those support the view that those experiences are “qualia”, a view that I want to oppose.

Therefore, there are at least two different ways of characterizing this type of first person experience. The first one is by focusing on its qualitative character, and the second one underlines its perspectival character. To underline the qualitative character of experience implies that there is a certain content that is neither accessible nor apprehensible from a third person perspective. This means not just that those undergoing certain experiences, whatever those experiences are, have an insider information that is not available otherwise, but also, that the knower has a privileged and uncontestable knowledge. Subjects have an unmediated access to their experiences and they have authority over their content, because, given that they are the only ones capable of accessing them, their testimony cannot be challenged. I will argue that we cannot use this type of experience to ground



collective knowledge, because given its necessarily private character, it is not possible to claim that women have common experiences.

I will, instead, favour the characterization of those experiences as bearing perspectival knowledge. This will allow us to argue that women can apprehend aspects of the world that remain opaque to those who do not belong to this particular epistemic group, but also that those experiences are not private, nor that individuals have an uncontestable authority about their content. In the next chapter I offer arguments to support perspectival knowledge (I will also argue in detail against a position supported by some feminist philosophers who have argued that perspectival knowledge consists in the apprehension of **subjective facts**.)<sup>38</sup>

In the next chapter, I will argue in detail that the use of qualia is highly problematic. I have argued for a concept of experience that is closely linked to the belonging to particular communities and practices. I have remarked that even if those experiences have to be acquired practically, i.e., by being a participant, and this implies a personal implication in the acquisition of knowledge, this does not amount to saying that they are private in the sense which is inevitably linked with “qualia”. By using qualia as the basis of feminist knowledge, we are open to the criticisms labeled by Scott: experiences became raw , private, and dangerously close to being the product of essential beings.

### 5.3 Women's Lives.

As I showed at the beginning of this chapter, taking experience as foundational for knowledge encounters many difficulties. I have suggested that, if we avoid taking women’s experiences as qualia and we take on board the criticisms that postmodernism has made of some uses of experience, then, by arguing for the collective nature of experience, we can make productive use of experience as the basis for knowledge. I have claimed that experiences have to be articulated by communities, and that they are based on practices. This concept of experience, as grounded in communities, is very different from a more classic one that takes experience to be an unmediated content in the mind of an

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<sup>38</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmya (1993).



individual knower, the basis of classic epistemology. The grounds for knowledge that I am arguing for are different from those of the foundational epistemologists. My concept of experience is also different from those who do not pay enough attention to the **personal** implication in the apprehension of knowledge.

Some theorists have argued that we should begin our research from the lives of women, instead of searching for particular experiences as the grounds of knowledge. Given that my definition of experience takes into account practices, it looks like if this will be a congenial move to make. There are two main ways in which this has been argued for: in the first part of the section, I will refer to the work of L. Stanley, who has offered an example of how a particular writer can use **her own life** as the source or knowledge for her theories (5.3.1). In the second part of this section I will put forward the work of Harding who argues for using **the lives of women** and other marginalized groups as the origin for feminist research (5.3.2). In the last part of this section I will put forward some difficulties for this theory (5.3.3).

5.3.1 Liz Stanley argues that the source of feminist knowledge is women's lives. There are different ways of interpreting this claim within her work, but I will focus here on the one that she develops in her article "The knowing because experiencing subject"<sup>39</sup> She kept a research diary to record her thoughts and feelings during her mother's illness and use it as a way of criticizing certain theories on autobiography defended by postmodernist thinkers and also as a vehicle to reflect about the nature of the self. Her attempt is interesting because it shows how a feminist woman critically approaches her own life and uses her conclusions as a source of evidence against other feminist theories. This is a process that only a **woman with knowledge of feminist theories** could accomplish. I remark upon the importance of this point because, being a woman it is necessary, but not sufficient, for producing this kind of knowledge. What is needed in order to produce this kind of knowledge is to be a woman, with an awareness of certain theoretical issues, looking at her own life in order to test the theories or to look for the answers. The results of this search have to be open to criticisms and dialogue from other positions, that is, they have to be made public. In a sense, this use of experience is similar to the one that I have

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<sup>39</sup> L. Stanley (1994).



pointed out before, when talking about the experiences of women who suffered from postnatal depression, but with the difference that L. Stanley is in command of the theoretical apparatus that would allow her to interpret her experiences within a particular framework. In this sense, her experiences are more mediated by discourses than those of other women. But those other experiences have to be justified and sactioned to the same degree, within a larger community. This use of women's lives as the grounds of knowledge, is very close to the concept of experience that I support. It has elements of personal involvement (L. Stanley is talking about her own life) and of the articulation of those experiences within a larger community.

5.3.2. Harding argues that the source of feminist knowledge should be the lives of marginalized people. There are two possibilities within this option: (i) It does not seem necessary to say that you must be a member of those groups to produce knowledge from other people's lives. We can ground our knowledge on their lives without getting involved in their lives. (ii) It is necessary to belong to a determinate group in order to produce knowledge.

It is important to notice that the type of knowledge that Harding aims to develop is a highly reflective type of knowledge that does not amount to a description of the lives of others from "nowhere". Her interest in using the lives of others as the grounds for knowledge is part of a process to obtain a more objective view of reality. I will offer a detailed account of this aspect of Harding's theory in chapter 7, where I will also argue in detail why I do not agree with possibility (i). For now I will just offer some examples to illustrate my position

5.3.3 I believe that possibility (i) does not pay enough attention to the personal involvement that is necessary in order to access certain types of knowledge. Getting involved in the lives of others is the only way of acquiring such knowledge. Talking to others is inadequate for capturing those experiences that are so epistemically valuable, as well as being a delicate process. The work of A. Sellers illustrates those difficulties. She is a feminist philosopher who used to believe that having her own point of view, and getting engaged in a dialogue with others that belong to different groups, was a good starting



point for evaluating her feminist theories and for obtaining a more objective knowledge. In the course of a visit to India, it became apparent to her that the project was more difficult to achieve than she thought, which drove her to the conclusion that it is not possible to engage in those sort of dialogues between systems of thought. She discovered that: having a dialogue of the sort that she was aiming for is only possible between those who share a **way of living**, and that getting engaged in other people's ways of life is something that implies existing power relations. This implies that it is not possible to have a usable knowledge of the lives of others unless you engage in their ways of living.

Even if we are willing to engage in the ways of living of others, the knowledge that we can acquire is limited. P.Hill-Collins<sup>40</sup> makes clear that material circumstances limit the experiences that we can have. As I explained in the previous chapter, she claims that it is necessary to be a black woman in order to produce black feminist knowledge. The experiences of black women ground knowledge when they are articulated into discourses, and this is why she underlines the importance of the black feminist scholars in the production of black feminist knowledge. Scholars are skilled in the use of the discourse of the "ruling" class, and are able to interpret the findings of the black women's community, whose members are not able to articulate their own knowledge in a traditionally accepted way (in a propositional way, for instance). Nevertheless, it is important to notice that the scholars belong to the group whose experiences they are making sense of. The perspective of outsiders is useful, but their knowledge is not comparable to those who are engaged in the practices and that belong to the communities.

In summary, I will say that, due to the practical nature of certain knowledges, it is not possible to capture them merely by engaging in conversations, or by observing the lives of others. It is necessary to share the practices in order to acquire the knowledge. Given that, in order to engage in practices it is necessary to belong to particular communities, and that the belonging is sometimes precluded by material circumstances, the knowledge that an outsider can acquire is different from the one acquired by the "members" of the community. Given the composite nature of the concept of experience that I support, it makes sense to argue that women's lives are a source of feminist knowledge, because it

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<sup>40</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990).



supports the idea that experience is not taken to be a direct access to the world, that it is not raw, and that it is only meaningful within epistemic communities and in reference to practices. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that even if merely getting into dialogue with others or *observing* their practices, it is possible to acquire some knowledge. Other types of knowledge cannot be apprehended unless there is a direct personal involvement in the practices. The insistence on this personal aspect of knowledge is due to the fact that I want to revalue types of knowledge that are practical, and which cannot be expressed propositionally. This is part of a general project of reconceptualizing what should count as knowledge and who should count as reliable epistemic agents.

## 6. Introducing Practical Knowledge.

In the last section of the chapter I have insisted on the composite nature of experience, and have claimed that a personal involvement in communal practices is necessary to acquire certain types of knowledge. I have also claimed that this move will allow me to reevaluate practical knowledge and to review the ways of evaluating who is a reliable epistemic agent. In this section I will signal why this project is congenial to feminism.

L.Alcoff and V.Dalmiya assert that "*modern epistemology has forgotten the lesson from Aristotle that knowledge can come in two forms: propositional and practical*"<sup>41</sup> According to their description of epistemology, the only sort of knowledge that has been considered knowledge is the one that can be expressed in a propositional form, and they think that this is the reason why traditional women's knowledge has not been taken to be knowledge. This sort of knowledge is obtained by observation and practice, of which soothing a newborn baby or baking an omelet are examples.

Those are things that you cannot learn in books, and that cannot be completely recounted in a propositional form. The acquisition of those types of knowing how are inseparable from practice, the knower must do them herself in order to learn how to do them and also in order to be attributed knowledge of how to do them. As well as being acquired in a practical way, the acquisition necessitates the apprehension of practices, the understanding

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<sup>41</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993),p 220.



of the communal dimension of the knowledge. For instance, when I learn how to make an omelet, I do acquire certain skills that allow me to whisk the eggs properly, recognize when the oil is hot enough to cook the omelet, etc...some of those skills are physical (learning how to make certain movements), other are recognitional, and others are to do with knowing what counts as making an omelet properly. The normative dimensions of practical knowledge are constitutive of the acquisition of it and consist in being able to apprehend a practice. Neither the acquisition of the skills nor the apprehension of the practice, are types of knowledge that can be reduced to the learning of propositions. By redefining knowledge to include practical knowledge, and by showing how the normative dimension of knowledge is apprehensible only by getting involved in practices, I will be changing the perception of what counts both as knowledge and as reliable knowers, opening up a space for women as reliable knowers.

## **7. Practical Knowledge and the acquisition of a political consciousness.**

In this chapter I have argued that women's experiences can be the basis for feminist knowledge. In order to show that they are not raw experiences, I have underlined the need of a social community to help in making sense of them, and in order to support the claim that only women can produce feminist knowledge, I have suggested that, in the production of knowledge, there is a personal element that cannot be captured unless the knower has undergone certain experiences. I have used examples of experiential knowledge to support the production of feminist knowledge.

In the previous section, I have given examples of practical knowledge, and I have indicated that I will revalue practical knowledge in order to be able to open a space for women as reliable knowers, and I have also maintained that this is a feminist task. Nevertheless, it is still undecided if the practical knowledge acquired by women can ground feminist knowledge in the same way in which experiential knowledge does.

I have claimed that women can experience that there is a gap between the world as it is experienced by them, and our conceptual system, and this experiential knowledge could be the basis for the development of alternatives. Their experiential knowledge provides them



with a negative, critical edge, and with a positive, creative one, that enable them to put forward of alternative theories. I also maintained that women have to develop a consciousness as members of a community of women in order to produce feminist knowledge. Are these characteristics present in practical knowledge?.

If they are not present in practical knowledge, then I could conclude that practical knowledge cannot ground feminist knowledge, but that its revaluation can advance the position of women as epistemic agents. Nevertheless, in the next chapter, I will support a different conclusion. I will show how practical knowledge, as well as advancing the position of women as epistemic agents in a general way, can be the basis of feminist knowledge in the same way as experiential knowledge can.

## **8. Conclusion**

In chapter 2 I argued that later forms of standpoint epistemology, which were influenced by postmodern and empiricist feminist epistemology were valuable epistemological theories that could overcome the criticisms that were leveled against them. In this chapter I have argued that it is possible to use the experiences of marginalised groups to ground knowledge without naturalizing the subject belonging to those groups, and without falling into essentialism or universalism. I have argued for a concept of group identity that is based in coalition, and that does not erase difference. Experiences are not the unifying basis for group identity but, rather, are explained and expressed within the group, partly constructed by the group and partly challenging the criteria for belonging to the groups. The epistemic value of the experiences of those that are in the margin is twofold. On the one hand it allows knowers to be critical of the current conceptual systems and, on the other hand, it opens up interesting alternative ways of representing the world. The revaluation of women's knowledge will allow us to have a critical view of theories that have an androcentric bias and also to develop alternatives. In the final sections of the chapter I have supported standpoint epistemology as a theory that helps us articulate women's experiences. I argued that standpoint epistemology can ground a composite account of experience that gives equal weight to personal involvement in the production of knowledge and to the role of communities.



In chapter 1 I explained that there was a symbolic identification of the feminine with particular types of knowledge that were consequently undervalued. I will argue that practical knowledge is at the core of any epistemological project, because it is the engagement with the world that allows us to develop our knowledge further, because there are aspects of the world that cannot be apprehended otherwise, and because the normative dimension of knowledge is apprehended by being involved in practices. So the implications of my above defense of standpoint epistemology are the following: first, it will allow us to give a better status to marginalized epistemic agents; and second, it will entail the redefinition of knowledge in general, and, therefore, it will change the conceptual implications of gender, knowledge and normativity (and therefore, also of rationality).



## CHAPTER 4

### 0. Introduction.

At the end of the previous chapter I indicated that propositional knowledge is the current paradigm of knowledge. My aim is to reevaluate practical and experiential knowledge and to show how both can ground epistemically privileged knowledge. In order to support their epistemic value, I will show how they are irreducible to propositional (and theoretical) types of knowledge. Given my support of practical knowledge, I will reveal the importance of practices in the acquisition and justification of knowledge, therefore showing how they underlie the normative aspect of knowledge. In chapter 5 I will explain the way in which normativity is present in practical knowledge, and in chapter 6 I will explain how this influences our concept of rationality. Therefore, the conclusions that I will reach at the end of this chapter will have an important bearing on the rest of the thesis.

I have already explained how, in our epistemological tradition, there has been a symbolic identification of the female with particular types of concepts that were in opposition to the more valuable, masculine ones. The symbolic identification of women with less rational and less valuable types of knowledge has had a reflection on the way in which women as cognitive agents have actually been treated. As E. Anderson claims, “*Western societies have labelled this kind of knowledge (impersonal theoretical and scientific knowledge) “masculine” and prevented women from acquiring and producing it, often on the pretext that it would divert their vital energies from their natural reproductive labour (Hubbard 1990; Schiebinger 1989) ”*<sup>1</sup> In a clear intermingling of what it is symbolically feminine and what women are actually capable of doing, philosophers and scientists, alike, have made a distinction between masculine and feminine ways of knowing. Women are identified with practical knowledge and men with theoretical knowledge. As I underlined in chapter 1, the ideal of objective knowledge that has been pervasive in epistemology has been that of a detached knowledge that fits better an ideal theoretical knowledge than practical knowledge. There are several consequences that follow from that distinction:

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<sup>1</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p50.



- a) Our epistemology privileges the type of knowledge that can be expressed in propositions. Theoretical knowledge is privileged over practical knowledge, which is marginalized, partly because it cannot be expressed propositionally. There is a very clear tendency to reduce practical knowledge to propositional knowledge in order to give some epistemic legitimacy to it.
- b) Given that propositional knowledge is favoured, the important role that of other types of knowledge and contents play in the rational explanation of our actions has been forgotten. I will argue that the model of rationality that follows from an exclusive use of propositional knowledge is less complete than an alternative model that includes different types of knowledge.
- c) The practical knowledge acquired by different groups, such as women, has been ignored when theories have been postulated. This links with my assertion, in the previous chapter, that the experiences of women have been largely ignored in our cultural and scientific tradition.
- d) Given the gap between the symbolic organisation of our concepts and its real implications, women have often been considered inferior epistemic agents, unable to engage in proper epistemological pursuits, and those types of knowledge that they have traditionally acquired and changed have been marginalized.

At the end of the previous chapter, I referred to the work of Alcoff and Dalmyia who claim that modern epistemology has forgotten the lessons present in Aristotles's work that knowledge can come in two forms; propositional and practical.<sup>2</sup> and, therefore, only those types of knowledge that can be constrained into the "S knows that p" formula are considered to be epistemically important. A clear implication is that **traditional** women's knowledge has been excluded because it is a knowledge that is mainly based on practices that cannot necessarily be put into a propositional form. An example of this marginalization is the exclusion of midwifery in the western world in favour of a medical approach, which is explained as "*a triumph of propositional knowledge over practical knowledge*"<sup>3</sup>. Midwives were replaced by doctors because they were considered to be ignorant given that their knowledge was not codified or written into books but, rather, it

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<sup>2</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmyia (1993), p 220.

<sup>3</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmyia (1993), p223.



was based on practical experience. But the decisive fact for the marginalization of midwives was not that their knowledge was not codified but, rather, the fact that it could not be codified, so the problem is *"not so much the contingent one that knowledge of midwives was not recorded in books but that it could not be. Midwifery as a skill was not and could not be a matter of following rules codified in conditional propositions. Ryle has persuasively argued that to reduce skills to a two-step process of apprehending rules and criteria and then acting in accordance with them ends in infinite regress or a vicious circle."*<sup>4</sup> I will be arguing in this chapter that the fact that midwives did not have propositional knowledge of their trade does not amount to the fact that they did not have knowledge at all. In actual fact they might have more reliable knowledge than doctors, even if it was acquired differently.

In the previous chapter, I developed a concept of experience that avoided the criticism of postmodernism. I argued that women's experiences, due to particular practices, will allow us to ground knowledge that could not be acquired otherwise. In this chapter I will challenge the current tendencies in epistemology that diminishes experiential and practical knowledge and tries to reduce it to propositional knowledge that fits better in "theories". I want to obtain a more comprehensive definition of knowledge that includes forms of knowledge that have been marginalized. My aim is twofold: in the first place, I want to change our epistemological structures; and in the second place, I want to challenge the conceptual implications that practical knowledge has, mainly because being identified with feminine ways of knowledge, its revaluation will allow us to change the place of women as knowers, and also because it will allow us to give more epistemic value to the knowledge of groups that have been marginalized.

In the next section I will argue that it is not possible to reduce all practical knowledge to a propositional form and that, if we want to have a usable concept of knowledge, we have to acknowledge that there are different types of knowledge that are irreducible to one another and are all equally valuable.

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<sup>4</sup> L.Alcoff and V.Dalmiya (1993), p 224.



## **1. Reductive moves: knowing that as the paradigm of knowledge.**

In the introduction to the chapter I explained how, in our tradition, practical and experiential knowledge has been excluded from our definition of knowledge. Practical knowledge has been opposed to theoretical knowledge and considered a minor form of knowledge, and has been symbolically linked to the feminine. Consequently, women have been considered to be lesser epistemic agents, not as well endowed as males to pursue theoretical knowledge. By implication, when traditional women's practices were put to the test of theory and there were disagreements, the theory was supported and the practice considered unscientific. In epistemology, any kind of knowledge worth the name has to submit to the model of theoretical knowledge, whose best representative is the knowing-that form. I will be looking at some of the arguments that have been produced to support the idea that practical knowledge can be reduced to a knowing-that form.

In this section I will analyse two different types of reductionist arguments that appear in the work of P.Snowdon, whose main set of arguments are directed towards proving that practical knowledge, of the knowing-how type do not involve the possessing of an ability or capacity, and therefore, it is possible to reduce knowing how to knowing that. He argues that having the ability is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to know how to do x. In 1.1 I will explore the different ways in which he uses the expression "practical knowledge", in order to ground my argument that his reduction does not work in all cases. In 1.2, I will examine the examples that he uses to support his claim that having an ability is neither sufficient nor necessary in order to attribute practical knowledge. I will argue that his arguments are insufficient to support his thesis and, in 1.3, I will analyse a second set of arguments that he uses to support his reduction and that can be summarised as: within any type of knowledge, the cognitive burden falls into its propositional content. I will introduce some general criticisms in section 1.3. against this type of argument, but my main arguments will be developed in section 2.

### **1.1 Three uses of "practical knowledge".**



Paul Snowdon challenges the distinction between knowing-how and knowing-that by arguing against what he calls “the standard view” on the subject. One of the central theses of this standard view is what he calls the capacity thesis: *“Knowing how to G (...) consist in being able to G, in having the capacity to G. Knowing how is a matter of possessing the ability or capacity to do the action specified”*<sup>5</sup>. Paul Snowdon does not agree with that thesis. He claims that knowing-how is ‘practical knowledge’ but that this does not imply that knowing-how consists in the presence of a practical ability.

If he is correct and knowing-how is not a practical ability then what does it consist in? Following Snowdon, knowing how to do x, i.e. having practical knowledge of x, consists in having knowledge of a practice. That is to say, consists in being able to give a detailed description of the actions that an agent should perform in order to do x. So, if I want to learn how to swim, I will get an instructor who could give me the pertinent instructions and I will put them into practice. The instructor could give me a list of propositions to this effect and this will count as him having practical knowledge on the subject of how to swim. He does not need to swim himself to prove that he has practical knowledge on the subject. I will express this use of the expression ‘practical knowledge’ in the following way<sup>6</sup>:

(1) We will attribute practical knowledge -knowledge of how to do x- to a subject on the basis of his description (which includes propositions and also gestures) of the actions that we have to perform in order to do x.

Is this the only sense of ‘practical knowledge’? I think that it is not. A person knows how to swim if he swims, even if he is not able to give a description of the actions that he performs when he swims, he has practical knowledge of swimming. There is a second way in which ‘practical knowledge’ can be used:

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<sup>5</sup> P. Snowdon (1995), p 2.

<sup>6</sup> This distinction is based on E. Craig (1990), section XVII.



(2) We will attribute practical knowledge- knowledge of how to do x- to a subject when he performs x or has performed x, even if he cannot/does not give a description of his actions.

I can also think of a third case which combines (1) and (2). There are people who swim and who can also explain how they do it. They have practical knowledge in the two senses that we have accepted already:

(3) We will attribute practical knowledge- knowledge of how to do x- to a subject who does/has done x and also gives a description of his actions.

Having distinguished three different uses of "practical knowledge", I come back to discuss Snowdon's proposal. He gives several examples to prove that having the capacity/ability to do x is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition to know how to do x, i.e., in order to have practical knowledge. On the one hand, his strategy works because we can use practical knowledge or knowing how in sense (1) which does not imply that the knower can put his knowledge into practice. But on the other hand knowing how is often used to express (2) and (3), that the knower puts his knowledge into practice or that his knowledge is his practice and, therefore, he must have the capacity and the ability to do x. In a number of occasions all that having practical knowledge of x or knowing how to do x means is that the knower has done x successfully(2). So when we use knowing how in its second sense the doing/having done x is both a necessary and a sufficient condition to claim that someone knows how to do x. Given that Snowdon is only correct when we refer to the first use of knowing-how, it is necessary to determine what is the scope of this use in order to decide if it is paradigmatic in explaining the nature of knowing-how.

In order to prove that it is not *necessary* or *sufficient* to have the capacity to x for 'knowing-how' to x. I will discuss some of the examples that Snowdon gives to illustrate his claims.

**1.2 Is having the ability/capacity to do x a necessary or/and sufficient condition to do x ?**



1.2.1) It is not *necessary* because there are instances of knowing-how in which you can give a description of how to do the action but you are not able to do it, therefore you know how to do it but do not have the capacity to do it.

*“Raymond Blanc, the world’s greatest chef knows how to make an excellent omelette. He lost his arms in a car accident; he retains his knowledge how to make omelettes, but is no longer able to make them”*<sup>7</sup>

1.2.2) To show that it is not *sufficient* to have the capacity in order to know how to do something, he uses the following example:

*“Compare Pollini and me as trill performers. The truth is that I know as much as anyone about baroque trills; I certainly know how to perform them. So of course does Pollini. The difference is that as a result of practice he can perform them; I alas cannot”*<sup>8</sup>

***(1.2.1) Is having the capacity/ability to do x a necessary condition in order to know how to do x?***

I will argue against Snowdon, that having the capacity to do x is a necessary condition in order to know how to do x, at least in senses (2) and (3). It is not a necessary condition in sense (1) but, as I will also try to prove, this sense is not paradigmatic of knowing how.

I want to introduce the distinction between having the capacity and having the ability. The capacity to make an omelette is prior to the ability to do it. In the example of making omelettes, this capacity consists in having a body able enough to perform certain actions (grabbing saucepans and eggs, for instance). Without some requirements such as the ones described, without those capacities, the chef in the example would not have been able to learn how to make good omelettes. He would not have acquired the ability which he possesses now. Once this distinction is made I will introduce some variations in the example

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<sup>7</sup> P.Snowdon (1995), p10.

<sup>8</sup> P.Snowdon (1995), p10



put forward by Snowdon, which will illustrate the importance of distinguishing between abilities and capacities:

Both Raymond Blanc and his brother Mark have or have had the capacity to cook an omelette. They also have practical knowledge(1) about it, which we attribute to them on the same basis: they can give instructions to others on how to cook omelettes. They have practical knowledge of how to cook omelette in sense (1) and therefore, in this restricted sense, they know how to cook an omelette. But Raymond Blanc has had the ability to cook omelettes and Mark has never had it. I will attempt to prove that lacking this ability means that he lacks some practical knowledge that Raymond has.

First of all it is important to explain how Raymond Blanc acquired his ability. We can tell the history of the way in which he did. We can imagine that both Raymond and Mark learned together how to do it. First they read the instructions in a cookery book, and then went to college and observed a chef cooking omelettes. Up to this point their learning process is exactly the same. But then Raymond, being more adventurous, tried to cook an omelette being corrected in the process by the master chef. We can admit that all this was witnessed by Mark. We can say that Raymond knows how to cook an omelette, because he has done it properly and this is something that we cannot say about Mark. There is a sense (2) in which Raymond can be attributed a practical knowledge that Mark lacks. If Mark tries to cook an omelette he will not do it as well as Raymond does because he has not trained himself to do it. It is very likely that he will cook a shapeless omelette. Raymond has an ability which Mark has not got.

In the past Raymond knew how to cook an omelette and he could demonstrate it by giving a verbal description of his actions and also by doing it, therefore he could be attributed to know how to cook an omelette in the three senses mentioned above, even if now he can only show his mastery in sense (1). Mark knows how to describe the process of cooking an omelette, knowing-how in sense (1). Having accepted that Raymond has an ability that Mark lacks, does this imply that there is a difference in their knowledge of how to cook an omelette? According to Snowdon, there is no difference, because we can say of



both of them that they know how to cook an omelette, but I think that there is a difference. I will draw on another example to explain why.

Let's imagine that A is a professional pilot who has flown thousands of hours and who knows all the theory about flying. He is unable to fly now because he has lost his arms in a car accident. He is thinking of getting some prosthetic arms so he could go back to his old career. B knows all the theory about how to fly a plane, but has never done it himself.

A and B have both the capacity to fly a plane, even if A has lost it for a certain time, and both have the practical knowledge (1), but A is the only one with the necessary ability to do it. So, on the one hand, and even if they know-how to fly a plane in sense (1), I think that it would be wrong to say that B really knows how to fly a plane, and I would not want him to pilot the one in which I am going to be travelling. On the other hand, I will accept that A knows how to do it, even if he cannot do it right now. The attribution of knowing how to fly a plane cannot be done just on the basis of being able to give a description of it. We ask for hands-on experience when we are going to attribute that type of expertise to others. In the previous example, we could feel inclined to affirm that both Raymond and Mark know how to make an omelette because, after all, if Mark cooks a shapeless omelette there is not too much at stake, but when the attribution of knowledge can have more serious consequences, the criterion of attribution is restricted to those who have acquired certain abilities.

Snowdon's argument was based on a reductive move, so it makes sense to question whether the acquisition of those abilities implies that A has some extra knowledge that B lacks. I think that the answer is positive because, in the first place, pilot A actually knows how to fly a plane, while pilot B does not, which implies that A has some knowledge that B has not got. What is more, I even think that pilot A will be able to give a more detailed account of the process because he has had experiences that B has not had. Even if both have always flown together, so B has witnessed all the actions of A, it is only A who can explain why, in that particular difficult moment he reacted as he did, how he felt, how he overcame the fear. So pilot A will have more information of the knowing-that type than pilot B. Finally, we must also take into account that flying a plane involves movements



which become reflexes with practice, as in driving a car or playing an instrument, and which can only be acquired by performing an action repeatedly. Someone who has acquired the skill is better at recognising the skill in others than someone who does not possess it himself so, in this sense also, pilot A has more knowledge than pilot B. Finally, instructors that have the ability to do x can also show how to do x. This is an advantage because some people are able to learn something easily when they are shown how to do it. And indeed, it is the only way of learning some trades. Summarising, being able to describe how to fly a plane, does not amount to knowing how to fly one, and this would be made obvious if we had to choose between A or B as flight instructors, or as the pilots of a flight: we will always prefer the one that has the ability to do it over the one that can only give a description of the process.

Traditionally, knowing-that has been considered the paradigm of knowledge, but in this section I have supported that knowing-how is irreducible to knowing-that, and also that it can be more valuable than knowing-that. In the examples that I have used I have mainly compared the knowledge of someone who knows how to describe an activity with someone who is able to give the description and also to take part in it, so I have been assessing knowing-how in sense (3) in relating to the two others. I have not yet considered the knower who is not able to give a description of his activity but who is able to do it. This possibility will be illustrated by the following example: we have an instructor with practical knowledge in sense (1) and another one with practical knowledge in sense (2). One will tell you how to do it, and the other will let you see how to do it, but will not be able to give you any verbal instructions. Which instructor should we prefer? I do not think that there is a standard answer in this case. It depends on what it is being learned and who is learning. There are some people, like myself, who, when they have to do a new routine in gymnastics, need to learn the propositional description of it in order to be able to reproduce it. This is because my visual memory is not good enough, but will a propositional description of it be enough in order to show me how to do it? As I said before, I think this is to be decided case by case. There are some things that we can not learn just by sight, while there are others that we cannot learn just by their descriptions. In any case, an instructor with practical knowledge(3) will obviously be more useful than any of the others. Furthermore, I think that he will be so even if he cannot put his ability into



practice at this moment, as in the case of Raymond Blanc, because, as I have already argued, he will still retain some extra knowledge.

In summary, having the ability to do x provides the agent with knowledge which a person who lacks the ability cannot access. If he is able to put this information into words an agent with the ability to do x will be a better teacher than someone who lacks the ability because he will be able to pass more information to the subject. There are some things that can only be taught by showing others how to do them and in those cases, a person with the ability to do x is the only one who can teach us how to do x. There are other cases in which knowing how to do x can be attributed to someone who lacks the ability to do x. Therefore having the ability to do x is not necessary in order to know how to do x, but it is sufficient. In order to have the ability to do x, you must have the capacity to do it, but having the capacity does not imply that you have developed it. Therefore having the capacity is not sufficient to know how to do x, and it is necessary only in the cases which imply having the ability to do x.

In relation to Snowdon's main argument, I agree that having the capacity to do something does not imply that you know how to do it. I have defended the view that having the capacity is necessary in order to develop the ability to do x and that having both, you know how to do x (sense 2 and 3). I have also agreed that having the capacity is not enough to attribute knowing how in those two senses, and it is not even necessary to attribute knowing how in sense (1). But I have tried to show now that sense (1) has very limited uses, and that it is the only sense for which having the capacity to do x is not necessary, and which does not imply having the ability. It is a correct use of knowing-how but, being so limited, it should not be taken as paradigmatic in the way in which Snowdon takes it.

### ***1.2.2) Is having the capacity/ability a sufficient condition for attributing practical knowledge?***

I will now examine Snowdon's arguments to prove that having the capacity/ability is not enough to attribute to someone knowledge of how to do x. I have agreed with Snowdon



that having the capacity is not enough to attribute to someone knowledge of how to do x, but I disagree with Snowdon in that I believe that having the ability is **enough** to attribute to a subject knowledge of how to do x.

Let's remember the example that he uses to illustrate his claim: "*Compare Pollini and me as trill performers. The truth is that I know as much as anyone about baroque trills; I certainly know how to perform them. So of course does Pollini. The difference is that as a result of practice he can perform them; I alas cannot.*"<sup>9</sup>

On the one hand we could accept that both Snowdon and Pollini know how to perform baroque trills (knowing how in sense (1)), on the other hand only Pollini has the ability to do it, due to practice, while Snowdon has not. Therefore I feel inclined to say that, being fair, only Pollini knows how to do it because this is one of the cases in which practice makes all the difference. Having the capacity does not imply in all cases that you know how to do something, but having the ability does. The capacity thesis is correct if rephrased in this way: knowing-how involves practical knowledge in the sense that you have to be able to perform certain actions, and therefore you must have the capacity to do them, or at least have had the capacity to do them, plus the ability to do them, which is acquired through practice. I want to underline that practice becomes central to the acquisition of knowing-how. Snowdon tries to undermine the importance of practice in relation to know-how, and he claims that: "*We very often come to 'know-how' (...) Without any practice. Just a glance in the room was enough for me to learn how to reach this chair. I certainly did not need to practice reaching it.*"<sup>10</sup> In a sense Snowdon is right, and in normal circumstances you do not have to practice to know how to reach a chair in a room full of chairs or obstacles. It is enough to locate the one that you want in order to be able to negotiate your way to it, but in another, more general sense, he is wrong because you can not learn how to reach a chair just by a glance. Learning how to reach objects is a complex process of trial, error, miscalculations, etc...that we begin to practice as soon as we are born, and it is an ability acquired through practice. Of course, once we have mastered the process, we do not 'learn' how to do it by a glance but, rather, we just do it.

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<sup>9</sup> P.Snowdon (1995), p10

<sup>10</sup> P.Snowdon (1995), p19.



In these two sections I have insisted that practice is an important element in order to be able to learn how to do something, I have claimed that, by doing x repeatedly, a knower can acquire abilities that she would not possess otherwise, and those are central to our criteria for attributing knowing-how. I have argued that, in some occasions, we can accept that someone knows how to do x in sense (1) when he is able to give a description of the practice, and that that knower will obviously know more than another who does not know in what the practice consist. Nevertheless, this is a limited use of knowing-how, and there are many other times in which we would only attribute knowledge to those who are able or have been able to do x. We consider that those knowers are more reliable, have more information, and are more able to recognise and teach the correct way of performing the activity than others who do not have the ability to do it. This implies that most types of knowing-how cannot be reduced to knowing-that, because they involve the acquisition of abilities and the performance of practices that are not summed up by a mere description of the knowing-that type.

### **1.3 A further argument to support the reduction.**

I have argued that people who have certain types of practical knowledge, who possess the ability to do x, might know things that they cannot put into words. This does not mean that, in all cases, it is not possible to do it, but only that they might not have the linguistic resources to do it. A stronger claim is to say that those are things that are known and that cannot be expressed propositionally, and this would support further the claim that knowing-how cannot be reduced to knowing-that, because they are different types of knowledge.

Snowdon accepts that there is a type of “content” which can be known even if there is not a propositional description for it and can be included in “knowing -that” constructions, but he considers that this content has no cognitive relevance, given that the reason why we attribute knowledge is due to its propositional content. If it is necessary that the subject knows a proposition in order to be able to make those ascriptions of knowledge with truth, then it is due to this propositional content that we can claim that knowing why or



where are forms of knowledge, and therefore that it is why they have a cognitive value. Snowdon is proposing that whenever the knower knows a "hidden" proposition as an answer to a knowing 'x' assertion presented as a question, then it is legitimate to say that the subject knows. In relation to knowing where, why and what it is like: he says that *"although these other forms of knowledge ascription are not explicitly ascriptions of knowledge-that, they require, if they are to be ascribed with truth to a subject S, that there is some proposition or other such that S knows that it, that proposition is true."*<sup>11</sup> For instance *"to know where to put an object amounts to knowing that a certain place is where to put the object."*<sup>12</sup>

Let's consider a two year old boy who knows that he has to put the glass in the sink after it has been used. We can ascribe truly to the boy that he knows where to put the glass even if he does not know what the proposition "the glass must be put in the washer" means. The fact that we attribute knowledge to the subjects of those knowledge assertions does not imply that the subject's mental make up has any proposition that describes what we are attributing when we say S knows where, why, what it is like or how. Rather, the criterion for attribution of knowledge in those cases is based on their actions. I will develop the arguments against this type of reductionist move in detail in the next section. But for now, the above suffices to signal my point of view.

Snowdon not only denies the cognitive significance of this non-propositional content, but also denies that there is a further **knowledge** of a content different from the one that can be described in a propositional form. But I think that he cannot deny that, in some of the examples that he uses, some of the knowledge is not captured by propositions. For instance, in the playing of musical instruments, where it is obvious that an accomplished player will know things that someone who only knows the musical theory does not. It is impossible to take seriously his example, in which he claims that in the case of the baroque trills performance both Pollini and himself know as much about playing baroque trills.

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<sup>11</sup> P. Snowdon (1995), p 5.

<sup>12</sup> P. Snowdon (1995), p 8.



I have argued that there are things that can be known, but not expressed, in a knowing-that form. The inability to express knowledge propositionally will be occasionally due to the incapacity of the knowers to do so, which does not necessarily imply that a more articulate knower would not be able to put the practice into a knowing-that form. Nevertheless, I have also said that the acquisition of knowing-how very often implies the acquisition of abilities, which is not identical with the description of those abilities, so there is an aspect of knowing-how that is not reducible to a mere knowing-that form. I have signalled that, by being able to participate in those practices, the knowers develop some cognitive abilities that allow them to be aware of aspects of the world that remain opaque to those that are outside the practice. I have accepted that those who know-how in sense (1), that is, who can describe the practice and have witnessed it, have more knowledge than those for whom the practice is completely opaque, but I have also made clear that those who take part in a practice have more knowledge than those who know-how in sense (1). I argued that, in some occasions, those who know-how in sense (2), that is, who know-how to do something but are not able to articulate their practice propositionally, can be more able knowers than those who, despite being able to articulate the practice, are unable to practice it. In the next section, I will analyse an argument against this last thesis and argue against it.

## **2. Second reductivist move: all knowledge should be expressed propositionally.**

In this section I will analyse the proposal put forward by Alcoff and Dalmiya, who claim that there are differences between knowing-that and knowing-how that make it impossible to reduce one to the other, but they claim that all types of knowledge should be expressible in a propositional way. They establish the difference between the two ways of knowledge by saying that the knower adopts different attitudes towards the propositions involved: *“When S knows how to do x, S is still required to grasp p, but this is not expressed in a consequent justified belief that p but rather in a use of p for achieving the desired goal. Thus the grasp of propositions would lie at the heart of a broadened epistemology that would, however, concede that such a grasp does not necessarily issue in statements of the form ‘S knows that p’ A proposition merely ‘grasped’ can be (a)*



*'assented to' as a full-blooded belief for a case of 'knowing-that' or can be (b) 'put to use' for an instance of 'knowing-how'. And a proposition can be used this way without being explicitly assented to.*"<sup>13</sup>

They claim that this will have important implications for the notion of truth because, in the case of knowing how, the relation between the propositions involved and the world is not one of correspondence. Nevertheless, they claim that what it is epistemologically relevant is the normative dimension of truth, and this relevance is retained in knowing how. *"There clearly is some content to the notion of a correct way of using propositions or rules to achieve success, which could parallel the idea of a true proposition correctly picturing the world."*<sup>14</sup>

Accordingly, they would challenge my assertions in the previous section, where I argued that having the ability to do x is sufficient to attribute to someone that she knows how to do x. Alcott and Dalmiya distinguish between having a skill (which will account for my "having the ability") and knowing-how: in order to "know-how" the knower must be able to recognise as true the propositions that underlie her practice (as rules) when they are presented to her. Therefore, according to their theory, my definition of knowing-how would be too broad because it includes types of knowledge that are not knowledge but skills. Even if I agree with their distinction between different kinds of knowledge, I disagree with their differentiation between skills and knowing-how.

Let's see first how they establish a distinction between skills and knowing how. The following example illustrates their position: *"I am completely at a loss when I confront someone's formulation of the 'rules' of swimming. But a midwife practices trade with knowledge because, when confronted with a manual (...) she can react with agreement or disagreement."*<sup>15</sup> So swimming is a skill but a midwife is not just skilled, but rather, she knows -how. As they say, *"to capture a genuine 'knowing-how' we need to add*

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<sup>13</sup> L. Alcott and V. Dalmiya (1993), p238.

<sup>14</sup> L. Alcott and V. Dalmiya (1993), p238-9.

<sup>15</sup> L. Alcott and V. Dalmiya (1993), p 237.



*something to a mere skill. This element, which is meant to bear all the cognitive burden, is (...) some reference to true propositions.”*<sup>16</sup>

I will argue against their distinction between skills and knowing how, because their theory will not allow me to include knowing how in sense (2). I will also challenge their assumption that it is propositional content the one that bears the cognitive burden. But I will retain their claim that what is epistemologically important regarding the notion of truth is its normative character, and that we need to preserve it when we include new forms of knowledge as paradigmatic ( I develop this issue in detail in chapter 5 )

Skills are forms of knowing how because we commonly attribute knowing how to agents that are not able to assent to the rules that underlie their behaviour, therefore the usage of knowing-how allows us to say that what Alcott and Dalmiya call "skills" are actually instances of knowledge. What we usually mean when we say that S knows how to swim is that he can do it even if he does not know the rules that underlie his performance. We attribute knowledge of knowing-how to deliver a baby to a midwife when she does it successfully, without taking into account whether she is able to recognise certain rules. Similarly, most speakers will not be able to assent to the rules of grammar when they confront them, because they will not understand the linguistic jargon, but this does not imply that they do not know-how to speak in a grammatically correct way. I think that it is right to say that, even if you are not able to recognise the rules, you know-how. The same is true for other types of knowledge, as will be clear if we remember the example, that I offered before, of a two year old child who drinks a glass of orange and then leave the glass in the sink. The child knows where to leave the glass but not because he knows that there is a place where he has to leave it, because he has knowledge of a proposition, but rather because he has seen others doing it, or he has done it before, or both. He has undergone a certain training and shows the correct behaviour and that is why we will attribute to him that he knows where to put the glass, not because he will recognise a proposition as the source of his knowledge.

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<sup>16</sup> L. Alcott and V. Dalmiya (1993), p 236.



I pointed out in the previous section that there is a sense of knowing-how (1) in which we can say that someone knows-how to do x when he could give a description of the practice, but that this is only a very limited use of the expression. What we usually mean when we attribute knowing-how to someone is that he or she knows how to perform the practice, and that they can recognise the normativity of it. By this I mean that they know which instances are correct or incorrect examples of the practice. Our attribution does not rely on their ability to describe the practice explicitly, or to put forward the “rules” that make a practice correct or incorrect. It does not even imply that they have to be able to recognise the rules when confronted with them. If the procedure for determining knowing-how were the one described by Alcock and Dalmiya we could encounter the following situation:

In the morning, we observe a swimmer swimming and a midwife helping to deliver a baby, and both of them are unable to recognise a propositional description of the rules of their practices. We will have to say that they are skilled, but that they do not know-how. We spend the afternoon with both of them making them recognise the rules put in a propositional form as the core of their practices, then, once they are able to do it, we can claim that they know-how. Of course, this process bears no resemblance to our actual practices for the attribution of knowing-how. Recognising the subjacent propositional description of a trade, or its rules is not a necessary condition to know-how to do x. In my next chapter I will argue that, as long as agents are able to recognise the normativity in their knowing-how practices, we will be justified in attributing to them knowing-how, even if they are not able to express the normativity propositionally. I want to remark that I agree with the necessity of recognising the normativity of the practices, even if this recognition is merely implicit in the performance of them.

I will support my claim further by arguing that there is a kind of content which can be known but not expressed propositionally, and that this is at the basis of any kind of knowledge. Peacocke defends the existence of a non conceptual content of perceptual experience. Some examples of which could be the perception of an object as containing some symmetrical features when the subject has not got a concept for symmetry, or the perception of irregular shapes for which we do not have a name for. He defends the necessity of accepting this kind of content in order to understand how we get to form



concepts as basic as the concept of self. This sort of content cannot be expressed in a propositional form because it cannot be conceptualised, but nevertheless it is invaluable from a cognitive perspective. In the next chapter I will argue in detail for this sort of content and I will explain its connection to practical knowledge.

I have shown in section (1) that when learning how to do x it is preferable to have a teacher who is skilled in the trade as well as able to explain how to do it. I also claimed that having to choose between a teacher able to explain it but unable to do it and another, who is skilled but cannot explain how to do it, the choice is not immediate, it is a question of pondering what we are learning and for what reason. So it is not obvious to me that the most valuable form of knowing is that which can be put into a propositional form. I cannot agree with Alcoff and Dalmiya that the cognitive burden in knowing-how is borne by the “subjacent propositions” of the practices. One of the main reasons why they had to defend the new status of knowing how as a form of knowledge is because they wanted to change the current perceptions about who has epistemic authority. I think that, by defending the view that the epistemic burden is carried by propositions, they are just supporting the current prejudices. Therefore, those who are more articulate, who are more in command of knowledge expressed propositionally will be given more epistemic authority than those who are unable to articulate clearly the rules of their trades, but are only able to assent to those when presented to them. I think that the real challenge to our current model of knowledge will be to accept the expertise of those who know how on the basis of their command of their trades, on the basis of their practical expertise.

Summarising, I have argued that it is not possible to reduce knowing-how to knowing that, that the attribution of knowing-how is usually done by recognising that the subject has acquired certain abilities by partaking in practices. The correct performance of a practice implies that the agent is able to recognise what makes the performance correct, even if she is not able to articulate in a propositional way the rules that are implicit in the practice. I have suggested that there is a content that can be known even if it cannot be put into a propositional form, and I will expand on it in the next chapter.

### **3. Reducing knowing what it is like.**



In this section I am going to analyse different reductionist attempts. First, I will assess the plausibility of the reduction made by Snowdon who wants to convert all knowing what it is like claims into a knowing-that form, second I will look at Mellor's suggestion that knowing what it is like is just a form of knowing-how and, finally, I will consider Alcoff and Dalmiya's project, which supports the view that knowing what it is like can be expressed propositionally. I will resist those reductions for different reasons. One of them is that, if those reductionist attempts are correct and it is possible to completely capture completely the content of experiences in a propositional form, then anybody who is able to understand those sentences will share the same content as those who have had the experiences. This has an important consequence in relation to my main thesis, the use of experience to ground the knowledge of marginalized groups, for which it is important to maintain that there is an irreducibility in claims of the knowing what it is like form. For instance, it is central to be able to claim that women can access some knowledge that men cannot have access to. The irreducibility option has to face some problems that are mainly ontological in nature. I will argue for a form of irreducibility that does not imply the existence of elusive "qualia". In this section I will first argue against two attempts of reduction, by Snowdon and Mellor (3.1), and then I will argue against Alcoff's and Dalmiya's theory (3.2).

### **3.1 Snowdon's reductionist attempt.**

P.Snowdon claims that knowing what it is like is a form of knowing-that because those sort of claims can be rephrased in the following way: *"I know that that was the smell of her perfume"* or *"I know that that was how Schnabel played the chord."*

But how would you reduce a phrase like "I know what it is like to be in labour" to a knowing-that form? "I know that that is to be in labour" is not equivalent to "I know what it is like to be in labour". Most adults would recognise a woman in labour if they see one, but only those who have undergone the experience can claim that they know what it is like. So the reduction is not applicable in all cases.



Furthermore, I have already argued, while talking about knowing-how, that, even if you can rephrase those statements to fit into a knowing-that form, we are still talking about different kinds of knowledge. I argued that there were differences between knowing-how in sense (1) and knowing-how in senses (2) and (3). The same distinction applies in knowing what it is like. There are subjects who have never given birth, but who have accumulated information about it by reading, talking to women who have undergone the experience, having witnessed many births, etc... that can say that they know what it is like to give birth. They know more about it than other people who do not have that information. But they will not have the same type of knowledge as those who have given birth.

The way in which we attribute knowledge to a subject of how to do x in sense (2) is by having seen him perform the action concerned, i.e., making sure that they have (or have had) the ability to do it. The subject has acquired the ability by performing the action a number of times. Even if this has provided the subject with some factual knowledge, there is no amount of factual knowledge that can replace his ability to do x. The same is true about knowing what it is like, the acquisition of knowledge of facts about an experience does not entail the knowledge of what it is like having that experience.

A defender of the reduction thesis could argue that, even if a verbal account of what an experience is like does not amount to having had the experience, this is the usual way in which we decide if someone knows what x is like, simply by exchanging information about x. But, then, does this mean that a cunning person who has not undergone the experience can witness enough exchanges of information to be able to fool people into the belief that he knows what x is like without really having experienced x? In some cases it is possible to attribute this type of knowledge to someone mistakenly but, even if this is the case, it has been claimed that, usually, if I am talking to someone who has undergone the same experience as I have, I can be aware of it by means of the quality of our verbal exchanges about the experience. Alcoff and Dalmiya claim that *"the conversation between people who have shared a type of experience has a richer quality to it that may not be observable by a simple recounting of their statements."*<sup>17</sup> They accept that there is

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<sup>17</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993), p 240.



something above the recounting of their statements which makes the quality of their communications better. It is possible to be aware of the special quality of the exchange, even as external observers. I do not think that this special quality is of any mysterious kind but, rather, that even if it is perceived, it cannot be pinned down to statements used. Sometimes the recognition that the other person has acquired common abilities is one of the signals to know if she knows what the experience is like. For instance, the recognition of particular metaphors as significant in describing the experience is one of those. People who have not undergone certain experiences, pain, for instance, might be able to use the concept of pain in a very varied way and in many different contexts, but many of the usages will be opaque to them. Equally, those who have undergone particular experiences might be more able to understand the reactions and feelings of others that have also undergone them. They will be more able to explain their behaviours by picking clues that are not apprehensible by others.

In the previous sections I argued that being involved in certain practices allow the knowers to acquire particular abilities, in the rest of the chapter I will argue that knowing what it is like also procure the knowers with cognitive abilities that cannot be acquired otherwise, therefore resisting the reduction suggested by Snowdon

### **3.2. Mellor's reductionist attempt.**

I have just drawn an analogy between knowing-how and knowing what it is like. Mellor has argued that it is possible to reduce knowing what an experience is like to knowing how to imagine the experience. I think that there is a similarity between those types of knowledge, but that to claim that one amounts to the other is incorrect. Knowing what x is like does not imply being able to imagine what it is like. It is possible to know what x it is like, and to be a very unimaginative type of person, and therefore to be unable to imagine what the experience is like. It is also possible to be a very imaginative individual and, relying on the descriptions of those who have undergone the experience, to be able to imagine very vividly what something is like. Nevertheless, this does not entail either that the imaginative subject knows what the experience is like. It is possible that, if he underwent it himself, he would have a different experience from the one that he has



imagined. Nor it does entail that the unimaginative person does not know what the experience is like.

In this section I have resisted Mellor's attempt to reduce what it is like to knowing how to imagine, which is enough to show that Mellor's reduction does not work.

### 3.3. Alcoff and Dalmiya reduction.

In the previous sections I have argued against two philosophers who want to erase the differences between knowing what it is like and other types of knowledge. In this section I have a different task. Alcoff and Dalmiya accept that there are differences between knowing that and knowing what it is like. Their position is clearly stated in their explanation of the differences between the knowledge of doctors and midwives. The knowledge of midwives was both practical and experiential, and it was different from that acquired by doctors because:

- 1)their knowledge was unrecorded.
- 2)was acquired through practice.
- 3)was gained from their own embodied experience of childbirth.
- 4)It was empathic *“this empathy was produced partly by a subjective or first-person knowledge of what it is like (for example) to be a woman going through labour, whereas the knowledge of physicians was founded in a self-conscious quest for objectivity.”*<sup>18</sup>

Any doctor that has theoretical knowledge of giving birth, needs to be involved in the birth of many babies in order to be able to claim that he is qualified to help in delivering babies. In this sense, both midwives and doctors acquire practical knowledge through experience that cannot be acquired otherwise. The main difference between the traditional midwife and a male doctor or a female doctor who has not given birth is that they also gained knowledge by their own experience of birth giving. Any man can have access to 1 and 2, but not 3 or 4, therefore, even if they have a lot of know-that type of information about it, and also they know-how in sense (1), they still do not know what it is like to give birth.

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<sup>18</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993).



Alcoff and Dalmiya argue for a distinction between several types of knowledges so why am I classifying their theory as reductionist? They claim that midwives have more knowledge than doctors because they have undergone the experience of giving birth themselves, which is an anti-reductionist claim, but they also claim that these experiences can be expressed propositionally, because they think that the cognitive burden resides in the propositions that underlie those experiences. While analysing knowing-how, I argued that this is an unnecessary reduction. I will take the same line or argument with respect to this move.

Alcoff and Dalmiya claim that midwives have apprehended some subjective facts that are not accessible from a third person perspective. Midwives, as women who have given birth, have undergone certain experiences that allow them to have a better understanding of the process. These are only accessible from a first person perspective, because if they were accessible otherwise, then doctors will be able to access them as well. In this section I will discuss whether these subjective facts amount to raw experiences of the kind argued against by Scott in the previous chapter. On the one hand, they want to resist the idea that these experiences are qualia which are private to individuals but, on the other hand, they are looking for a restricted access to those “subjective facts”, so they postulate the existence of what they call “collective privacy”. I will argue that this approach is very problematic and I will support an alternative.

I will support the view that those who have given birth share a knowing what it is like type of knowledge that is not apprehensible by those who have not undergone the experience, but that does not imply the existence of subjective facts or a collective privacy. I will argue that knowing what it is like is close to knowing-how in the sense that its content might not be propositionally expressible, but that it is nevertheless tied to normativity and, in this sense, is fully accountable to the communities that include the individuals who have undergone the experiences. I will argue that knowing what it is like allows us to apprehend aspects of the world (but not facts) that would be unaccounted for otherwise.

I will devote most of the section to analyse Alcoff's and Dalmiya position (3.3.1), and then I will explain in some detail my alternative(3.3.2).



3.3.1 Alcoff and Dalmiya claim that knowing what it is like is a form of knowledge that consists in the apprehension of subjective facts. My first criticism of their theory is that they presuppose the existence of those subjective facts, without supporting their claim sufficiently. They consider that their existence is beyond doubt: *"Just as there is a fact of the matter as to what it is like to be a bat, a Martian or Thomas Angel experiencing e, so also there is a fact of the matter as to what it is like to be a woman experiencing childbirth, or pregnancy, or patriarchal marriage."*<sup>19</sup> One of the reasons that they offer for the existence of those subjective facts is that the communication between people who have undergone the experiences (who are acquainted with those "facts") is more informative than between those who have not. I will argue in section 3.2.2 that it is not necessary to postulate the existence of those facts in order to explain this.

My second criticism is that, in order to support their general theory that all that is known must be expressed propositionally, they have to postulate the existence of an idiolect that is used to record these subjective facts. I disagree with both presuppositions, with their ontological claim that subjective facts exist and with the supposition that all knowledge has to be propositionally expressible. According to their own theory, if we are going to accept the apprehension of these facts as knowledge, they have to be expressible in propositions, but if they are so, then anybody can access them. To explain why not everybody can access this content by means of our shared language, Alcoff and Dalmiya claim that our current language cannot express gender specific experiences because it is gender-biased. To support the assertion that this type of knowledge is knowledge, even if inexpressible, Alcoff and Dalmiya say that these experiences are potentially expressible by means of a specific idiolect: *"The introduction of a gender-specific point of view and gender-specific facts seems to suggest the conclusion that the truth of some propositions is not expressible in a gender-neutral language. Along these lines one could say that G-experiential knowledge is propositional, but these propositions are peculiar in being expressible only in a gender-specific idiolect."*<sup>20</sup>. So women who have given birth, share

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<sup>19</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993), p 229

<sup>20</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993), p 230



knowledge of facts that are not expressible in our current language but that are intrinsically expressible in an idiolect.

Let us have a closer view at their general argument: they postulate the existence of this idiolect because, if knowing what it is like is a type of knowledge, then it must be somehow expressible, but this move begs the argument, given that, until we can show that it is expressible propositionally, it is not knowledge according to their theory. If we can prove that knowing what it is like is a form of knowledge by using other means, then it could follow that it has to be somehow expressible propositionally but, in order for this to follow, the claim that all knowledge must be expressible propositionally must be proven to be true independently.

For the sake of the argument, let's accept that all knowledge must be expressed propositionally. They infer the existence of the idiolect from the fact that knowing what it is like is knowledge, and they reach this conclusion because they consider that knowing what it is like consists in the apprehension of subjective facts. Therefore, the main reason to support the view that knowing what it is like is knowledge is the reliance on a parallelism between knowing-that as knowledge of facts and knowing what it is like as knowledge of subjective facts: *"If there is a fact of the matter as to what it is like to give birth, then apprehension of this fact in a gender specific experience could count as knowledge as much as apprehending the objective fact about the cat being on the mat."*

<sup>21</sup>. In our epistemological tradition the knowledge of facts has been closely linked with their representation in propositions and therefore, to move from the knowledge of subjective facts to the existence of an idiolect that represents them might seem to be a justifiable step. Nevertheless, I see think that this project does not hold. In the rest of the section I will argue that there are no such things as "subjective facts" and that it is not possible to have a private idiolect between women.

My first step in arguing against the existence of subjective facts will be to analyse the two different senses in which Alcoff and Dalmiya characterise subjective facts, and to show how with neither of them can they account for the diversity and the commonalties in

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<sup>21</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993), p239.



women's experiences. The concept of women's experiences that could ground a feminist epistemology is not captured by their characterisation of them as subjective facts. There is more than one characterisation of subjective facts in Alcoff and Dalmiya's article, which I will illustrate with two different quotations (I have underlined the important sections):

a) *"If there is a fact of the matter as to what it is like to give birth, the apprehension of this fact in a gender specific experience could count as knowledge as much as apprehending the objective fact about the cat being on the mat."*<sup>22</sup>

b) *"Just as there is a fact of the matter as to what it is like to be a bat, a Martian or Thomas Angel experiencing e, so also there is a fact of the matter as to what it is like to be a woman experiencing childbirth, or pregnancy, or patriarchal marriage."*<sup>23</sup>

While in the first quotation, the subjective fact is what it is like to give birth, in the second quotation, the subjective fact is what it is like to be a woman experiencing childbirth. Both are very different claims and I will analyse them in turn.

In the first quotation, by using giving birth as an example of subjective facts, Alcoff and Dalmiya are suggesting that there is some knowledge that is accessible only to those who can experience giving birth from a first person perspective. In the previous chapter I claimed that they should be included in our accounts of knowledge and I mentioned post-natal depression as an example of such a knowledge and, therefore, my position is that those experiences can ground knowledge. My disagreement with Alcoff and Dalmiya resides in the characterisation of those experiences. I claimed that we should not take those experiences to be natural and unmediated by cultural factors, a question that seems to be overlooked if, following Alcoff and Dalmiya, we consider that there is a common subjective fact that it is apprehended when women give birth, because we seem to be ignoring the many different ways in which women experience childbirth in different cultures, societies, or even due to individual idiosyncrasies. In the previous chapter, and following the teachings of postmodern and postcolonial philosophers, I argued that it is incorrect to assume that all women will have the same experiences just because they are

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<sup>22</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993) p 239.

<sup>23</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993), p 229.



women, and that it is necessary to allow for diversity. This is a fact that is acknowledged in the second characterisation offered by Alcoff and Dalmiya, in which, instead of postulating that there are **facts** that are common to all women, and that therefore could not be mediated by different practices or discourses, they claim that there is a common **quality** that women feel when they experience *x*, so they allow for diversity while attempting to account for a certain commonality.

They say that :*“All that is necessary to meaningfully speak of a ‘woman’s specific point of view’ is that there be a determinable quality to the fact of a woman having experience e, under which we may subsume different determinate characteristic feelings of varying generality that are dependent, for example, on more specific circumstances like the cultural background of the woman in question down to the unique ‘subjective fact’ associated with a particular woman experiencing e.*”<sup>24</sup> The “subjective facts” that they postulated before implied that, even if they were only apprehensible from a particular perspective, they were, somehow, public, a perception that was supported by their comparison between those facts and an objective fact (in their words) such as the cat is on the mat. But, with their new characterisation of subjective facts as felt qualities, it is inevitable to think that they are moving into the realm of the private, a suggestion that they want to resist. They claim that there is a subjective fact for each woman experiencing *e*, but given that this type of “qualia” cannot be the basis for a woman’s perspective, they also suggest that there is a “determinable quality to the fact of a woman having experience e”, that is, when women have experiences, there is a common quality shared by all women, and this, I suppose, amounts to women having a common perspective that mediates their experiences. But having a common quality and sharing a perspective are different issues. And while I will accept that women can share a perspective, I will deny that women share a determinable quality when having particular experiences.

According to Alcoff and Dalmiya, what it is common to all women is a determinable quality to the fact of woman having experience *e*, so the common ground is a particular quality. That quality must be universal, given that it is there despite the cultural and

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<sup>24</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya, p 229.



individual variations in the experience. To argue that women have a common quale that permeates their experiences has several problems:

First, coming back to the example of childbirth, we see how, with their new characterisation of experience, they can acknowledge diversity, because it allows for individual and cultural variations in the experience, while at the same time accepting that there is a common quale. Nevertheless, there is still a universalist claim in this analysis, because that common feminine quale has to be necessarily independent of the different practices that might inform what being a woman is in diverse communities. In the previous chapter I argued against theories that considered that women are a community because they share their experiences universally.

Second, I have already noted how by talking about qualia, they are moving into the realm of the private, and this is exactly the sort of move that they wanted to avoid. By introducing subjective facts, they wanted to make the content of knowing what it is like claims propositionally expressible, but the nature of the quality postulated is inexpressible. We cannot rely on the existence of qualia in order to ground a common perspective for women, neither in the apprehension of quale as they are present in particular experiences (quotation 1) nor as quale accompanying the experiences of women (quotation 2).

Nevertheless, Alcoff and Dalmiya are aware that the reliance on qualia might present a problem in their theory, and they try to avoid it by claiming that, even if the content of knowing what it is like claims is not expressible because our language is gender biased, and unable to account for gender-specific experiences, it is, nevertheless, expressible in an idiolect common to women. This move would allow them to hold at the same time that there is privacy, due to the first person aspect of the acquisition of knowledge and, therefore, men will be excluded, and also, at the same time, that there is a collectivity that shares the privacy, and therefore the qualia become expressible. I will argue that, despite this new element, their project does not hold.

This move has several problems. If we are talking about qualia, then it is not possible to know that all the members have the same quale, as Wittgenstein showed with his beetle in



the box example. If the criteria for recognising those “qualia” are public criteria then they include more than private labelling with an idiolect, they include the sharing of practices, which implies that, even if males cannot have the experiences, they are able to understand the practices of attribution and, therefore, they can be part of the common conceptual system. If we want to keep Alcoff’s and Dalmiya’s original project, in order to obtain an exclusive gender specific knowledge, the knowledge obtained by apprehending those gender specific facts has to remain private and, given that collective privacy is not possible, it has to remain inexpressible and, therefore, it does not fulfil their own definition of what counts as knowledge.

Nevertheless, I think that it is possible to argue that women can have experiences that are not captured in our common conceptual systems, while at the same time claiming that those experiences do not remain in the realm of the private. But the solution that I offer implies leaving out any reference to qualia. In the previous chapter I argued that women can have experiences for which we do not have a name, but that can be named within the current language after a process of collective awareness. Once this has been done the new usages of terms/ new words can be available to the general population. Dale Spender gives examples of a few of them in Man Made Language<sup>25</sup>. In a way, it is possible to escape (by enlarging it) the language that we possess *"being aware of the limitations that are inherent in the language we possess, being sensitive to its falseness and its distortions is, however, a beginning, and a beginning from which we can develop women's meanings (...) in a new direction."*<sup>26</sup> I was particularly interested in pointing out that this move does not presuppose that experiences are prior to, and independent from, our naming them. I suggested that the process of naming those experiences and the belonging to particular groups informed the experiences. I underlined the fact that those experiences were neither raw experiences, nor “qualia”. I argued that, within the appropriate communities, women could talk about those experiences, name them, and let others know about them. They might need to stretch the meaning of some words in order to account for their experiences, and the task to explain to others what they mean when they refer to those experiences implies more than just giving them a name, implies changing their perceptions

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<sup>25</sup> D. Spender (1990), p182,-90

<sup>26</sup> D. Spender (1990), p183.



and presuppositions but, in any case, I claimed that this process takes place within the boundaries of shared languages. Given my insistence on the fact that expressing the content of those experiences does not amount to having them, and that the experiences might provide the knowers with abilities and skills that they could not have acquired otherwise, I could still argue that women can apprehend certain aspects of reality than men cannot access in the same way, that is, they can be different kinds of epistemic agents. Nevertheless, this move is not open to Alcoff and Dalmiya, because they argue that all knowledge must be put into a propositional form ( in the next section, I will argue against that claim).

Summarising, I agreed with Alcoff and Dalmiya's suggestion that women are the only ones who can have a first person view of certain experiences. I also agree with them that this perspective allows them to access certain aspects of the experience that are not accessible otherwise. But I disagreed with their claim that, by undergoing the experiences, women are apprehending subjective facts. In the former paragraphs, I have argued that their two different characterisations of subjective facts collapse into qualia, a position that is full of difficulties and that does not allow them to reach their final objective: the expressibility of all known content in a propositional form. In the next section I will support the view that, even if it is undeniable that women who experience childbirth have a different perspective in the process to that of doctors, they do not need either to be attributed the apprehension of subjective facts in order to be attributed knowledge, nor to be able to express the content of their knowledge propositionally in order to make it count as knowledge.

3.3.2 In the previous section I have argued that the characterisation of subjective facts that Alcoff and Dalmiya put forward is unsatisfactory for ground a feminist epistemology and, also, that it has problems internal to their own theory. In this section I will argue that, if even there is always a content in knowledge and, therefore, also in knowing-what it is like, nevertheless, not all contents are facts. I will quote D.H.Mellor to support my view. He says :*"Why can I not state the fact that I know when I know what it's like to feel warm? The obvious answer is that there is no such fact. Knowing what feeling warm is like is not*



*knowing any fact, because it is not knowing that any proposition is true.*"<sup>27</sup> In the first part of the chapter I argued that we can attribute knowing how to subjects who were unable to express their knowledge propositionally, either because they did not have the necessary linguistic resources, or because their knowledge involved the showing of their skill instead of describing it. If we consider that facts are those items of knowledge that can be captured by propositions, it is clear that there are at least some instances of knowledge that are not about knowing facts. The same reasoning can be applied to knowing what it is like, we can attribute it to people who are unable to express propositionally the content of their knowledge. Mellor supports the symmetry of both types of knowledge when he claims that knowing what it is like to feel warm in this respect is: "*like knowing how to ride a bicycle. I cannot state the fact I know then either, because there is no such fact to state. I must of course know some facts about bicycles to know how to ride one, but having this ability is obviously neither constituted nor entailed by my knowing those facts. And that is why no one thinks it mysterious that I cannot say what fact my knowing how to ride a bicycle is knowledge of: it is too obvious that there is not such a fact.*"<sup>28</sup> I have already argued that the analogy goes further because, in the same way that knowing-how provides us with some abilities that could neither be acquired by recounting them propositionally, nor attributed to others by the mere description of those abilities, knowing what it is like might also provide us with certain recognitional abilities that someone who has not undergone the experience does not possess, and that we could not acquire from a simple recounting of factual knowledge.

At the end of the previous section I claimed that I would explain how it is possible that women who have undergone childbirth are attributed a knowledge that doctors do not possess. I have suggested, in this section, that, by undergoing some experiences, the subjects are able to acquire certain recognitional abilities, which amounts to saying that doctors who have not had first hand experience of giving birth would not possess such abilities. In the rest of the section I will expand on this issue.

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<sup>27</sup> D.H. Mellor (1993), p8.

<sup>28</sup> D.H. Mellor (1993), p 8.



While Alcock and Dalmiya described the “subjective facts” acquired in knowing what it is like as Lockean subjective qualities: *“their being is a dimension of the subjects’ experiencing something.”*<sup>29</sup> I prefer to say that by knowing what something is like we do not get to know a subjective fact but, rather, we just become aware of some aspects of the world that are apprehensible from particular perspectives and not from others, and whose apprehension gives us reasons for acting in certain ways and not in others. I follow P.Gilbert who claims that *“The subjective character of experience simply consists in its reason giving role, that to have an experience consists in coming to have a reason for desire and/or belief in a particular non-inferential kind of way.”*<sup>30</sup> Therefore it is not that you have to “capture” a subjective fact and then you know what it is like but, rather, having an experience, for instance, feeling pain when you are pricked by a thorn, gives you reasons to display avoidance behaviour. This characterisation of knowing what it is like does not necessitate that the subject can put his knowledge in a propositional form but, rather, this characterisation gives us a closer link between what is being apprehended and the subject as an embodied agent P.Gilbert says that *“The subject’s knowledge of what reasons his experience gives him (...) is a recognitional capacity which consists in forming his desires and beliefs (...) Now knowledge of this sort is immediate- it requires attention only to the experience, not to other evidence.”*<sup>31</sup> Having experienced pain once, we acquire, in a non-inferential way, a reason for avoiding touching thorns in the future. We exercise a recognitional capacity and acquire an ability. The involvement of the subject with the world as the means of acquiring this knowledge is central to this theory, which implies that, in order to attribute knowledge to the subject, he does not have to express his beliefs in a propositional form. As K.Lennon affirms *“If providing reasons consists in displaying the appropriateness of an agent’s response, given her other perceptions and attitudes, then this may not always be capturable in propositional form.”*<sup>32</sup> I have already argued that, in order to attribute knowing what it is like to a subject, it is necessary that the knower responds appropriately to the environment. Occasionally this criterion will imply that the subject has to give particular propositional information about her experiences. For instance, there are differences in the uses of a concept such as “pain”

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<sup>29</sup> L. Alcock and V. Dalmiya (1993), p240.

<sup>30</sup> P. Gilbert (1992), p 243.

<sup>31</sup> P. Gilbert (1992), p 245

<sup>32</sup> K. Lennon (1995), p 532.



between those who are unable to feel pain, and those who can feel pain. But this does not imply that this is the only test to determine if someone knows what something is like. There are other types of behaviour that count as responding appropriately. And it is the recognition of the normative aspect that regulates our attribution of knowledge that makes knowing what it is like a form of knowledge.

Summarising, in the first part of this section I argued against Snowdon's claim that knowing what it is like is reducible to knowing-that. in the second section I argued that knowing what it is like is not reducible to knowing how to imagine. In the last part of the section I claimed that the content of knowing what it is like cannot be apprehended propositionally, but that the impossibility is not due to the existence of qualia but, rather, to the fact that it is a type of practical knowledge that equips the knower with recognitional abilities that cannot be captured propositionally. I have insisted that knowing what it is like necessitates that the knower undergoes certain experiences, but I have also underlined that those experiences are not raw but, rather, they are shaped by societies and regulated by them. Finally, I have claimed that being expressible as a proposition is not the criterion for determining what is knowledge, and I have signalled that the normative aspect of knowledge attribution is what determines which practices are knowledge and which are not.

## **5. On Knowing others.**

In the previous sections I stated that the content of knowing how or knowing what it is like does not have to be expressed in propositions to count as knowledge. I argued that having knowledge does not always amount (or only amount) to having propositional information about x. On many occasions it also means having the capacity to act in certain ways, or being able to relate to what is known in an appropriate manner. In this section I will argue that knowing others cannot be reduced to propositions either. For instance, what someone means when they claim that they know Mozart is that they are experts on his work, but what someone meant by it while he was alive was that they have met him. This second sense of knowing Mozart implies that, even if you have some propositional



information about him, you also have, due to your acquaintance with Mozart, the capacity for relating to him in particular ways.

When we let other people get to know us we express our feelings to them, and they understand us. In this process we are not just delivering propositional information about ourselves, as P. Gilbert points out, we are creating a relationship, something that includes the sharing of propositions and also of attitudes in relation to them and to ourselves. That we do not just share propositional information is proven by the fact that sometimes we do not know what our feelings are until the other points them out to us- gives us the propositional content- “ *For though I can sometimes say to another just what I think and feel, I commonly cannot.*

*And then, I may need a friend to help me to find out. Another can tell me from the way I express my feelings what these feelings are- give me propositional knowledge of them. Or it may not matter if they cannot, since at least I have given expression to them, and this expression has been understood.*”<sup>33</sup> And it is also proven by the fact that we might choose to deliver information about ourselves to people who we do not know “*the mere sharing of information about ourselves, however, does nothing to create personal relationships. We tell intimate things to our doctors, priests or strangers we meet in trains and know we will never see again.*”<sup>34</sup> So the amount of propositional information shared is not what builds a relationship of understanding between two people but, rather, it is the hope that they will have the appropriate attitude towards them “*I trust others with my feelings only if they would thereby be committed to an appropriate attitude towards them. They would not, other things being equal, scoff or sneer or take advantage of me.*”<sup>35</sup> The sort of knowledge that I have described here is valuable, not because of its relation to truth, if we define truth in terms of propositions picturing the world in the right way, given that propositions are not always involved but, rather, it is desirable because “*my knowledge of another in a close relationship still constitutes an awareness of what they are really like, though my reliability about them comes out in my behavior rather than in my judgments.*

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<sup>33</sup> P. Gilbert (1991), p 96.

<sup>34</sup> P. Gilbert (1991), p98.

<sup>35</sup> P. Gilbert (1991), p 98.



*It is simply better to get such things right about people in this way than to get them wrong. We cannot imagine ourselves not regarding it as especially desirable to do so.”<sup>36</sup>*

In a close relationship we expect others to show the appropriate attitude towards ourselves. This is what it will constitute the proof that they understand us and therefore, in order to know if they do, we have to take into account not just the sort of things that they know about us but, also, we have to take into account their behavior. Their knowledge is shown by other means than the utterance of the right propositions, even if these will certainly be necessary sometimes. But it clearly implies something else because we will not trust them if their actions contradict their words. This knowledge is acquired through a process that is socially instituted. It has many variables, but it includes negotiation, trust, and the capacity of understanding body language, signs, gestures and social rituals. It implies making sense of particular forms of life.

In a previous chapter I put forward a concept of experience that was not raw, but was not completely mediated conceptually either. In this chapter I have signaled types of knowledge in which experience has a bearing. I have claimed that there are some types of content that can be apprehended by knowers, but that it cannot be transmitted or even expressed in propositions. Therefore, they are not captured by concepts. In the next chapter I will explain how we can apprehend certain epistemic contents for which we do not have words, without implying that we experience them as being completely unmediated. I will argue that the way in which humans apprehend non-conceptual content, is mediated by the practices in which the apprehension takes place.

## **6. Experiential/ practical knowledges and their relation to privileged feminist knowledge.**

In my account of knowing how, knowing what it is like and knowing others, I have insisted that these are different types of knowledge and that they are not reducible to knowing-that, or propositional knowledge. But given that knowing that has been

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<sup>36</sup> P. Gilbert (1991), p 101.



considered the paradigm of knowledge in our epistemic tradition, and that justification is linked to propositional knowledge, I still have to argue that those other types of knowledge are knowledge. My aim is not just to show that practical and experiential knowledge are legitimate forms of knowledge, but also to prove that they can be the grounds for privileged knowledge.

I have characterised **practical** and **experiential** knowledge as having both personal and social aspects. Therefore, on the one hand, they can only be acquired by individuals undergoing certain experiences or partaking in particular practices but, on the other hand, they are socially sanctioned. While my insistence on the first characteristic will allow me to claim that only certain knowers can produce particular types of knowledge, the second characteristic will help me to argue for the status of “proper” knowledge for experiential and practical knowledge. I will devote the next chapter to proving this last point, but in the following paragraphs I will begin to sketch the basis for my arguments.

In relation to **experiential** knowledge, I concluded chapter 3 by saying that experiences are not raw, that they are mediated by conceptual systems, but I also claimed that, by having particular experiences, there are aspects of the world that are apprehended **despite** the conceptual systems that we are embedded in. This apprehension takes place by engaging with the world in particular ways. This means that these aspects of the world cannot be apprehended but from particular perspectives and are opaque from others, and that they are not captured by merely sharing a conceptual system. At the same time, I also claimed that they are not “natural” kinds waiting to be experienced, but that they are the product of social practices.

In the previous chapter I followed N.Schemann who showed how, although some women were unable to understand their own reactions and behaviour because they lacked the right context in which to make sense of their feelings, when they joined a CR group, they were able to articulate them, and to realise that they were feeling angry, and acting angry. They had to challenge the traditional use of the term in order to account for their anger, and they could only do it by relying on a community of others in similar circumstances. The experience that those women had could not be completely captured by their conceptual



system. They shared a similar social situation, they partook in common practices, and their particular location allowed them to experience their lives in a determinate way that was not the expected one. I will argue, in the rest of the thesis, that it is their sharing of practices that allowed them to capture particular aspects of the world that were opaque to others. Being part of a group that occupies a determinate location, they all shared a common feeling of not fitting the role that they were expected to play. They knew what it is like to be in their situation, but they were unable individually to understand their feelings, those were not immediately transparent, or they might immediately have known that they felt anger. Instead, their feelings had to be articulated by engaging in an exchange with a group of people with similar experiences, occupying the same location that they were occupying.

In relation to **practical** knowledge, I showed how there are knowers who are able to do what is required of them, but unable to explain to others how to do it. This knowledge can take the form of engaging directly with the world, such as swimming, or by apprehending aspects of the world and taking practical decisions regarding them, as it is the case of knowing when some bread is ready to be baked. In these cases, the knowers are able to engage successfully with the world without having to be able to put into propositions the content of their knowledge. Obviously this type of practical knowledge has some elements in common with experiential knowledge, because as well as the latter, it is acquired in and sanctioned by the communities wherein the knower belongs. I will use the **normative** nature of experiential and practical knowledge to support my claim that they are proper types of knowledge.

But what about my claim that those are the grounds of epistemically privileged knowledge?. I have insisted on the epistemic value of the epistemic content that it is apprehended by knowers yet is non propositional. I will argue, in the next chapter, that non-propositional content can help us to enlarge our current conceptual systems. That content is more readily acquired by those who are at the margins, and who are able to sense a gap between the world as it is experienced by them and the way in which it is conceptualised.



I have already pointed out that experiential knowledge seems to be the natural source for that privileged knowledge, and I want to point out now that practical knowledge is equally valid for grounding marginalized knowledge. If we review the example of midwifery, for instance, we can see how the medicalization of childbirth would have marginalized many instances of good practice and sound knowledge regarding traditional ways of delivery. Those who have delivered many children following those traditions could have seen how medical science was overlooking important facts about giving birth. Midwives would be an important source of criticism and improvement to a more theoretical approach to their trade, as well as being a source of inspiration for improvements. Their knowledge has both the critical edge and the creativity that are the mark of marginalized knowledges.

I have established the basis for arguing that experiential and practical knowledge can be considered “proper” knowledge and, furthermore, that they can be the ground of privileged knowledge. Therefore, I have already tackled two issues that I mentioned in the first paragraph of this section. Now I want to introduce a further question: are both types of knowledge equally capable of grounding **feminist** knowledge?. Despite the similitudes, there is still an important difference between both types of examples. In the case of experiential knowledge it seems necessary that the knowers develop a feminist identity, in order to produce feminist knowledge, but in the case of practical knowledge this does not seem necessary. I pointed out this difference in the previous chapter (section 7).

In order to support the view that both types of knowledge have need of knowers who have developed a political consciousness, I will argue that we should not forget that an individual midwife who is being relegated from her trade by a more fashionable medical approach to delivery is in the same position as the housewife who is unable to make sense of her feelings. Both of them need the support of a community in order to validate and justify their knowledge. Furthermore, unless they are able to argue their case on a political basis, and change our current perceptions of who is a reliable epistemic agent, their knowledge will not be recognised as such. I have already claimed that the supporting of practical knowledges will have feminist implications, but the point at dispute now is whether practical knowers produce **feminist** knowledge or not.



I believe that women with practical knowledge, can produce feminist knowledge when they develop a feminist consciousness. Nevertheless, I have to admit that this seems a counterintuitive move, because it seems obvious that knowers who have acquired their knowledge practically, in the form of skills, will retain their knowledge even if they do not develop an identity as marginal knowers. Therefore the step that I am suggesting, the acquisition of a political consciousness, does not seem necessary in all cases.

Knowledge is a social activity. For a practice to be considered knowledge, it has to present a normative aspect, and it needs to be recognised as such by a relevant community. Therefore, to have a skill is not simply to be able to do x, or y but, rather, it consists in knowing what will count as having done x or y correctly or incorrectly. This does not seem to imply that the community to which the subject belongs, a community of women, for instance, has to be a feminist community, one with a political consciousness, because it can be argued that the mere fact that there is a community suffices to fulfil the need of sanctioning the knowledge. Nevertheless, I think that we should not forget that in order for women to be considered an epistemic community, a certain awareness of politics is necessary. We should not forget that women is not a “natural” grouping, and that the practices within communities are entangled with the political identity of the communities. I think that women belonging to particular epistemic communities are knowers even if they do not have a feminist consciousness, but that the development of this consciousness improves their situation as knowers. Furthermore, even if we can claim that women belonging to these communities are knowers, we cannot claim that their knowledge is feminist knowledge until they develop the appropriate political consciousness.

In the next chapter I will analyse the role of tacit knowledge in our epistemic practices. This type of knowledge implies that we possess epistemic skills of which we are not aware of as well as those other of which we are aware. These skills are very valuable in theory making, because they can provide us with the resources to propose new theories as well as with a critical edge which allows us to see weaknesses in the current theories. In our present paradigm of knowledge, we do not recognise the value of knowers who possess these epistemic skills, a trend that should be changed. I will argue for new paradigms of knowledge that take advantage of epistemic diversity, and that acknowledges that it is



necessary to include different epistemic agents who bring in particular cognitive skills (some of which are unacknowledged by them). I believe that this process is facilitated by the development of a political consciousness (this is the reason why I believe that epistemic communities of women benefit from the development of a political awareness as feminist).

The political articulation of knowers who belong to marginalized epistemic groups is necessary for them to become aware that their practices are **effective** ways of apprehending and responding to the world, in a world, that their practical knowledge is “**proper**” knowledge. By becoming aware of the validity of their knowledge, and of the fact that their knowledge is marginalized for political, and not for epistemic reasons, they can be better prepared to support their knowledge claims, in opposition to those of the mainstream. Finally, it will also help those belonging to the mainstream to become aware of the existence of valid practices that are alien to them and of the need to attribute epistemic expertise to the members of those epistemic communities.

Summarising, I have argued that there are types of content that ground knowledge even when we cannot put them in a propositional form. In my account of experience, I have insisted in the value of those types of content that cannot be put into words, because they allow us to enlarge our conceptual systems, allowing us to apprehend aspects of the world that would remain opaque otherwise. Furthermore, I will re-evaluate the role of those knowers who can allow us access to that content that it is only apprehensible through practices, and also to the types of knowledge that capture those types of content. I have argued that a political awareness is necessary to be able to produce **feminist** knowledge based both in the practical and experiential knowledge of women. In a later chapter I will also argue that it is conducive to feminist goals to argue for a form of evaluating knowledge that takes into account different types of expertise, and does not focus just on theoretical expertise.

## 7 Conclusion



At the beginning of the chapter I claimed that I would argue for a revaluation of forms of knowledge that have been marginalized, in our epistemological tradition. I have succeeded in showing that these are not reducible to knowing that, that not all the content of what it is known can be put into propositions and that it is not straightforward that the most valuable form of knowledge is propositional knowledge. Nevertheless, opening up the definition of knowledge, means that I have to provide criteria to decide what will count as a knower having a correct knowledge of the world and what will not so count. According to the traditional view, a subject knows if he has a justified true belief but, with the inclusion of non-propositional types of knowledge, it is necessary to apply different criteria. In this chapter I have signalled that normativity is the criterion for knowledge. In the next chapter I will revise the concept of justification and also that of normativity.



## CHAPTER 5

### 0. Introduction.

At the end of chapter 4, I claimed that we should not take ‘knowing that’ as the only form of knowledge. I argued that there are other types of knowledge that are as valuable as ‘knowing that’, and that cannot be reduced to it. I accepted that our current concept of knowledge as justified true belief should be revised in order to account for non-propositional knowledge, and its acceptance requires me to offer another definition of justification. In this chapter I will spell out what I mean by normativity and how this concept help us to justify different types of knowledge. My account of normativity will lead me to discuss my concept of rationality, an issue that I will review in the next chapter.

There are a number of philosophers who claim that all our mental content has to be conceptual. They make a close link between “being conceptual” and “being expressible in words”. This amounts to saying that all our mental content should be expressible in words. I am going to argue for the existence of a non-conceptual mental content. I will claim that we cannot have an accurate representation of the world unless we accept the existence of this content. An example of the sort of content which might plausibly stand as a candidate for non-conceptual content is the following: we can perceive shades of colour for which we do not have names. Having established the existence of non-conceptual content I will then go on to use it to support the claim that we know things that we cannot express propositionally.

My insistence on the representational character of knowledge does not imply “representationalism”. Representationalist theories assume that we have mental states that represent the world and that one role of epistemology is to dictate which of those are justified and can count as knowledge. There is at least one suggested alternative to representationalism that even if it does not deny that we have representations of the external environment, “*suggests that we do not start thinking about knowledge from representations.*”<sup>1</sup> This alternative, which follows closely Heidegger’s account of

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<sup>1</sup> A.Tanesini (1999), p 11.



knowledge in *Being and Time*, is characterised by A. Tanessini<sup>2</sup> as being able to account for practical knowledge, as accepting that value is constitutive of knowledge and, finally, as supporting the idea that knowledge is mainly a social activity. All these characteristics are very congenial to the projects supported by feminist epistemologists, and also to my own thesis. By not grounding knowledge on representation, this alternative is able to focus on different types of knowledge, being mainly “*concerned with the kind of knowledge we manifest in our everyday dealings with the world. This is practical mastery.*”<sup>3</sup>

I intend to redefine representation to broaden what counts as representing the world and, in doing so, I will also challenge some concepts of justification. I will argue that the apprehension of the world is necessary to knowledge because, in order to relate to the world in an appropriate manner, subjects have to be able to apprehend the world, to locate themselves within it, and to react to it adequately. But I will argue that apprehension does not need to consist in having a mental ‘picture’ of a particular aspect of the world, or a concept, or a word to describe it but, rather, it is attributed on the basis of the subject being able to relate to the world in an efficient manner. This approach to representation is coherent with my argument against the widespread idea that human beings capture the world solely by means of their conceptual apparatus, and that the only type of mental content is conceptual content.

In this chapter I will first examine a theory put forward by McDowell, who denies the existence of non-conceptual content for human cognitive agents. He argues that all content must be conceptual if it is to enter into rational justificatory explanations. I will argue for a broader understanding of what should count as rational justification in order to accommodate non-conceptual content into McDowell’s picture of human knowledge and its relation with the world.

In the next section I will explain what non-conceptual content is and how the apprehension of this content by humans is different from the apprehension of non-conceptual content by animals. This distinction is important because I have argued that the

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<sup>2</sup> A. Tanesini (1999), p 11-12.

<sup>3</sup> A. Tanesini (1999), p12.



attribution of knowledge claims is sometimes done on the basis of an appropriate behaviour or response to the environment, but this is something that is also attributable to animals. I want to argue that, while humans can be attributed knowledge on this basis because they inhabit the space of reasons, animals are not entitled to the same attributions.

## **1. Sensibility and spontaneity: two ways of representing reality.**

McDowell considers that all animals possess sensibility, which means that all animals have perceptual sensitivity to their environment by means of their senses. Human beings, have sensibility, as all animals do but, at the same time, they also possess spontaneity.<sup>4</sup> The faculty of spontaneity allows humans to acquire concepts.<sup>5</sup> McDowell thinks that once we have acquired concepts our representation of the world changes, we do not perceive the world “innocently” any longer, but rather due to our spontaneity, we perceive the world as mediated by our conceptual repertoire. Therefore, pre-linguistic babies and animals represent the environment at a non-conceptual level, but for humans who have acquired a language, all the content in our perceptual representations became conceptual.

I will explain why, for McDowell, the acquisition of concepts makes such a big change to our perception of the world and some of its consequences in relation to knowledge.

We acquire concepts by acquiring a language and, in the process, we learn to recognise the rational relations between the concepts. This means, in McDowell's terms, that we come into the realm of reasons.<sup>6</sup> For McDowell, the "space of reasons" is a normative space, created as an abstraction from concrete practices of giving and asking for reasons.<sup>7</sup> In order to enter the space of reasons, the knower has to enter the space of concepts, that is, learn a language. Once a language is acquired, the subject is then able to see the

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<sup>4</sup> J. McDowell (1994), "We have what mere animals have, perceptual sensitivity to features of our environment, but we have it in a special form. Our perceptual sensitivity to our environment is taken up into the ambit of the faculty of spontaneity, which is what distinguishes us from them." p 64.

<sup>5</sup> Actually, I am not sure that this is a correct characterisation of spontaneity. J. McDowell (1994) equates spontaneity with understanding and endorses Kant's definition of it: "The faculty, on the other hand, which enables us to think the object of sensible intuition is the understanding." p 4.

<sup>6</sup> J. McDowell (1994), "In being initiated into a language, a human being is introduced into something that already embodies putatively rational linkages between concepts, putatively constitutive of the layout of the space of reasons, before she comes on the scene." p 125.

<sup>7</sup> R. Brandon (1995), p 896.



relations in the space of reasons, and then she can make knowledge claims or claims that express knowledge. I will give an example to illustrate this. A twelve month old baby shouting "the house is on fire" does not understand the implications of such a claim, but his seven year old sister does because she realises how it stands in the space of reasons. Standing in the space of reasons means standing in the space of concepts,<sup>8</sup> given that "*concepts are places in the space of reasons.*"<sup>9</sup> McDowell is offering a procedure to justify knowledge: making the appropriate moves in the space of reasons counts as having knowledge.<sup>10</sup> There is a clear link between being in the space of reasons and counting as a knower. Those who cannot stand in the space of reasons, cannot know.

But what happens when someone who is not considered to be a knower, an animal for instance, utters the appropriate words at the right moment? Brandon proposes an interesting example to question this point: "*what is the difference between a parrot who is disposed reliably to respond differentially to the presence of red things by saying 'kwak, that's red' and a human reporter who makes the same noise under the same circumstances?*".<sup>11</sup> He answers that the parrot does not possess the concept of red and, therefore, it does not have understanding. A human being is a knower because she has a concept of red and this is evident because she "*can tell what follows from them and what would be evidence for these.*"<sup>12</sup> The first consequence of distinguishing between spontaneity and sensibility is that only human beings who possess a language are to count as knowers.

The second consequence of the possession of spontaneity is that our dealings with the external world are the product of our freedom, in the sense that we can choose whether or not we take the deliverances of our senses as adequate pictures of reality. This freedom is one that will influence our dealings with the world in a way that cannot be attributed to animals. McDowell says that "*minimally, it must be possible to decide whether or not to judge that things are as one's experience represents them to be. How one's experience*

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<sup>8</sup> J. McDowell (1995), "The space of reasons is the space within which thought moves, and its topography is that of the rational interconnection between conceptual contents: we might equally speak of the space of concepts." p 888.

<sup>9</sup>R. Brandon (1995), p 894.

<sup>10</sup>R. Brandon (1995), p 894.

<sup>11</sup>R. Brandon (1995), p 895.

<sup>12</sup>R. Brandon (1995), p 895.



*represents things to be is not under one's control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it.*"<sup>13</sup> Experience means what is delivered by the senses and, according to McDowell, experience in human beings is already saddled with concepts, a use of the term that it is clearly different from the use of experience as raw data. This concept of experience is not applicable to animals in the same way as to humans because animals cannot judge whether or not the world it is as it is presented to them by their senses.

McDowell expresses the distinction in a Gadamerian fashion when he claims that there is a *"difference between a merely animal mode of life, in an environment, and a human mode of life, in the world."*<sup>14</sup> For McDowell, living in an environment implies that animals are biologically determined in their behaviour *"A merely animal life is shaped by goals whose control of the animal's behaviour at a given moment is an outcome of biological forces. A mere animal does not weigh reasons and decide what to do."*<sup>15</sup> This important distinction establishes that animals cannot choose how to behave, while humans can: *"When we acquire conceptual powers, our lives come to embrace not just coping with problems and exploiting opportunities, constituted as such by immediate biological imperatives, but exercising spontaneity, deciding what to think and do."*<sup>16</sup> We can choose what to think and what to do. Therefore possessing spontaneity means not just that we can decide freely how to act but also that we are responsible for our representations, in a way that animals are not.

In the opening paragraph of the section, I quoted McDowell where he said that humans, as animals, have perceptual sensitivity to features of the environment. Humans perceive and represent the environment by using their spontaneity, that is, their picture of reality is mediated by concepts, while animals, not possessing concepts, must have other forms of perception and representation. McDowell grants that animals perceive the environment and take decisions; he says, *"we need to appeal to an animal's sensitivity to features of its environment if we are to understand its alert and self-moving life, the precise way in*

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<sup>13</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 11.

<sup>14</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 115.

<sup>15</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 115.

<sup>16</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 115.



*which it copes competently with its environment.*"<sup>17</sup> This description of how we cannot understand the behaviour of animals unless we take into account that they are aware of their environment, and that this allows them to act competently within it, brings the mode of representation of animals closer to the human model.

In relation to the determinism of the behaviour of animals, he denies that animals have spontaneity and, therefore, freedom in a Kantian sense; but he claims that this does not imply that he considers animals automata. Animals can be "*in their ways, clever, resourceful, inquisitive, friendly and so forth.*"<sup>18</sup> Animals cannot have a world but "*if someone wants to work out a conception of orientation towards the world that is detached from spontaneity in the Kantian sense, with a view to making the language of world-directness available for talking about the mentality of brutes, that is, so far, perfectly all right by my lights.*"<sup>19</sup> What we have now, in McDowell's theory, is an acceptance that the mental content of animals is non-conceptual but it is, in a way, representational. Animals have to apprehend the world in order to be able to respond to it in an appropriate way, and they do respond to the world in an appropriate manner.

Even if McDowell has moderated the differences between animals and humans, he still insists on the dramatic changes that learning a language makes to our view of the world: once we acquire concepts there is no way "out". McDowell wants to avoid the theory that the animal way of representing the world forms the basis of our own representation of the world because he believes that non-conceptual content cannot be the basis of our conceptual content. The reason why this is not possible, according to McDowell, is because, if it were the case, we could not justify our knowledge claims. I will devote section 5 to an analysis of this last claim.

## **2. Spontaneity and representational content in humans.**

McDowell considers that spontaneity is natural, and by natural he means second nature, following closely the Aristotelian model: "*Exercises of spontaneity belong to our mode of*

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<sup>17</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 117.

<sup>18</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 182.

<sup>19</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 183.



living. And our mode of living is our way of actualising ourselves as animals. So we can rephrase the thought by saying: exercises of spontaneity belong to our way of actualising ourselves as animals. Once we have acquired an understanding of concepts, through spontaneity, this becomes second nature for us, and we cannot perceive nature without it.”<sup>20</sup> I agree with him on that point, but I do not agree with one of the implications that McDowell draws from this claim, viz., that the only representational content that humans can have is conceptual content.

McDowell offers the following arguments to support this claim:

a. He claims that, unless we take experiences to be the deliverance of conceptual capacities, that is, as the result of operations of spontaneity, we cannot attribute any representational content to them. If experiences have non-conceptual content then they are intuitions without content, and therefore, they are blind<sup>21</sup>.

b. He says that all our perceptual content has to be conceptual because, in all our claims about what we receive from our senses, we take inductive steps and we cannot take inductive steps unless we can put our knowledge into propositions. <sup>22</sup> He gives the following example of this “*colour experiences being testimony of the senses depends on the subject's already knowing a great deal about, for instance, the effect of different sorts of illumination on colour appearances; and a subject could not know that without knowing a great deal, outside the immediate deliverances of the senses, about the objective world and our cognitive access to it.*”<sup>23</sup>

c. He claims that unless experiences are the product of spontaneity, they could not be subject to revision. If we could not revise them, then we would have to take them as they appear, and we would not be able to see the relations among them as reason constituting. All this implies that, unless experiences are the product of spontaneity, we are only excused to believe, and not justified to believe, in our judgements.

I will argue that content can be representational at different levels. For instance, we have seen how, even if animals do not have conceptual capacities, they are able to represent

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<sup>20</sup> J. McDowell (1994) p 82.

<sup>21</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 52.

<sup>22</sup> J. McDowell (1994). “ This is so even with the concepts that are most immediately linked to the subjective character of experience itself, the concepts of secondary qualities.” p 11.

<sup>23</sup> J. McDowell (1995), p891.



their environments, a condition *sine qua non* for their survival. I have already agreed that, being in the space of reasons, the way in which humans represent the world is not the way in which animals do. Despite the differences, I believe that there is some mental content that it is representational and non-conceptual at the same time (it is non-conceptual, but this does not imply that it is blind).

I will argue against the idea expressed in (b) while supporting the existence of non-conceptual content. I will argue that, even if a subject needs to have concepts in order to relate to the world, this does not imply that all its content is necessarily conceptual. I will analyse at length the example, used by McDowell, regarding colours. I will prove that, from the fact that colour experiences require that the knower must have certain presuppositions, we cannot infer that all the content in that experience has to be conceptual. I will support the existence of non-conceptual content that can accompany conceptual content in colour experiences.

Finally, I will explain how McDowell wants to avoid non-conceptual content because he thinks that non-conceptual content cannot be justified, being something not suitable to enter the realm of reasons. I will argue that humans who have entered the realm of reasons can have non-conceptual content (accompanying their conceptual content) and that this non-conceptual content can enter the realm of reasons and can, therefore, be justified. I want to emphasise that I do not claim that non-conceptual content justifies knowledge claims by itself, as the Myth of the Given makes us believe. I also do not claim that it is the raw data coming from our senses what justifies our claims of knowledge in a causal way. Rather, I believe that the justification for non-conceptual content comes from its place in the realm of reasons. Later in the chapter I will argue that McDowell has to expand what counts as justifying knowledge, suggesting that reasons for actions are also part of the make up of the space of reasons, and I will also claim that justification is not simply a case of producing propositions to back up knowledge claims.

### **3. On being exculpated and being justified to believe.**

#### **3.1 On being exculpated to believe .**



We have seen how McDowell<sup>24</sup> thinks that representational content cannot be non-conceptual. I have already pointed out how his characterisation of representational content is too restrictive: if we accept it, then we cannot understand how animals can apprehend their environments in an adequate way in order to survive in it. My aim in this section is to weaken further his conception of content as uniquely conceptual<sup>25</sup>.

I will begin by distinguishing my position from two others that are criticised by McDowell: The Myth of the Given and a particular application of it, Evan's theory on content. Both of them make use of non-conceptual content in a way from which I differ. I agree with McDowell that, in both theories, the subject is not justified to believe, but rather, exculpated to believe.

### 3.1.1. *The Myth of the Given.*

What stands against the conceptual scheme is the Given. The Given stands for the information that reaches our senses without being changed by our conceptual capacities: raw data coming from the environment.

McDowell's main criticism regarding the existence of this raw data is that, if it constitutes the base for our judgements, we have to think of a way to guarantee that our "*exercises of concepts can constitute warranted judgements about the world.*"<sup>26</sup> If we distinguish between our perceptions of the world and our concepts, then there has to be "*an external constraint on our freedom to deploy our empirical concepts.*"<sup>27</sup> So, if we have to ground our belief that a judgement is a true judgement, we must have to point out the object which provides us with the experience (composed by the given or raw data) in the first place "*pointing to something that is simply received in experience.*"<sup>28</sup> This schema

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<sup>24</sup> J. McDowell (1994), "Representational content cannot be dualistically set over against the conceptual.(...) that is obviously so, however hospitable we are to the idea that some representational content is non-conceptual." p3.

<sup>25</sup> Having made this remark, I will also say that what I will be talking about in this section is content for humans and I have already agreed with J. McDowell that once humans step in the realm of reasons their content is then very different from that of animals'.

<sup>26</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 5.

<sup>27</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 6.

<sup>28</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 7.



requires the existence of observational concepts, "*concepts suited to figure in judgements that are directly responsive to experience.*"<sup>29</sup> These observational concepts have been formed "*from confrontations with suitable bits of the Given.*"<sup>30</sup> The problem is that "*in any ordinary impingement on our sensibility, it would have to be a manifold Given that it is presented to us.*"<sup>31</sup>

In this theory "*the space of reasons, the space of justifications or warrants, extends more widely than the conceptual sphere. The extra extent of the space of reasons is supposed to allow it to incorporate non-conceptual impacts from outside the realm of thought. But we cannot really understand the relations in virtue of which a judgement is warranted except as relations within the space of concepts: relations such as implication or probabilification, which hold between potential exercises of conceptual capacities. The attempt to extend the scope of justificatory relations outside the conceptual sphere cannot do what is supposed to do.*"<sup>32</sup> If the justification for our beliefs come from non-conceptual content, then McDowell argues that we cannot be justified to believe, but rather exculpated to believe x. We are exculpated because the relation is simply brutally causal, rather than justificatory.

It is clear that the model of reason that McDowell is presenting is that of reason as a process of reasoning, which includes sets of propositions that have relations of implication and probabilification.

### 3.1.2 Evan's Model.

McDowell argues that an example of the Myth of the Given that has to face the above difficulties is the model offered by Evans, who claims that non-conceptual content is representational. According to Evans, we receive the information from our senses unmediated by concepts. Both human beings and animals apprehend the world at this basic level. Human beings process this information at a second stage, by using conceptual

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<sup>29</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p7.

<sup>30</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 7.

<sup>31</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 7.

<sup>32</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 7.



abilities.<sup>33</sup>

McDowell claims that it is not possible to transform a non-conceptual representation of the world into a conceptual one. According to McDowell, Evans's position implies that we cannot see the relations that exist among our perceptions, given that those relations are given within the space of reasons, and that we cannot recognise those relations as reason-constituting. If this were the case, we would be in the same situation as animals are when perceiving their environment, we could not form judgements, and we could not justify our claims.<sup>34</sup>

I agree with McDowell's criticisms of both theories. I think that he successfully proves that non-conceptual content (if we characterise it as raw data) cannot be the basis for our conceptual content. But there is a second possibility that he overlooked and for which I will argue: non-conceptual content, as part of our content, unified with conceptual content.

### **3.2 On being justified to believe.**

In this section I will explain and criticise what McDowell considers as justification for knowledge. McDowell uses experience to justify our beliefs, but claims that this experience is already saddled with concepts, so his use of experience does not include non-conceptual content. If our experiences are saddled with concepts, this implies that spontaneity is in operation in experience. And McDowell points out most vehemently that, even if there is this active element in our experience, we are also passive recipients of it.<sup>35</sup>

Passivity in our acquisition of experiences ensures that the world has a say in our perceptions and that, therefore, we are having a glimpse at the world while experiencing it.

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<sup>33</sup> J. McDowell points out that for Evans, experience is not the same in animals and humans.

<sup>34</sup> J. McDowell (1994), "The putatively rational relations between experiences which this position does not conceive as operations of spontaneity, cannot themselves be within the scope of spontaneity, liable to revision, if that were to be what the self-scrutiny of active thinking recommends. And that means that we cannot genuinely recognise the relation as potentially reason-constituting" p.52.

<sup>35</sup> J. McDowell (1994), "In order to escape the oscillation, we need a conception of experiences as states or occurrences that are passive but reflect conceptual capacities, capacities that belong to spontaneity, in operation." p 23.



<sup>36</sup> We know that our mental content represents the world because we are passive recipients of intuitions that affect our sensory system. Therefore there is a relation between the world and our representation of it. That relation is mediated by our conceptual apparatus, so we are not receiving stimuli from the environment without making any contributions to it but, rather, we perceive our environment as already organised by our concepts, so we are partially responsible for our mental content. Our perceptions of the world constrain what we can think of it but, also, what we can think of constrains our perception of the world. This guarantees that we can justify our assertions about the world as knowledge about the world,<sup>37</sup> but at the same time it means that all our mental content has to be conceptual and that we cannot justify any claims of knowledge that have a non-conceptual content.

So far, I have offered an exposition of McDowell's thought. I will now offer some of its consequences and some criticisms against it.

3.2.1 If we cannot justify any claims of knowledge that have a non-conceptual content, then it seems that certain types of knowing-how will not count as knowledge. I have argued that there are types of knowledge that cannot be expressed propositionally. If we equate conceptual knowledge with knowledge expressed propositionally, then it is clear that knowing-how will not be justifiable in those cases in which its content cannot be specified propositionally. I will argue, later in the thesis, that knowledge that cannot be expressed propositionally is both justifiable and, also, plays an important role in the justification of knowledge that is expressible propositionally.

3.2.2 McDowell claims that the conceptual order that our language encompasses is a rational order that is present in reality, whether we are able to see it or not. The passivity of our experiences, which I have mentioned in a previous section, that plays such an

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<sup>36</sup> J. McDowell (1994), "The fact that experience is passive, a matter of receptivity in operation should assure us that we have all the external constrain we can reasonably want. The constrain comes from outside thinking, but not from outside what is thinkable." p 28.

<sup>37</sup> J. McDowell (1994), "In a particular experience in which one is not misled, what one takes that things are thus and so. That things are thus and so is the content of experience, and it can also be the content of a judgement: it becomes the content of a judgement if the subject decides to take the experience at face value. So it is conceptual content. But that things are thus and so is also, if one is not misled, and aspect of the layout of the world: is how things are. Thus the idea of conceptually structured operations of receptivity puts us into a position to speak of experience as openness to the layout of reality. Experience enables the layout of reality itself to exert a rational influence on what a subject thinks." p26.



important part in McDowell's system is further enhanced by the idea that the space of concepts captures the world as it is. This is clearly expressed in the following quotation *"In experience one find oneself saddled with content. One's conceptual capacities have already been brought into play, in the content's being available to one before one has any choice in the matter. The content is not something one has put together oneself, as when one decides what to say about something."*<sup>38</sup>

If the rational order is already in nature and we acquire a certain way of looking at the world, a standpoint, which we inherit when learning a language, then it seems that we represent the world in a way that does not allow much freedom or choice. This seems to contradict McDowell's theory that we have the power of deciding if the world is as it is presented to us via our spontaneity. This was one of the main differences between a human and an animal way of apprehending the world.

The way of escaping this contradiction is to claim that the capacities that we exercise when we acquire that content are conceptual and this means that *"Minimally, it must be possible to decide whether or not to judge that things are as one's experience represents them to be. How one's experience represents things to be is not under one's control, but it is up to one whether one accepts the appearance or rejects it."*<sup>39</sup> Therefore, even if we are given a seemingly closed conceptual system, we still have to reflect upon it in a critical way. McDowell claims that *"weaknesses that reflection discloses can dictate the formation of new concepts and conceptions."*<sup>40</sup>

Our conceptual system is never closed, because even those thoughts that we accept after critical reflection can still be the product of *"parochialism, or reliance or bad prejudice."*<sup>41</sup> This idea links nicely with the assertion that we have an obligation to reflect on *"the credentials of the putatively rational linkages that, at any time, one takes to govern the active business of adjusting one's world view in response to experience"*<sup>42</sup> because *"there is no guarantee that the world is completely within the reach of a system*

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<sup>38</sup> Italics are mine, J. McDowell (1994), p 10.

<sup>39</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 11.

<sup>40</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 81.

<sup>41</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 81.

<sup>42</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 40.



*of concepts and conceptions as it stands at some particular moment in its historical development.*"<sup>43</sup>

On the one hand, McDowell claims that our conceptual system reflects the world reliably. He also claims that we acquire it through the acquisition of language, and I have claimed that this seems to be like the acquisition of a rigidly pre-formed structure. But on the other hand, McDowell allows changes in our conceptual system (the ways in which we represent the world can change) so, even if we acquire a worldview already structured, it admits further changes. What is even more interesting is that he also says that we can adjust our world view in response to experience. The question now is that, given that experience is already loaded by concepts, how is it possible that experience enables us to change precisely those concepts that it encloses?

I have put forward an important problem for McDowell: he has to explain how we can make changes in our view of reality that is rigidly enclosed in our conceptual system. He cannot resort to unmediated experience to explain the changes, given that the knowledge that we obtain in this way will be outside of the realm of reasons, that is, we could not justify it. Is there any solution to this problem?

My answer to this problem is that McDowell has to enlarge his concept of justification and allow for non-conceptual content in his theory but, before I develop this argument, I will explore an answer to the problem more in tune with McDowell's theory.

#### **4. Gadamer on the fusion of horizons.**

McDowell has to explain how it is possible to exercise a critical approach to the deliverances of spontaneity when our sensory experience is already saddled with concepts. McDowell resorts to saying that sometimes experience will make us realise that our judgement is wrong; but I have already pointed out that this move is not allowed by McDowell's theory.

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<sup>43</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 40.



A second resource of criticism for our conceptual system is that of getting to understand another thinker, who is, in principle, opaque to us.<sup>44</sup> This second possibility does not, in principle, imply that we have to get outside of our conceptual system, but it presents its own problems.

McDowell considers that we can get to share conceptual systems that are, in principle, opaque to us. This means that there are parts of the world that are not wholly captured by our acquired language and conceptual system. This seems to fit with his project, given that he accepts that our conceptual systems are always incomplete. The problem is that, if those conceptual systems enclose experiences to which we cannot have access via our conceptual apparatus, then how is it possible that we can make the jump into that new and different conceptual system? How is it possible that we understand what the other person means by concepts that are opaque to us? We cannot even resort to asking them to point to us what it is what they mean, given that the deliverances of our senses are already saddled with our own concepts. A related problem is that it does not seem to be possible that, sharing a rationality that is based in our spontaneity, there can be thinkers who are opaque to us.

There are some answers to the problem that I am creating for McDowell. Those answers can be found in the work of Gadamer, to whom McDowell's theory is greatly indebted. There are striking parallels in the work of both philosophers, so I think I am entitled to try to use Gadamer's work to help McDowell out of some of these difficulties.

Gadamer, as McDowell has done, claims that experience is preformed by language, but that, even so, there are critical possibilities within it. One of the most important sources of criticisms against our own experiences of the world come from conversations with others when they are ( in Gadamer's own words) opposed thinkers. They can provide us with new critical tests and with new experiences.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> J. McDowell (1994) "When the specific character of her thinking starts to come into view for us we are not filling in blank in a pre-existing sideways-on picture of how her thought bears on the world, but coming to share with her a standpoint within a system of concepts, a standpoint from which we can join her in directing a shared attention at the world without needing to break out thought a boundary that encloses the system of concepts." p 36.

<sup>45</sup> H. Gadamer (1975) "The fact that we move in a linguistic world and grow up into the world though an experience preformed by language does not at all remove the possibilities of critique. On the contrary, the



It is important to note that any experience has to be preformed by language if it is going to be understood at all, so that, if the conversation with the other is going to provide us with new experiences, they have to be expressed in words that we can understand. According to Gadamer, a condition *sine qua non* for any conversation to take place is that there has to be a shared language.<sup>46</sup> But then, if we have in our vocabulary the resources to understand the experiences, it seems that they are not new experiences for us. The parallels between McDowell's problem and this one are clear. The difficulty that I have just pointed out appears to me as an important difficulty that Gadamer has to solve, and I think that Gadamer has a good answer to it.

Gadamer says that understanding is a creative exercise. When we are involved in a conversation with another person, we become aware that that person has a different view on the subject. In order to reach an understanding of that person, we must be open to changing our own view,<sup>47</sup> and the end result will be a position that will not look like any of the two previously held. Gadamer calls this a fusion of horizons.<sup>48</sup> This is a very interesting answer to the problem that I have posited: when we understand another person, out of the process of understanding a new content is created, which is different from those that the two people involved in conversation had previous to their exchange of ideas. Gadamer thinks that, in order to understand another person, or a book, or a historical situation, we have to have prejudices, that is, we have to be able to relate to them closely. For instance, if we are going to understand others, we have to share a language, that is, a way of life.<sup>49</sup> If we are going to understand a particular historical

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possibility of going beyond our conventions and beyond all those experiences that we schematized in advance opens up before us once we find ourselves, in our conversation with others, faced with opposed thinkers, with new critical tests, with new experiences." p 546.

46 H. Gadamer (1975) "Mastering the language is a necessary precondition for coming to an understanding in a conversation. Every conversation obviously presupposes that the two speakers speak the same language." p 385.

47 H. Gadamer (1975) "Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weighs the counter-arguments, it is finally possible to achieve- in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other's position (we call this an example of views)- a common diction and a common dictum." p 387.

48 H. Gadamer (1975) "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point", p 268.

49 H. Gadamer (1975) "For you understand a language by living in it." p 385.



situation this has to be part of our past, of our inheritance.

The weakness that I perceive in the system is one which Gadamer is aware of, if we need to be filled with a knowledge of the past already in order to attempt its understanding, then it seems that we will not gain a new point of view from this exercise. And this familiarity is a necessary condition of understanding because, unless we are acquainted with the ways of the past, with that particular horizon of the past, we cannot understand it.<sup>50</sup>

The similitude with the problem encountered by McDowell is evident. We need a conceptual system in order to make sense of the conceptual system of an opaque thinker, but unless there is a common ground, we cannot understand each other.

Nevertheless, there is a very valuable contribution made by Gadamer, when he says that *“every encounter with tradition that takes place within historical consciousness involves the experience of the tension between the text and the present.”*<sup>51</sup> It is possible to sense a tension between conceptual systems, as it is possible to sense a tension between a historical text of the past and the present.

An example that illustrates even more clearly the feeling of tension between a conceptual system and the world is that which takes place in translation. When we try to translate between two languages we have mastered, we became acutely aware that words seem to fit the world so perfectly that it is not possible to find equivalents in the other language.<sup>52</sup> It is then that we became experientially aware that language appropriates the world in an inadequate way. And, also, it becomes clear that, when we translate, we interpret, and that make us see the world in a different way.

The translator has the possibility of seeing the world in two different ways, an experience that is not open to two people involved in a conversation and who share a language. The

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50 H. Gadamer (1975) “If however, there is no such thing as these horizons that are distinguished from one another, why do we speak of the fusion horizons and not simply of the formation of the one horizon, whose bounds are set in the depths of tradition?” p 273.

51 H. Gadamer (1975), p275.

52 H. Gadamer (1975), p402.



understanding that they reach would be truly innovative if they were translating each other but, as Gadamer makes very clear, two people who speak the same language do not translate each other.<sup>53</sup> They do not interpret one another, they simply speak to one another.

The conceptual tension that we can find in the conversation between two people who speak the same language is based on differences that can be understood and sorted by producing convincing arguments,<sup>54</sup> but the sort of tension that I am highlighting, and that is really creative, is that which translation produces and this cannot be explained by producing good arguments but, rather, by getting involved in different ways of life and, therefore, acquiring whole new languages.

There is an instance of a situation close to translation, which takes place between two people who share the same language but who does not share the same culture. In this case, the meanings of the words are not symmetrical, and the process of understanding necessitates that at least one of the persons involved in the conversation gets involved in the way of life of the other.

Although I believe that understanding another person in conversation in a shared language (when there is a shared culture) can successfully change part of our preformed views on the world, I think that its innovative powers are very limited. The conditions under which understanding can be reached (sharing a common language, for instance) imposes very severe limits on what can be changed.

Therefore, I think that both Gadamer and McDowell need a more radical approach to the question of engaging in conversation with others if this exercise is going to enlarge our conceptual system. I have favoured the view that what is needed is a more radical change in our “horizon”, one that implies changes in our ways of life in order to properly

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<sup>53</sup> H. Gadamer (1975) “When there is understanding, there is no translation, but speech” p 384.

<sup>54</sup> H. Gadamer (1975) “Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding on to his own arguments, weights the counter-argument, it is finally possible to achieve in an imperceptible but non arbitrary reciprocal translation of the other’s position (we call this an exchange of views)- a common diction and a common dictum.” p 387.



understand others (I will develop this possibility in more detail in the next chapter).

Summarising, the argument that I analysed in section 3 was the difference between being justified to believe and being exculpated to believe. One of the main differences was that we are justified to believe when we can reflect critically about our representation of reality and revise our conceptual system to decide if it fits the world adequately. Given the close relation between experience and spontaneity, that is between our conceptual system and our perception of the world, it seemed impossible to get a glimpse of the world unmediated by concepts. My question was how to become aware of the tension between our conceptual system and the world in order to be able to think critically about it? This question is of central relevance for McDowell given that what is at stake is whether our conceptual apparatus, our spontaneity, allows us enough space to receive clues from the world that will make us enlarge and criticise our conceptual apparatus. I have pointed out the severe restrictions that McDowell's system imposes over our attempt to appraise critically our conceptual systems. I have signalled that a way of becoming aware of the tension between conceptual systems and the world is by translation, by mastering another language and, therefore, by being involved in more than one way of life.

How does this link with my defence of the existence of non-conceptual content? The awareness that there is a gap between the world and our conceptual systems is not expressible propositionally, and it cannot be acquired by an exchange of arguments, it is experiential. I have argued that mastering a new language is not the only way to become aware of this gap: as I have already said, getting involved in particular practices within communities is another. The involvement in those ways of life or practices will allow us to make explicit certain contents that are usually at the fringes of our consciousness and remain untold. This tacit knowledge (which again, is not propositional or conceptual) will allow us to make important changes in our conceptual system.

## **5. The limits of conceptual content: shades of colours.**

So far I have used two different arguments to support the existence of non-conceptual content. First, I pointed out how animals have a content that is non-conceptual but that



allows them to respond appropriately to the world, which implies that they have, somehow, apprehended the world. This opens up the possibility of the same sort of content in humans. Second, I have argued that it is necessary to experience the tension between our conceptual systems and the world as it appears to us if we are going to exercise our spontaneity critically. A good way of apprehending the tension is by learning another language, which implies getting involved in a different way of life. Another is getting involved with different communities, which, again, implies the acquisition of interpretational skills that cannot be expressed propositionally. At any rate, I have argued that a simple conversation between people who have different points of view that can be shared, by arguing for or against them, is not enough to produce a tension between the world and our conceptual system.

Gadamer himself, points out that language is very ill suited for expressing what we feel<sup>55</sup>. If this is the case, why should we accept that we can experience the world solely by means of our linguistic resources? One of the arguments used most often to support the non-conceptual representational concept of experience is that our concepts cannot capture the richness of the content of experience. One of the most common examples to illustrate this point is the number of shades of colours that we can perceive but for which we do not have names. This fact suggests that there are some contents of experience that are not completely captured by our concepts.

McDowell considers that we can capture completely the content of fine-grain experience like the shades of colours by using expressions such as "that shade". He believes that *"If we have the concept of a shade, our conceptual powers are fully adequate to capture our colour experience in all its determinate detail."*<sup>56</sup> Therefore, we do not need to refer to a non-conceptual content of experience.

I do not find McDowell's answer satisfactory, so I will put forward a number of arguments to support the view that in our perception of shades of colours there is a non-conceptual element that it is not captured by expressions such as "that shade".

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<sup>55</sup> H. Gadamer (1975), p 401.

<sup>56</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 58.



The first argument against McDowell is the following: attributing the possession of concepts to speakers is a process that necessitates that the speaker uses the concept in more than a single occasion of utterance. Claiming that when the subject says “that shade” is exercising a conceptual capacity, McDowell let himself open to the criticism that this cannot be a conceptual capacity because it *"contains an expression of a colour concept that it is restricted to this occasion of utterance."*<sup>57</sup>

In order to support his view against that criticism, McDowell argues that *"the very same capacity to embrace a colour in mind can in principle persist beyond the duration of the experience itself."*<sup>58</sup> He says that when you see the shade, i.e., have the experience of that shade, there is a conceptual content in this perception that produces in the perceiver the acquisition of a recognitional capacity. If, later in life, the shade is present again, the recognitional capacity acquired the first time you saw the shade allows you to recognise it again: *"It is the conceptual content of such a recognitional capacity that it is guaranteed to be available at the time of the experience with which the capacity sets in. Later in the life of the capacity it can be given linguistic expression again, if the course of experience is favourable: that is, if experience again, or still, presents one with a suitable sample. But even in the absence of a sample, the capacity goes on being exploitable as long as it lasts, in thoughts based on memory: thoughts that are not necessarily capable of receiving an overt expression that fully determines their content."*<sup>59</sup> He says that we keep the capacity of recognising the shade as long as we remember the shade, but he admits that this implies admitting the existence of thoughts that are not necessarily capable of receiving an overt expression that fully determines their content, which means that they cannot be expressed by appropriate words, and this is exactly the point that it is at stake.

Given the close link between concepts and words that he establishes, he is rather contradicting himself when he claims that there is a content that cannot be fully expressible and that it is conceptual or, rather, he is accepting that there is some content that can enter in rational relations with other mental content even if it is not completely captured by our

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<sup>57</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 57

<sup>58</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 57.

<sup>59</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 58.



linguistic repertoire. If this last alternative is correct, then conceptual content is not as tightly linked to the resources of our language as he seems to postulate elsewhere. It seems to open up the possibility of having a content that can enter the space of reasons, but that is not completely capturable by words. Either ways, he cannot use the above claim to support the view that the persistence of the shade in memory, and its later application, count as the knower being in possession of a the concept of that particular shade.

McDowell considers that, given that our language about colours includes the term “shade”, this is what will allow a subject who has seen a shade on one occasion to recognise the shade if he sees it again. Nevertheless, in the rest of the section, I will argue against the claim that merely understanding what “that shade” means allows a subject to recognise the shade again. If I am right, then McDowell cannot argue that “that shade” is to count as a concept.

We should distinguish between capacities and abilities. Having a capacity is a precondition of having an ability. For instance, in order to acquire the ability to make good omelettes you have to have the capacity of grabbing saucepans. In relation to the example of shades, in order to acquire the ability to recognise shades, you must have the capacity of seeing it. But having the capacity of seeing a shade is not a guarantee that you will be able to recognise it again.

I think that, in his example, McDowell is confusing recognitional capacities with recognitional abilities. Anybody who can see a shade and has a normal functioning memory has the capacity to recognise a shade. But to have the ability to recognise shades is different from having the capacity to do so. If the subject recognises the shade again in the appropriate circumstances, then he can be attributed the ability to recognise shades. But in the example given by McDowell, he has not yet shown that he is able to recognise it, therefore we cannot attribute to him the ability to recognise shades.

Recognising a shade is an ability that must be developed by training. It is an essential part of the training of painters or printers. It is difficult to acquire and can be developed by looking at a sample and trying to reproduce it without looking at the sample, that is, by



memory. This is a very difficult task to perform even when one has just seen the shade. In actual fact, even when one has been specially trained, it is not possible to reproduce the sample or discriminate among similar ones when a period of time has passed.

What I think is wrong with the theory offered by McDowell is that he claims that, simply by having the concept of shade, this will be enough to see a shade, place it in our memory, and recognise the shade the next time we see it. I think that you do not acquire the ability simply by saying “that shade”. This ability requires training and a social way of deciding if one has acquired the ability or not.

The necessity of public criteria is made evident because the subject might think that he is recognising a shade that he saw before, when, in actual fact, he is confusing it with a fairly similar one. If we have to test his ability, we have to develop a system in which we will have to name the shades somehow and agree that this is an example of the same shade. Given that we should have to undergo this process of social naming and recognising, which most of us are not currently undergoing, we still have to face the objection posited by Evans: our current language does not possess enough resources to capture the richness of experience. We would have to develop the highly impractical system that I have suggested in order to make our linguistic resources adequate for expressing the richness of experience.

In my view, McDowell’s reductionist attempt fails to prove that all our colour experience can be contained by the concept of shade. I also think that, to resort to the claim that what it is missing in detail is captured by the expression “that shade”, is not enough to prove that the content that the speaker is referring to is conceptual.

## **6. Is the recognition of shades an ability based on non-conceptual content?**

Is the lack of words to describe the myriad of shades of each colour a proof that the recognitional ability of those who possess it is non-conceptual? McDowell could argue:



- a. That the process of naming the shades is possible and, therefore, this content of experience should be considered, in principle, to be conceptual.
- b. It is our possession of the concept of shade that allows to us to capture an example of it. Therefore, unless we possess this conceptual power we could not see it in the first place. Seeing shades must be a conceptual ability.

It might be true that, in having the conceptual capacity of saying "that shade", we are enabled to capture the colour experience in all its detail, but it is not true that this alone enables us to recognise the shade later on, when the sample is not present. In order truly to recognise shades successfully we will need further training, in order to develop that recognitional capacity into a recognitional ability. This fact alone is not a counter-argument against McDowell, given that, in order to acquire the recognitional ability we must first have a content of experience that we could not possess unless we had a conceptual capacity. Therefore the recognitional ability either is also conceptual, or dependent on a conceptual capacity. For my overall argument I do not need to argue against the second possibility, given that I argue that non-conceptual and conceptual content appear together.

I will use two arguments against McDowell: first to develop the skills needed to recognise shades is not sufficient for having the concept of shade and, second, recognitional capacities have a non-conceptual element.

A recognitional ability such as the one mentioned above is a kind of knowing how. In chapter 4 I have supported the view that there are types of knowing how for which it is not necessary to be able to express the skill in a propositional form (which is relevant to the current debate) and that these skills are not acquired by learning propositions. It is not enough to have the concept of shade (the recognitional capacity) in order to have the ability to recognise shades. I have supported the view that the subject could show that she knows how, i.e., that she possesses a skill, without having to possess any conceptual capacity related to the subject. McDowell will not accept that non-conceptual content is the foundation of conceptual content. I suppose that he will not accept, either, that non-conceptual abilities are needed to ground conceptual ones.



My claim is not that the perception of the shade is a non-conceptual content of experience that needs to be processed later on in order to reach higher cognitive states (i.e., it will not be converted into conceptual content later on in order to have a representational status). What I claim is that this content of experience is representational in its own right. When the subject is trained to that effect, she will be able to recognise the shade again, to reproduce it, match it, or show any other relevant behaviour that will prove that she recognises the shade. I have argued that the possession of the concept “shade” is not enough to capture all the content of experience, given that not all of those who possess it will be able to recognise the shades. I claimed before that not all kinds of knowledge, or of mental content, need to be propositional, or conceptual, and I think that this is a good illustration of my point.

## **7. The rational justification of knowledge based on non-conceptual content.**

McDowell does not accept the existence of non-conceptual content because claims of knowledge based on it cannot justify our beliefs, only exculpate them. If experiences are going to be reasons for judging how reality is, then they must be expressible in a propositional way.

The possibility that I embrace is a mixed one. It is a view previously put forward by Peacocke, in which the conceptual and the non-conceptual content of experience appear together and neither of them is prior to the other. We do not have experiences which are non-conceptual and that are processed afterwards, in order to be fit to constitute reasons for judgements but, rather, in the experiences are entangled both types of content and in which non-conceptual content can offer justifications for our beliefs.

McDowell points out that Peacocke *"takes certain judgements and beliefs to be rationally grounded in non-conceptual content possessed by experiences. (...)he defends the claim that the non-conceptual content he attributes to experiences can afford 'not merely*



*reasons but good reasons' for judgements and beliefs.*"<sup>60</sup>

McDowell claims that this non-conceptual content cannot provide the subject with reasons to believe because there is not a rational linkage between experiences of this sort and judgements. He gives the example of a cyclist who adjusts his bodily movements to keep his balance without realising what he is doing. There is not a rational linkage between his actions to keep balance and what is required in order to keep one's balance because, if something is to count as a reason for an action, the subject must be able to express it propositionally. *"Reasons that the subject can give, in so far as they are articulable, must be within the space of concepts."*<sup>61</sup> We have here a dispute regarding what are reasons for actions and what is a rational linkage between experiences and judgements. The type of rationality that McDowell is embracing is one in which reason is linked with reasoning, as in giving a list of premises from which we can reach a conclusion. If this is the only model applicable to reason, giving the example of the cyclist excludes him from actually invoking an instance of knowing.

If we take the example of the cyclist offered by McDowell we feel inclined to accept that, given that the cyclist is not fully aware of his actions (which are mere mechanical reactions), then we cannot really say that his experiences lead him to make judgements that guide his behaviour. Even if the cyclist was paying attention to his actions, he would not be able to explain why he makes the movements that he does. It just seems right for him to do so.

Nevertheless, by looking at a very similar example we also feel tempted to argue the opposite. An experienced baker is preparing the dough in order to cook some bread. He measures the flour and the water and begins to work on the dough and then adds some more water until the consistency of the dough "feels right". He cannot tell you beforehand how much water, if any, he will have to add, and he is not able to explain, either, why it is now and not before that the dough is just right. This time his experience, which cannot put into a propositional form, is the reason for his actions. He has done it, as the cyclist,

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<sup>60</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 162-3.

<sup>61</sup> J. McDowell, (1994),p 165.



because it felt right, so I am inclined to argue that, in both cases, there is a rational linkage between experience and judgements. The judgements do not take a linguistic form because we cannot reconstruct their reasoning in propositions and then make the necessary inferences but, that does not mean that they cannot be justified to believe, but merely exculpated to believe.

This way of arguing is not too different from the one adopted by McDowell, who claims that if we ask a subject why she thinks that some object in her visual field is a square, she can say: "Because it looks that way" and this will count as giving a reason for holding a belief.<sup>62</sup> If we ask the baker in the previous example why he thinks that the dough needs some flour he could answer that "It feels like it", then this could count as a reason for his belief.

The fact that human beings stand in the space of reasons, and that this is acquired in learning a language, does not mean that we have to be able to articulate propositionally the reasons for all our beliefs. Brandon pointed out *"something that can use concepts and have beliefs, something, that is, that can find its way round the space of reasons- can count as having knowledge in particular cases in which it has a true belief that it is not in a position to give reasons for."*<sup>63</sup>

Taking the argument a step further, I would like to point out that Brandon claims that knowing what relations there are in the realm of reasons is a type of knowing-how. He says that animals do not possess this skill and, therefore, they do not know what will count as evidence for their claims, they do not master the realm of reasons.<sup>64</sup> Brandon argues that our standing in the realm of reasons is reducible to a type of knowing-how, which allows us to have dispositions to apply concepts following certain patterns. Brandon's argument leaves us with the claim that knowing how is not reducible to knowing-that and, in actual fact, is prior to it and necessary in order to be able to justify any knowledge

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<sup>62</sup> J. McDowell (1994), p 167.

<sup>63</sup> R. Brandon (1995), p 895.

<sup>64</sup> R. Brandon (1995) " This practical know-how - being able to tell what they would be reasons for and what would be reasons for that - is as much a part of their understanding of 'red' and '70 degrees' as their reliable differential responsive dispositions. And this inferential articulation of those responses, the role they play in reasoning, that makes those responsive dispositions to apply concepts"p895.



claims. If being in the realm of reason is a form of knowing-how, the process of justification as it is understood by McDowell ( i.e., justification within the realm of concepts) relies on an ability that cannot be expressed propositionally. I think this supports further my claim that both conceptual and non-conceptual content must be linked together if we want to be able to justify knowledge. Before I move on and analyse one of the implications of my claims, the need for a different model of reason (section 9), I would like to clarify my position in relation to the primacy of practical knowledge.

## 8. The primacy of knowing how.

Is all knowledge practical knowledge? In this section I will argue that, in a sense, all knowledge is practical knowledge, because knowledge is a practice but, on the other hand, there are also asymmetries between different types of knowledge that are worth taking into account. The debate has traditionally taken the form of a distinction between knowing-that, or theoretical knowledge, and knowing-how, or practical knowledge. It has been argued that there are asymmetries between these two different types of knowledge, which preclude the reduction:

-First, Ryle claimed that, while knowing-how can be a question of degree, knowing that is not so *"we never speak of a person having practical knowledge of a body of facts or truths, (...)On the other hand, it is proper and normal to speak of a person knowing in part how to do something."*<sup>65</sup>

-Second, he also said that *"learning how or improving an ability is not like learning that or acquiring information. Truths can be imparted, procedures can only be inculcated, and while inculcation is a gradual process, imparting is relatively hidden. It makes sense to ask at what moment someone became apprised of a truth, but not to ask at what moment someone acquired a skill."*<sup>66</sup>

-Third, a further difference between the two types of knowledge was put forward by Craig, who asserted that *" Of the many types of action which one might wish to have done, or see demonstrated, the vast majority virtually never happen by accident. That means that a single performance given to order often has, de facto, the force of a proof*

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<sup>65</sup> G.Ryle (1980), p 57-58.

<sup>66</sup> G.Ryle, (1980), p 58.



*that the performer can perform reliably. In contrast, there are many questions that can be answered correctly by accident, so that getting the answer right, once only rarely establishes much likelihood that the informant will be right in future on that type of question.”*<sup>67</sup>

*-Finally, Craig also said that “Someone who cannot himself do A may have no difficulty in recognising just by observing his performance that someone else is doing A; whereas someone who does not yet know whether p cannot tell just from hearing it affirmed that p (or not-p, as the case may be) that he has been told the truth.”*<sup>68</sup>

I agree with the distinctions made in 1, 2, and 3, but I disagree with 4. A subject might be unable to do x, and still being able to recognise if someone else knows how to do x, but this is not true on all occasions. In order for a subject to be able to judge whether or not another subject knows how to do x, the first person has to be able to recognise the practice. In a way, he has to know-how in sense (1). For instance, if someone claims that he practices a particular style of martial art, and performs a few movements in front of me to prove it, I will be unable to determine if this is true or if he is pretending. Knowing-how is not self evident in the way that it is suggested by Craig, it involves being familiar with particular practices, and being able to recognise the normativity in them. In this sense, knowing-how and knowing-that are closer than it is implied. I think this is an important point, given that I am arguing that normativity is the mark of knowledge.

Being able to recognise knowledge practices is a form of knowing-how, so in this sense, all knowledge is practical knowledge, but it is interesting to note that, in our attribution of knowledge, there are different criteria at play. I have already explained how Alcoff and Dalmiya say that the difference between knowing-that and knowing how is that the knower has “*different attitudes to propositions that have been grasped.*”<sup>69</sup> In the case of knowing-that, to grasp a proposition is to assent to it, while the case of knowing-how consists in putting it to use.<sup>70</sup> I have already said that the difference that they suggest is better characterised as having different attitudes towards the contents grasped, given that

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<sup>67</sup> E.Craig,(1990), p 160.

<sup>68</sup> E.Craig. (1990), p 160.

<sup>69</sup> L.Alcoff and V.Dalmiya (1993), p 238.

<sup>70</sup> L.Alcoff and V.Dalmiya (1993), p238.



there are no propositions involved in a lot of cases. Knowing-how to do x implies a capacity to do the action x, plus the ability to do x, which have been acquired by repetition/training. Knowing what it is like consists in having certain recognitional abilities. You must undergo certain experiences in order to have them, and they give you reasons for acting in a particular way in the future. The case of knowing someone is different, what is important to us in a close personal relation is that the other shows the appropriate attitudes towards ourselves, and this is only possible if they have apprehended a great many things about us and share many social practices with us. All along this chapter I have insisted on the fact that there is a non-propositional content in experiences, which can be known while keeping its non-conceptual character.<sup>71</sup> The apprehension of that type of content is also normative, it is apprehended by being involved in particular practices, and in a sense is a form of knowing-how that cannot be captured in propositions. But, on the other hand, we are only able to justify that type of content because we have entered the space of reasons, which is closely linked with the acquisition of a language, a question that should not be overlooked, and that seems to lose importance with the general claim that all knowledge is practical knowledge. Nevertheless, this does not imply that reason and language are interchangeable. In the next section I will argue for a model of reason that respects normativity but that does not make it dependent on language.

## 9. Towards a Different Model of Reason.

One of the consequences of the theory that I support is a further disagreement with McDowell and Gadamer about the relation between reason and language. Gadamer says that “*language is the language of reason itself*”<sup>72</sup> and this is closely related to McDowell’s assertion that the realm of reason is the realm of concepts. Given my defence of non-conceptual content, I find their link between reason and language too restrictive.

Gadamer notices that, if the link between reason and language is as close as he presumes, then “*this makes language so close to reason - which means, to the things it names- that*

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71 C. Peacocke (1992) and Piaget (see Nelkin entry on “Subjectivity” in S. Guttermann, 1995) explain the importance of this non- conceptual content in the formation of concepts as important as “self”.

72 H. Gadamer (1975), p 401.



*one may ask why there should be different languages at all.*"<sup>73</sup> The fact is that there are different languages, which points to a gap in our ontologies, and this implies that reason and language cannot be that close after all. Gadamer defends his theory against this observation by saying that these are limitations to the languages we use, but that these should not amount to a critique of the priority of language and of its closeness to reason. He says: "*behind all the relativities of language and convention there is something in common which is no longer language, but which looks to an ever-possible verbalisation, and for which the well-tried word reason is, perhaps, not the worst.*"<sup>74</sup> So, for Gadamer, reason is linguistic in potential. Our languages are not finely tuned enough to express all the possibilities of our reason, but this does not mean that they are not verbalizable after all. I do not agree with this characterisation of reason.

I have already argued that we can apprehend relations in the space of reasons that we cannot express in words, as is the case in many instances of knowing how. The model of reason that I support has to be broad enough to account for justificatory moves that do not necessitate being put into a propositional form. I have discussed Brandon's claim that being able to make moves in the space of reasons is nothing other than a form of knowing-how. Finally, I have argued that, within a model of rationality that links too closely language and experience, it is not possible to explain how we can make changes in our conceptual system and, therefore, it is difficult to see how spontaneity can work.

In the model that I am supporting, the feeling that our conceptual system does not fit with reality must come from experience, but this means that experience cannot be completely constrained by our conceptual abilities. I think that a non-conceptual content that can enter into rational relations with the rest of our mental content is necessary in order to understand changes in our conceptual system, and that this is a necessary addition to McDowell's theory.

## **10. The advantages of accepting non-conceptual content.**

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<sup>73</sup> H. Gadamer (1975), p 401.

<sup>74</sup> H. Gadamer (1975), p 547.



In this chapter I have agreed with the distinction made by McDowell, between human beings and animals, one that allows us to claim that attributing knowledge to humans implies that they are in the space of reasons, as McDowell's project also implies that all knowledge has to be expressed propositionally. I argued that his system will benefit from the inclusion of non-conceptual content.

I have agreed with McDowell that it is not possible to consider non-conceptual content as the basis of conceptual content, because this will mean falling back on the Myth of the Given. I have argued for a mixed account of content that does not necessitate basing conceptual content on non-conceptual content.

In doing so, we can have representational content for things for which we do not have exact words and which, in McDowell's system, did not seem to fit.<sup>75</sup> This also implies that justified knowledge is not necessarily knowledge for which we can give a complete propositional account. We can make moves in the space of reasons that justify our knowledge claims even when we cannot give reasons for them in a linguistic form. Sometimes showing the appropriate behaviour and successfully completing certain actions can be enough in order to be attributed knowledge, and to be justified to believe. The inclusion of non-conceptual content and of knowing how as a form of knowledge, together with the acceptance of the role of intuition in reasoning (in next chapter), will allow us to explain how it is possible to make changes in our conceptual systems, a feature that McDowell has problems in explaining. Finally, I have promoted a more comprehensive conception of reason than the one offered by McDowell, which I will develop in more detail in the next section.

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<sup>75</sup> In the discussion of the shades of colour, McDowell (1994) claims "Now it is true that fine-grain capacities I have appealed to have a special character, which is marked by how demonstrative expressions would have to figure in linguistic expressions of them. But why should that prevent us from recognizing them as rationally integrated into spontaneity in their own way, so that they can simply take their place in my general framework?" p 58.



## CHAPTER 6

### 0. Introduction.

In this chapter I will argue for a concept of rationality that is not defined in opposition to intuition. In the previous chapter I explained how McDowell argues for a view of rationality that relies on a close relation between our language and the world. I have qualified his concept of rationality as too narrow. I argued against the idea that the rational order of the world can be completely and adequately captured by our linguistic representations. By arguing that intuition is an essential part of reason instead of its opposite, and that its content is not analysable into a set of propositions, I want to support further my claims against McDowell's thesis, and to develop a different concept of rationality.

This new concept of rationality, that includes intuition, allows me to revalue practical knowledge. I argue for a model of intuition intimately linked to practices and characterised as a skill. Characterising intuition as part of reason instead as its opposite, and also as linked with practices, allows me to show, once more, the importance of the bodily involvement in knowledge and the central role of knowing how in any epistemological model. Finally, I will argue that taking intuition to be part of reason allows us to have a more complete picture of reality.

In the following sections I will define tacit knowledge, by relying on Polanyi's work on the subject. My interest in this type of knowledge is due to the fact that I will argue that intuition is a form of tacit knowledge, based on experience.

### 1. Polanyi on tacit knowledge

The terms "tacit knowledge" are currently used both in psychology and in philosophy of mind to refer to a number of different things, but I am only interested in the concept as it was used by Polanyi. What he calls tacit knowledge can be illustrated with an example of



subception based on the experiments of the psychologists Lazarus and McCleary: *"These authors presented a person with a large number of nonsense syllables, and after showing certain of the syllables, they administered an electric shock. Presently the person showed symptoms of anticipating the shock at the sight of "shock syllables"; yet, on questioning he could not identify them. He had come to know when to expect a shock, but he could not tell what made him expect it. He had acquired a knowledge similar to that which we have when we know a person by signs which we cannot tell."*<sup>1</sup>

In that quotation there are two examples of tacit knowledge: the first one, the recognition of shock syllables by a subject, who has developed a recognitional skill for which he cannot give an explanation; and the second is that by which we are able to recognize a person, while being unable to point out which are the clues that allow us to perform the recognition. Polanyi stresses that, in all instances of tacit knowledge, we can always distinguish two terms: **proximal** and **distal**. In the first example the shock syllables are the proximal term and the electric shock the distal term. He explains how any instance of tacit knowledge encompasses the **explicit** knowledge of the proximal term and the **implicit** knowledge of the distal term<sup>2</sup>: the subject learned that there was a connection between both of the terms, which remained tacit, given that he was only attending to the electric shock. If we learn how to recognize the shock-syllables attending from the distal term to the proximal one, then, we acquire tacit knowledge of the proximal term.<sup>3</sup>

In tacit knowledge, we are aware of the particulars only in relation to the whole, as the recognition of a physiognomy exemplifies. In actual fact, we are aware of the features of a physiognomy only in terms of the physiognomy we are attending.<sup>4</sup> For instance, we recognize a mood by attending to the whole expression of the face or, as the previous

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<sup>1</sup> M. Polanyi (1966), p7-8.

<sup>2</sup> "We know the electric shock forming the second term, by attending to it, and hence, the subject is specifiably known. But we know the shock producing particulars only by relying on our own awareness of them for attending to something else, namely the electric shock, and hence our knowledge of them remains tacit. This is how we come to know these particulars without becoming able to identify them. Such is the functional relation between the two terms of tacit knowing: we know the first term only by relying on our awareness of it for attending to the second." M. Polanyi (1966), p 10.

<sup>3</sup> M. Polanyi (1966), p 10.

<sup>4</sup> "In the exercise of a skill, we are aware of its several muscular moves in terms of the performance to which our attention is directed. We may say, in general, that we are aware of that from which we are attending to another thing, in the appearance of that thing" M. Polanyi (1966), p 11.



example of the recognition of the shock syllables shows, these are recognized as such only because they are in a relation with the electric shock, as Polanyi puts it *"they signify the approach of a shock."*<sup>5</sup> The particulars are meaningful only in relation to the whole, because *"If we discredit the usefulness of a tool its meaning as tool is gone. All particulars become meaningless if we lose sight of the pattern which they jointly constitute."*<sup>6</sup>

Polanyi claims not only that particulars are meaningless if taken out of a pattern but, also, that we cannot attend to them in the same way that we attend to the whole. If we try to do it, we are apt to feel something similar to "stage fright."<sup>7</sup> To explain why this is the case, Polanyi distinguishes between two types of awareness: focal and subsidiary. I introduce, this distinction here because it will be very valuable in the later sections:

*"When we use a hammer to drive in a nail, we attend to both nail and hammer, but in a different way. We watch the effect of our strokes on the nail and try to wield the hammer so as to hit the nail most effectively. When we bring down the hammer we do not feel that its handle has struck our palm but that its head has struck the nail. Yet in a sense, we are certainly alert to the feelings in our palm and the fingers that hold the hammer. They guide us in handling effectively, and the degree of attention that we give to the nail is given to the same extent in a different way to these feelings. The difference may be stated by saying that the latter are not, like the nail, objects of our attention, but instruments of it. They are not watched in themselves; we watch something else while keeping intensely aware of them. I have a subsidiary awareness of the feeling in the palm of my hand which is merged into my focal awareness of my driving the nail."*<sup>8</sup>

According to Polanyi, we are subsidiarily aware of the proximal term and focally aware of the distal object, and acquiring knowledge consists in going from one to the other and being able to apprehend them as a whole. This apprehension can be an apprehension involving practical skills or theoretical ones, it is a paradigm for all kinds of knowledge. And it is due to a skill that is acquired without us being able to explain how we learned it.

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<sup>5</sup> M. Polanyi (1966), p11.

<sup>6</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 57.

<sup>7</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 56.

<sup>8</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 55.



Polanyi considers that, in being skilled, we change not just our intellectual capacities but, rather, our whole self. At this point, I will explain the role played by our embodiment in the acquisition of knowledge.

## 2. Knowledge as Dwelling.

In the process of knowledge, our bodies are proximal terms for us, and are only accessible through the mediation of the distal objects. Polanyi illustrates this point with the following example: when we use a stick for feeling our way, we *"became aware of the feelings in our hand in terms of the meaning located at the tip of the probe or stick to which we are attending."*<sup>9</sup>. This example shows that our own body is a proximal term in relation to the distal term, which is the object being perceived. Our perception of objects always includes information of its relation to our bodies that remains undetected by us.<sup>10</sup> In all instances of our explicit knowledge of the distal objects, in all our perceptions of the world, there is always an element that remains implicit, our corporeality, which is captured in our awareness of the objects, but which remains untold.<sup>11</sup>

As I have already noted, Polanyi points out that our body is always a proximal term in relation to the distal terms that are the objects of perception. But, as we have seen in my previous examples, there are also times in which we have objects that act as proximal terms, so, in those cases, what is the role of our body when both the distal and the proximal terms are objects other than our own bodies? Polanyi says that *"when we make a thing function as the proximal term of tacit knowing, we incorporate it in our body- or extend our body to include it-so that we come to dwell in it"*<sup>12</sup>.and he adds that *"we put ourselves out into them and assimilate them as parts of our own existence. we accept*

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<sup>9</sup> M. Polanyi (1966), p13.

<sup>10</sup> "Physiologists long ago established that the way we see an object is determined by our awareness of certain efforts inside our body, efforts which we cannot feel in themselves. We are aware of these things going on inside our body in terms of the position, size, shape, and motion of an object, to which we are attending. In other words, we are attending from these internal processes to the qualities of the things outside. These qualities are what these internal processes mean to us. The transposition of bodily experiences into the perception of things outside may now appear, therefore, as an instance of the transposition of meaning away from us, which we have found to be present to some extent in all tacit knowing." M. Polanyi (1966), p 13-14.

<sup>11</sup> The reasons why it cannot be told are explained in section 3.

<sup>12</sup> M. Polanyi (1966). p16.



*them existentially by dwelling in them.*"<sup>13</sup>

All knowledge is an action that requires skill, therefore knowing consists in being able to perceive and put together certain clues in order to illuminate a particular situation. The process of perception and selection of what will count as a clue is done in a knowing how way, that is, we do it without being able to explain how we have acquired such a skill to produce the right answer. We pay attention to particulars, we are focally aware of them, but we are not aware of the process that we are using to pick up those particular clues, we do not know what make us to consider them meaningful, we are just subsidiarily aware of it. Polanyi generalizes his analysis of knowledge as dwelling to all types of knowledge, including our linguistic skills that are also an example of tacit knowledge.

Knowledge as dwelling can be exemplified by moral teachings. We internalize those teachings and use them as the proximal term in our moral judgments. It is important to notice that those moral teachings are not acquired as maxims but, rather, by exemplars. The distinction between exemplars and maxims is made clear when Polanyi describes how mathematical knowledge is acquired. We learn how to solve mathematical problems by learning to see that they are instances of a particular type. When we have grasped the similarities, then we can follow the routine and solve them. Accordingly learning to see the similarities in particular situations is how we acquired a moral code that allows us to make moral judgments. This picture of knowledge is also applicable to our scientific knowledge, therefore we are able to understand a theory only by seeing things in its light, by using it: *"To rely on a theory for understanding nature is to interiorize it. For we are attending from the theory to things seen in its light, and are aware of the theory, while thus using it, in terms of the spectacle that it serves to explain. This is why mathematical theory can be learned only by practicing its application: its true knowledge lies in our ability to use it."*

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Polanyi insists that we can only learn mathematical theory by practicing, by learning to recognize that a particular puzzle is just an instance of a more general type. This

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<sup>13</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 59.

<sup>14</sup> M. Polanyi (1966), p17.



description of how the mathematician works is very close to that of how an experienced baker is able to tell that the dough is ready. Both of them have to undergo a certain training that allows them to develop certain skills that make them able to see things that would not be meaningful to a less trained eye. As I have pointed out already, neither of them has to be capable of explaining how they have been able to see the clues that make them choose those particular conclusions, as is the case in many cases of knowing how (see chapter 4). In the following sections I will explain what are the implications, for our general theory of knowledge and for our definition of rationality, of considering knowledge to be the acquisition of practical skills.

### 3 The nature of Subsidiary Awareness

It is important to realize that, by subsidiary awareness, Polanyi does not mean subconscious or preconscious awareness. He says that “*what makes an awareness subsidiary is the function it fulfills; it can have any degree of consciousness, so long as it functions as a clue to the object of our focal attention.*”<sup>15</sup> What we are subsidiarily aware of can be brought into our focal attention, so we can formulate it in form of maxims, for instance, but he claims that such specification will not be exhaustive. There remains an ineffable element in their knowledge.<sup>16</sup> But why is there this element of ineffability? It depends on the case. In some occasions we are not able to point out the relevant particulars. In other cases, we are not able to point out the relation between those particulars.<sup>17</sup> Nevertheless, saying that there is an element of ineffability does not mean that we cannot talk about it at all, merely that we cannot adequately capture it entirely with words.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>M. Polanyi (1966), p96.

<sup>16</sup> “Although the expert diagnostician, taxonomist and cotton dresser can indicate their clues and formulate their maxims, they know many more things that they can tell, knowing them only in practice, as instrumental particulars, and not explicitly, as objects. The knowledge of such particulars is therefore ineffable, and the pondering of a judgment in terms of such particulars is an ineffable process of thought.” M. Polanyi (1998), p 88.

<sup>17</sup> “When I am riding a bicycle or picking out my Macintosh, I do not know the particulars of my knowledge and therefore cannot tell what they are; when on the other hand I know the topography of a complex, three dimensional aggregate, I know and could describe the particulars, but cannot describe their spatial interrelations.” M. Polanyi (1998), p90.

<sup>18</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 91.



In my opinion, it is important to separate subsidiary awareness from subconscious or preconscious awareness. The content that we are subsidiarily aware of is not correctly characterized as subconscious because Polanyi's tacit knowledge is the product of skills and, as such, involves a degree of corporeality that is misrepresented if we label it as subconscious. I will illustrate my point with an example, which I have used in a previous chapter. An expert baker is able to tell whether the dough for making bread needs more water by picking different clues from it, maybe by the way it feels, or looks, or smells, or by a whole cluster of these characteristics. But it is very likely that, if she tries to explain exactly what are the reasons why she knows that to be the case, she cannot tell. As I have argued in chapter 4, even if she cannot tell why she knows that the dough is right, this still counts as knowledge. It counts as knowledge even if she cannot reproduce her thought processes propositionally. In order to reach her conclusion, she does not make inferences, neither conscious nor subconscious, (of the type: if we have 200grms of flour we have to add an x amount of water) but, rather, she reaches her conclusion because she has learned to recognize certain clues and to act accordingly. There are certain patterns that are meaningful for her, which she has been trained to recognize and to react to accordingly. That process of recognition and of providing the appropriate answer, of acting appropriately, counts as knowledge. She has acquired a tacit knowledge, born from experience. As I argued in the previous chapter, it is possible to have perceptual experiences that are not conceptual, so it is perfectly possible that the baker is perceiving the clues without being able to conceptualize them, and this supports my claim that her knowledge is not propositional.

Therefore, the reason why a subject cannot tell how he has acquired a particular skill, for instance, the reason why he cannot know how he knows that a syllable is a shock syllable, is not because subsidiary awareness is either subconscious or preconscious but, rather, because it involves a certain training of his whole body that cannot be accounted for propositionally. To support this claim, I will quote Gelwick, who explains that Polanyi argues that linking the focal target and the subsidiary clues is not simply a mental exercise, but rather, that the whole person is involved in the process. He says "*the operations in which we move from our clues to theory joint meaning are an achievement of the person. It is a process of inference. It is a process done within our body. And it is done within our*



*body. And it is one that cannot be focally observed by us. We cannot simultaneously rely upon clues for attending to a problem or task and observe them in themselves. In this sense, there will always be a tacit dimension in our knowledge that is held together by the person.*"<sup>19</sup>

As I have already said, in all acts of knowledge there will always be a content that we will not be able to make explicit because our bodies always play the part of the proximal object which means that they always remain in the realm of our subsidiary awareness and that, therefore, we cannot get to know them other than tacitly. We cannot know in which ways our embodied nature taints our cognitive actions because we cannot access the world in a disembodied way and because we cannot perceive our body unless in relation to the world. This approach to knowledge implies that we know more than we can tell, in the sense that a part of our cognitive content will always remain tacit. This supports further the model of knowledge as not merely propositional for which I argued in a previous chapter, as well as my thesis that not all mental content is neither conceptual nor conceptualizable. I also want to move a step further and argue that the acceptance of tacit knowledge should make us change our model of rationality, but this is a task that I will perform in section 5.

#### **4. Changing our conceptual frameworks.**

I argued, in a previous chapter, that most of our mental content was shaped by our concepts and acquired by our learning a language, but that there are cases in which we experience a gap between what we are apprehending and our conceptual apparatus. Polanyi supports the view that not all our mental content has a possible linguistic representation, and that this content is sometimes in conflict with our linguistic representations.<sup>20</sup> To illustrate the gap between these two types of knowledge, he refers to some of Piaget's observations, which showed how children who could solve certain practical problems were unable to solve them when put into a verbal form, even if they had

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<sup>19</sup> R. Gelwick (1977), p64.

<sup>20</sup> "We are referring in both these cases to a state of mental uneasiness due to the feeling that our tacit thoughts do not agree with our symbolic representations, so that we have to decide on which of the two we should rely and which we should correct in the light of the other." M. Polanyi (1998), p 93.



known for a long time before how to solve them.<sup>21</sup>

In a changing world, these conceptual changes must occur very often, therefore we must have mastered ways of adapting our language to these changes. Polanyi offers different instances of these types of change in language<sup>22</sup> and following Piaget explains the two different types of changes that those can promote: **assimilation** occurs when we change slightly the use of words in order to fit our experiences, or when we ignore certain aspects of the experience to make it fit with other similar ones under a common denomination, and **adaptation** consists in changing our interpretative framework to include the new experience. While assimilation is directed by rules, adaptation cannot be the product of rules, given that it challenges the current uses of the concepts. Adaptation occurs in the realm of **intuition**.

## 5. Intuition.

Intuition, as it is used in our everyday language, has traditionally been considered by philosophers as not playing any important role in knowledge. While it has been granted that it exists as a form of experience, it has been denied its value as a claim of knowledge. The attitude of J.Hospers in relation to this issue can be taken to be paradigmatic: *"if a composer has a "sudden intuition" for his next symphony, no doubts need be raised as long as he is not claiming to know anything by means of this intuition; a bit of inspiration has simply come to him in a flash. But if someone claims to know by intuition **that a proposition is true**, then we would do well to ask a few questions concerning it. It is not the occurrence of this experience that we question but that which he claims to know by*

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<sup>21</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 93.

<sup>22</sup> "The first represents the ideal of using language impersonally, according to strict rules, the second relies on a personal intervention of the speaker, for changing the rules of language to fit new occasions. The first is a routine performance, the second is and heuristic act. A paradigm of the first is counting, which leaves its interpretative framework- the numbers use in counting- quite unchanged; the ideal of the second is found in the originality of poetic phrasing or of new mathematical notations covering new conceptions. Ideally the first is strictly reversible, while the second is essentially irreversible. For to modify our idiom is to modify the frame of reference within which we shall henceforth interpret our experience, it is to modify ourselves. In contrast to a formal procedure which we can recapitulate at will and trace back to its premises, it entails a conversion to new premises not accessible by any strict argument form those previously held. It is a decision, originating in our own personal judgment, to modify the premises of our judgment, and thus to modify our intellectual existence, so as to become more satisfying to ourselves." M. Polanyi (1998), p 105.



*means of the experience. (The intuition must be propositional before we are concerned with it in a discussion of knowledge) "*<sup>23</sup>

When intuition is accepted as playing a certain role in relation to knowledge, then is supposed to be a sort of inspiration, that is, it is an experience that accompanies new ideas, but it does not justify knowledge. But, even within this very restricted view on the worth of intuition, there is a use of intuition that could be the basis of knowledge claims: *"many people are quick to notice "minimal cues" in the behavior of other persons and are able to "gather the sense of a meeting" or conclude correctly that the audience is becoming tired or bored; they arrive at this estimate on the basis of rapid but precise observation (sense-experience) and not by intuition, as they claim. Let us be careful, then, that we do not confuse claims to know by intuition with knowledge by other means."*<sup>24</sup>. When there is knowledge as a product of this sort of intuition it is not due to its inspirational content but, rather, to the fact that it is based on observation. Consequently, intuition is explained away, it is not considered to be the basis of knowledge.

M. Fricker attempts to give a more sophisticated explanation of intuition which even if it based on what Hospers calls "sense experience", it does not reduce intuition to it. Following Polanyi very closely, she considers that intuition is a reliable source for knowledge claims based on previous experiences. Undergoing certain experiences has the effect of training on the knower, who is able to resolve new situations by observing its similitude to previously confronted ones. Fricker claims that *"scientists are able to have intuitions about how to solve new scientific puzzles by virtue of a stockpile of lessons learned from past experience. These lessons do not take the form of consciously held beliefs, but rather they amount to a capacity for increasingly educated hunches (regarding a particular subject matter) so internalized that the process by which we arrive at them is usually subconscious, so that the subject will not know quite by what train of thought she arrived at the intuited proposition. This is of course not to say that the intuitive processes are irretrievably subconscious, since there is no reason to think it impossible retrospectively to retrace subjective associations or triggers for ideas."*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> J. Hospers (1978), p136-137.

<sup>24</sup> J. Hospers (1978), p137.

<sup>25</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p 237.



According to Fricker, intuition is, effectively, a form of tacit knowledge.

She gives the example of a car mechanic who suspects “*that without knowing why, the peculiar starting problems with a given car might not be connected to the electrics after all, but maybe to the carburetor.*”<sup>26</sup> His suspicion is grounded on his previous experiences in similar situations. Intuition cannot be ruled out by saying that it is just based on memories. Memories are not enough to explain his hunch, given that we are presupposing that he has never encountered the same situation before. The car mechanic has developed intuitional skills (using Fricker's terminology) in his many years working as a mechanic, which enable him to see a problem as similar to another one that he has seen previously.<sup>27</sup>

Feminine intuition is another good example: due to their experiences in child caring, women can acquire a 'relevant range of intuitive capacities'.<sup>28</sup> For instance, “*when ‘mother knows’ what's making baby cry or she foresees an independent accident and answers it in the nick of time.*”<sup>29</sup> Mothers have been in the same situation many times before, so they can pick up little cues that will help them to know what will happen next. These clues would not have any significance to someone with less experience.

## 6. Intuition and reason.

We are now in a position to say that intuition and reason are not in a relation of opposition. We should adopt a concept of reason that illustrates how intuition is constitutive of it.

Fricker thinks that intuition is the origin of new scientific hypothesis. This is a traditional role for intuition, if we take it to be a form of inspiration, which is compatible with thinking of intuition as the opposite from reason. But Fricker maintains that, even in this

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<sup>26</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p 241.

<sup>27</sup> M. Fricker maintains that the car mechanic has arrived at the conclusion by a subconscious process. I think that we should take intuition to be a form of tacit knowledge, in Polanyi's sense, and this will allow us to explain it without reliance on the subconscious.

<sup>28</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p240.

<sup>29</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p241.



role, we should realize how intuition exhibits the **same mechanisms** as reason. She argues for a conception of intuition that “*must have some internal capacity of its own.*”<sup>30</sup> This means that intuition does not work in a random way but, rather, that it is able to discern between different possibilities and offer a solution (in the form of a hunch, for instance) appropriate to the problem that the epistemic subject is considering. Fricker seems to be pointing in the direction of some rational form of decision taking by subconsciously weighting alternatives. Nevertheless, M. Fricker remarks that intuition is not to be confused with subconscious inference.<sup>31</sup> Intuition is a non-inferential, subconscious way of belief formation, based on past experiences, which is rational because it is relational: there is an evidential relation between past experiences and the resultant intuition<sup>32</sup>. The intuition that allows the scientist to make a new hypothesis in order to solve a particular problem is reached by a subconscious process that does not consist in making inferences. Fricker shows that the inferential model is not attractive, because it will imply cases as counter intuitive as the following “*when a tennis player hits the ball she must be subconsciously making calculations about where to move and when to hit the ball, using split second estimates of its velocity.*”<sup>33</sup> In Fricker's model, the tennis player does not make subconscious calculations to decide where to hit the ball but, nevertheless, she takes decisions in a subconscious way. I will discuss later whether this is sufficient explanation.

The first argument in support of the rationality of intuition is that both intuition and reason exhibit the same mechanisms, that is, adequate responses to particular problems. There is a further attribute of intuition that links it with reason instead of putting them in opposition: **Intuition also acts as a tester of hypotheses**, as happens in the case of moral intuitions. For instance, if we follow the strict rules of utilitarianism in order to decide what to do in a certain situation, we can reach conclusions that are in opposition to our moral intuitions<sup>34</sup>. In this example, moral intuitions are seen as “*the internalized lessons learned from the past experiences that are taught by an appropriate moral upbringing.*”<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p243.

<sup>31</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p237.

<sup>32</sup> M. Fricker (1995) claims that “intuition is properly described as rational in virtue of the facts that the relation between a set of past experiences and any resultant intuition is fundamentally an evidential reason, albeit under-determined and subconscious.” p 240.

<sup>33</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p 237.

<sup>34</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p 243.

<sup>35</sup> M. Fricker (1995), p 243.



I will take this chance to point out that Fricker's view on intuitions is very similar to Polanyi's tacit knowledge, and also to signal how they differ. She supports the view that intuition is based on experience, it is not innate or due to nature but, rather, the result of social training, a second nature. It is easy to see a similarity between her proposal and that of Polanyi which I explained before. The similarity between them is made obvious in their explanation for the existence of moral intuitions. He also claimed that moral intuitions are internalized moral lessons, but then he differed in its classification as subconscious. As I have explained in section 3, for Polanyi, these moral lessons will be proximal objects in a moral judgment, which means that they will be present but we will not attend to them in a focal way but, rather, we will be aware of them in a subsidiary way. They will be part of ourselves in the same way in which any other skill becomes part of ourselves. They will inform our decision making but we will not be aware of it. Nevertheless, as Polanyi points out, this does not mean that these moral lessons became subconscious.

Summarizing the state of the argument regarding the relation between intuition and reason.: intuitions play the part traditionally attributed to reason when it tests hypotheses and when it has an internal capacity to decide, between different possibilities, which is the right one.

Nevertheless, there is a difficulty in considering intuition as functioning in the same way as reason, and this is that the subject cannot explain how he reached a particular conclusion. It is interesting to recall Hospers here: *"the intuition must be propositional before we are concerned with it in a discussion of knowledge"*. Hospers argued that this is one of the biggest obstacles to maintaining that intuition is the source of knowledge *"All the reference to "intuition" enable us to conclude is "He doesn't know how he knows (if he knows)". As an explanation it is quite empty.(...) The word intuition is simply a cover-up term for our ignorance, revealing only that we do not know how he was able to do this. If asked to explain his successful predictions, we would be at a loss."*<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> J. Hospers (1978), p138.



## 7. Justification

If I am going to argue that intuition is within the realm of reason, I have to explain why it is a mark of rationality to have certain intuitions. I will argue that, even if the subject does not know how he knows, intuitions are to be considered both as rational responses to problems and as a form of knowledge. In order to prove it, I will tackle the question of justification.

I will approach the issue of justification by offering different examples in which intuition is at play. I will then show how, in these cases, the intuitions arise from the engagement of the subjects with practices that allow them to obtain knowledge of which they are not aware, and which is present to them in the form of hunches or intuitions. I want to draw a parallel between hunches or intuitions in the cases of mothers, car mechanics, the recognition of moods in people's faces and the understanding of metaphors.

It is a matter of fact that we can recognize moods in the semblances of people, but we cannot explain how we do it. We see connections between the expression of sadness in a particular face and the same mood in another person, even if their features are completely different. We are trained since we are born to interpret other people's faces, therefore we are able to pick up clues that make us see the different faces as expressing the same thing, despite the enormous differences between them. The same is true of the car mechanic to whom I have already alluded, his response is the appropriate one to a particular situation even if he has never seen this particular model of car before, due to his experience he is able to link the current situation with others previously lived.

Once again, this process is very similar to the apparently more intellectual one that we undergo when creating or understanding a metaphor: we pick up similarities between the two terms of the metaphor that were not obvious beforehand but that, once we have understood the metaphor became salient to us. Understanding metaphors, even if it looks like a purely intellectual achievement, needs often to rely on shared experiences. For instance, when a child claims that she has a frizzy foot it is obvious, for someone who has



had the experience that she means, that she has pins and needles, but if you have never had the experience it is not obvious. By understanding a metaphor we realize that there are similitudes between two very different things, and this is the same process as the one that is undergone when we recognize moods in faces or when a mechanic has a hunch in relation to a car.

The links that we establish are the result of a particular training that allows us to acquire certain recognitional skills, which can be present to us in the form of intuitions. As I have already argued, when we pick up similarities that allow us to see a situation in the same way as a previous one, we engage in a process that involves entities as a whole, and that cannot be analyzed in terms of propositionally inferring the right answer.

These examples illustrate that the subjects involved are able to give the appropriate response in a given set of circumstances, by relying on their previous experiences and training. I think that this is to be taken as a sign of rationality, even when the subject is not able to give a detailed reasoning of why she is so sure that this is the right thing to do. This assertion has clear echoes of the arguments that I offered in chapter 5, in which I argued that once a subject enters the space of reasons, she can justify her practical or experiential knowledges, even when she cannot offer a propositional account to justify her knowledge.

I also argued that a reason characterized as merely based on propositions is unable to account for all those actions that are suitable responses to the circumstances (that denote knowledge) given by subjects who have entered the space of reason. Nor can it explain how it is possible to make discoveries in science, or how we can enlarge our conceptual systems. In this chapter I have supported the broadening of the concept of reason because a reason narrowly characterized cannot explain why intuitions guide us to obtain the right answers.

On these grounds, I want to argue that intuitions are cases of tacit knowledge, and that subjects are justified in believing what their intuitions indicate to them. Tacit knowledge has to face the same difficulties as practical and experiential knowledge regarding



justification, given that, in most cases, knowers are unable to provide us with a list of propositions suitably linked with logical connectives in order to account for their hunches. The difference is that the arguments offered to support that practical and experiential knowledge are justified forms of knowledge do not seem to apply to tacit knowledge because, in the case of tacit knowledge, the knowers are not aware of the normativity involved in their practices.

In order to show how tacit knowledge is knowledge because it can be justified, I will insist that we make a distinction between being able to justify a belief and being justified in believing. This distinction will allow me to claim that, even when a knower cannot justify her belief, she might be justified in believing. This distinction is illustrated by the example of the physiognomies: subjects learn to recognize facial expressions as embodied with meanings, but if asked, they might not be able to point out how they do it. Nevertheless this does not mean that they do not know how to do it. They cannot justify their knowledge by giving a list of propositions that describe their skill, but they are justified in believing that a particular person is in this or that mood. In this case, the justification arises from the fact that they are able to take part in determinate types of social interactions that imply the ability to recognize moods by attending to facial expressions. The knowledge is justified by the fact that the subjects are also able to recognize good and bad examples of the practice, which means that their attributions of moods are not arbitrary

The example of the car mechanic supports further my distinction because it shows that we can say that he is justified in believing that the fault is in the carburetor, and we could attribute to him a tacit knowledge that grounds his intuition. Again, I want to remark that our attribution of knowledge is not based on the soundness of a propositional argument but, rather it is based on the perception that he has acquired a certain expertise due to his many similar experiences. Taking into account his training, his previous experiences and the certainty that he has of the source of the failure, we can say that he has sufficient elements to justify his belief. By pointing out where the faulty piece is, and by repairing it, he will prove that his hunch was correct. The justification for his claim will be a series of actions and practices that we will recognize as supporting his claim. We will recognize that he has a grasp of certain aspects of the world that some of us do not have. I want to



underline that he is “getting things right” because he grasps certain patterns that are significant to him due his experiences, but also because he is able to recognize what counts as solving the problem or not solving it. He is able to appreciate the normative aspects of his knowledge.

I think the same type of reasoning can be applied to the other two cases that I mentioned at the beginning of the section, the intuitions of mothers regarding their babies or the understanding or creation of metaphors. In the first instance, the mother becomes aware of certain patterns of behaviour that allow her to foresee what it is going to happen, while in the second case, we learn to capture relations between concepts that are meaningful not only to ourselves, but also to the rest of speakers. The tacit knowledge displayed in these examples is the product of experience and it involves the apprehension of a certain normativity. Therefore, even if at first sight, we could not argue for the justification of tacit knowledge by its underlying normativity, a more detailed analysis of some examples points in the opposite direction.

Nevertheless, in the first section of the chapter I offered an example to illustrate the nature of tacit knowledge that seems to jeopardize my claims regarding the justification of tacit knowledge. I am referring to the example of the electric shock and the random syllables proposed by Polanyi, in which a subject is presented with a number of syllables, some of which were preceded by an electric shock. Subsequently, the subject becomes able to recognize a sequence in the apparently random arrangement, which enables him to anticipate the shock-syllables. Even if the subject can anticipate the shock syllables, he is not able to point out the sequence.

In the above example, the subject seems to have acquired the knowledge in an almost brutal causal way, which seems to indicate that this is just a case of conditioned behavior that does not really count as knowledge. It is tempting to say that the subject has not apprehended any normativity in the process of learning and that, therefore, the conditioning cannot count as knowledge. Nevertheless, I think that this judgment displays a clear misunderstanding of the role of training in the acquisition of certain types of practical and tacit knowledge. Even if, very often, we learn how to respond appropriately



to some situations in this seemingly mechanical manner, this does not imply that we do not acquire knowledge.

I can support my claim by referring to the training of astronauts, or soldiers, which involves the use of technology that necessitates quick reactions, and which necessitates that they are trained to react in a “mechanical” way, such that they are able to pick up information displayed in front of them and react to it immediately. The above example illustrates how knowers can engage in practices that entail the recognition of patterns, without being able to express which is the subjacent pattern, but this does not imply that their knowledge cannot be justified. I think that, in these cases, their knowledge is justified by having undergone training, because it has made them able to engage satisfactorily in certain practices, which implies the apprehension of a certain normativity. Nevertheless, it still can be argued that there is no apprehension of normativity in being trained to recognize shock syllables via receiving electric shocks, because animals can also be trained in this fashion.

While in the case of the car mechanic and physiognomy recognition it is clear that the knowers are partaking in socially sanctioned practices, and that their intuitions consist in making the appropriate moves within the space of reason, which makes their intuitions count as knowledge; in the case of the electric shocks this is not so obvious. Nevertheless, I believe that, even when human beings are trained to react “without thinking”, and even when the training involves purely mechanical reactions, there is still a difference between animals and humans, because humans can apprehend the whole process of knowledge acquisition and take responsibility for their learning. This implies that, even if the end result of their training is that they have learned to recognize a random pattern of syllables, in the process they have agreed that there are good and bad answers, that there is a trainer who knows the correct way of responding, that there are permissible and non-permissible ways of responding to the training and that, at the end of the training, there will be skilled knowers and others who have not got the knowledge. Human beings capture the normativity of their knowledge, even in the cases when the norms are arbitrary, or when they cannot explain why they know what they know.



## 8. Intuition and Creative imagination.

In a previous chapter I argued that a picture of rationality that implies that all our mental content is conceptual is inadequate to capture the complex nature of our mental representations, and I argued for the recognition of a content that is non-conceptual but able to enter into our rational deliberations. In the previous sections I have argued that a model of rationality based merely on propositions is insufficient for several reasons. Among them, I mentioned that it is unable to account for radical changes in our conceptual apparatus, or to explain the gap that we can sometimes experience between our conceptual framework and our apprehension of reality.

In section 3 I explained that Polanyi believed that individuals could make contributions toward closing the gap between their apprehended reality and their conceptual framework. These contributions are mainly individual, but are the product of a certain training. He adopts the same attitude in respect to scientific discoveries: Scientists are able to solve puzzles or see the solution to new questions by making coherent a group of data that, at first sight, might appear unrelated. In scientific discovery, *"the researcher is engaged in the problem of trying to find the coherence of various pieces of information. (...) Polanyi added that the seeing of a pattern is the outcome of an intentional effort of the person to find order in reality"*<sup>37</sup> This characterization of knowledge as the action of putting seemingly unrelated information together into a coherent picture is an activity for which **rules cannot be given.** *"These [scientific judgment] are judgments that demand insight and understanding, two scientists could have a perfectly identical understanding of scientific laws and theories, but one may make a great discovery and the other spend his or her life doing ordinary research which conforms to current knowledge. The difference lies in the personal judgment of the scientist."*<sup>38</sup>

Discovery in science results from the handling of theoretical information in different ways by equally well trained scientists, and this is explained by Polanyi as the product of creative imagination, a faculty that will enable the scientist to see the world in a **new way**

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<sup>37</sup> R. Gelwick (1977), p 27.

<sup>38</sup> R. Gelwick (1977), p 26.



by making a coherent picture out of a set of data that do not seem to be related. I maintain that creative imagination is nothing other than **intuitions** based on skills acquired by being trained in particular ways of living and which allow the scientist to organize the perceived reality in a completely different way.

I will give more weight to the role of communities in the acquisition of these skills and less to the role of the individual. As Polanyi does, adopting this view, I increase the importance of belonging to more than one epistemic group, which will provide us with diverse skills, which in turn will provide us with richer conceptual frameworks. I will expand on this idea in the following chapter, while in the next section I will attend to some objections to my project.

## **9. Kuhn on intuition and the change of paradigm.**

I am supporting the view that, as a product of particular cognitive skills, the knower is occasionally able to apprehend reality in a way that does not capture her conceptual framework. I will even argue that this could be the case with respect not to single words but to complicated webs of concepts, such as the ones that we can find in scientific theories. What I am suggesting is close to the idea of a change of paradigm propitiated by non-conceptual intuitions.

There are obvious arguments against this model, for instance, the work of Kuhn on paradigm change seems to challenge the possibility that I envision. He argues that the change of paradigm necessitates that the scientist is already perceiving the world by the means of a previous paradigm. Even if I do not deny that this is the case, I will argue that it is possible to apprehend the world in ways that are not completely mediated by the concepts enclosed in that paradigm. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the knower has an unmediated relation with the world, I think it is mediated at least in two senses:

-First, knowers are those who are in the realm of reason and, therefore, most of their mental content is conceptual. My main argument in chapter 5 was that conceptual and non-conceptual content appear **closely related**, even if I argued that there is a certain



amount of non-conceptual content that will allow the to make changes in the accepted view on the world.

-Second, as I have also already argued, I agree with Polanyi, who claims that our embodied nature is always tacitly present in all our knowledge claims, therefore there is an ineffable element in our perceptions, which mediates them.

I do not believe that our perception of the world is unmediated. With this premise in mind, I will argue that scientists are able to transcend the current theories and the concepts that they enclose, to see and organize reality in different ways. In this section I will argue against Kuhn by showing that unless scientists are able to apprehend aspects of the world outside the conceptual system provided by their theories, they would not be able to change paradigms. In a later section I will spell out the consequences of my claims for a feminist epistemology.

Now, I will explain Kuhn's theory on how scientists are able to change paradigms. He points out that the changes of paradigm are not identical to a Gestalt switch<sup>39</sup>, but he nevertheless accepts that the transition between paradigms *"like the Gestalt switch, it must occur all at once (though not necessarily in an instant) or not at all."*<sup>40</sup>.

Kuhn also supports the idea that intuition is the origin of a new paradigm *"Scientists then often speak of the 'scales falling from their eyes' or the 'lightning flash' that 'inundates' a previously obscure puzzle, enables its components to be seen in a new way that for the first time permits its solution. On other occasions the relevant illumination comes in sleep. No ordinary sense of the term 'interpretation' fits these flashes of intuition through which a new paradigm is born. Though such intuitions depend upon the experience, both anomalous and congruent, gained with the old paradigm, they are not logically or piecemeal linked to particular items of that experience as an interpretation would be. Instead, they gather up large portions of that experience and transform them to the rather different bundle of experience that will thereafter be linked piecemeal to the new*

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<sup>39</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p85, 114.

<sup>40</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p150.



*paradigm but not to the old.*"<sup>41</sup>

In the above quotation Kuhn claims that scientist can see the problem which he tries to solve in a new way through intuition, which is prior to the new paradigm. So, up until this point, there seems to be a coincidence between the role that Kuhn attributes to intuition and the description that Polanyi made of how creative imagination works. The difference between the two accounts is that Kuhn claims that *"Surveying the rich experimental literature from which these examples are drawn makes one suspect that something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself. What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see."*<sup>42</sup> This is an important problem for the model that I am supporting. In my defense, I will argue that Kuhn himself has to confront a problem: he has to explain how it is possible to have a perceptual change, i.e., to have the intuition that will change the view of the scientist, without first changing the paradigm. I will argue that the tension in his model cannot be solved unless we accept a non-propositional account of scientific intuition: according to Kuhn, we need a new paradigm already in place to have the change of vision but at the same time it seems that we need intuition, that will propitiate a Gestalt switch in order to have a new paradigm.

Looking at a particular example of a change of paradigm in Kuhn's model will help us to understand the difficulty. We will look at his explanation of how Galileo introduced important changes in physics with the development of the theory of the pendulum. The Aristotelian paradigm (previous to Galileo) maintained that *"a heavy body is moved by its own nature from a higher position to a state of natural rest at a lower one."*<sup>43</sup> Therefore, if looking at a pendulum in movement, they would have interpreted the movement of the pendulum as *"falling with difficulty."*<sup>44</sup> Galileo was trained to analyze motions in terms of impetus theory, which was developed in the late part of the fourteenth century and allowed him to approach the movement of the pendulum in a new way, refuting the prevalent Aristotelian paradigm. Galileo saw the pendulum *"as a body that almost*

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<sup>41</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p123.

<sup>42</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p133.

<sup>43</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p119.

<sup>44</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p 119.



*succeeds in repeating the same motion over and over again ad infinitum.*"<sup>45</sup> So the conceptual possibilities opened by the medieval paradigm shift allowed Galileo to have different perceptual experiences from those who followed the Aristotelian theory.

Kuhn's describes the change of paradigm as a change in our perceptions propitiated by a change of theory (paradigm). For instance, he thinks that it is wrong to claim that both Galileo and the followers of the previous paradigm, the Aristotelian, saw the same thing while looking at a weight attached to a string in motion. Following Kuhn, the Aristotelian saw a swinging stone and Galileo saw a pendulum. He does not accept that both are seeing the same thing and interpreting it in a different way but, rather, that their different paradigms make them see different objects. He says that *"rather than being an interpreter, the scientist who embraces a new paradigm is like the man wearing inverted glasses. Confronting the same constellations of objects as before and knowing that he does so, he nevertheless finds them transformed through and through in many of their details."*<sup>46</sup>

As I said before, it seems paradoxical that you need to have the new paradigm in order to see the world as ordered according to it, and to claim at the same time that seeing it as such it is what propitiates the change in the paradigm!. Kuhn acknowledges, in his postscript, that his liberal use of 'paradigm' makes his text inaccurate. I think that his position in the postscript will help us to make sense of this paradox.

In the postscript he calls paradigm a disciplinary matrix. In a disciplinary matrix we find: symbolic generalizations, heuristic models, values and exemplars. A disciplinary matrix includes exemplars as a part of it. And an exemplar is what Kuhn was also calling paradigm in his previous text. By paradigm, he meant the particular way of looking at the world that a group of scientists acquired while being trained as scientists. The use and understanding of the same exemplars is what produces the learning of scientific theories.

Students do not become scientists by learning a theory and a few rules and then using it to solve problems. A scientist grasps a theory by solving problems. This is very clearly

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<sup>45</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p 119.

<sup>46</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p122.



illustrated by an example provided by Kuhn. It is common that students get to the end of a lesson and try to solve the problems that they encounter in the text book and feel unable to do them. This is commonly reported and it ends when " *The student discovers, with or without the assistance of the instructor, a way to see his problem as like a problem he has already encountered. Having seen the resemblance, grasped the analogy between two or more distinct problems, he can interrelate symbols and attach them to nature in the ways that have proved effective before.*"<sup>47</sup> This is the way in which students learn to see the world as the other trained scientists do. Science consists in acquiring a particular way of viewing the world. Kuhn himself makes a connection with Polanyi's tacit knowledge.<sup>48</sup>

Let's come back now to the paradox that we were trying to solve. Changes of paradigm are like Gestalt changes because they occur at once. Does this mean changes in the disciplinary matrix or changes in the exemplars? A change of the disciplinary matrix cannot be sudden, it has to be built step by step. But a trained scientist can have a sudden change in his vision similar to that which he undergoes when learning to solve the problems by seeing them as similar to others he has encountered previously. A scientist trying to solve a particular problem in a theory realizes that it is not explained by seeing it as similar to others that he has previously solved but, rather, he sees it as similar to some other types of problems he has solved somewhere else. If we accept that paradigm changes necessitate just this sort of glimpse into what it could be like for the old theory if we see a current problem in a new light, then it seems that the paradox that Kuhn was facing can begin to be explained. First the scientist has an intuition, based on previous experiences, which shows her the data arranged in a completely new way. She feels it is a good way of ordering them and begins to foresee the enormous implications that this particular move can have for the existing theory. She does not need to be able to explain just now the new theory in detail, but she feels justified to believe that this is a more correct way of solving the problem.

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<sup>47</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p189.

<sup>48</sup> "That sort of learning is not acquired by exclusively verbal means. Rather it comes as one is given words together with concrete examples of how they function in use; nature and words are learned together. To borrow once more Michael Polanyi's useful phrase, what results from this process is 'tacit knowledge' which is learned by doing science rather than by acquiring rules for doing it." T. Kuhn (1996), p191.



Polanyi claims that we can have tacit knowledge of undiscovered things: *"This is indeed the kind of foreknowledge the Copernicans must have meant to affirm when they passionately maintained, against heavy pressure, during one hundred and forty years before Newton proved the point, that the heliocentric theory was not merely a convenient way of computing the paths of planets, but was really true."*<sup>49</sup> Regarding the justification of this knowledge, he says *"Since we have no explicit knowledge of these unknown things, there can also be no explicit justification of a scientific truth. But as we can know a problem, and feel sure that it is pointing to something hidden behind it, we can be aware also of the hidden implications of a scientific discovery, and feel confident that they will prove right. We feel sure of this, because in contemplating the discovery we are looking at it not only in itself but, more significantly, as a clue to reality at which our clues are pointing."*<sup>50</sup>

I find this explanation appropriate for solving the difficulty that Kuhn has to face but, accepting it, I seem to be granting the possibility that the scientist can somehow escape the conceptual system that underlines his view of the world and confront some aspects that are not captured by the theory that he embraces. This seems to put into question Kuhn's denial of a sharp distinction between observation and theory, given that he claims that observation is theory laden. Interestingly, in a later article, Kuhn explains how the change in paradigm is due to anomalies provided by experimentation giving unexpected results that do not fit the theory at hand. These anomalies are called *"unassimilated observation"* or *"incongruous experience"*<sup>51</sup> and they refer to the observation of facts or phenomena that resist conceptualization: *"the data requisite for revolution have existed before at the fringe of scientific consciousness, the emergence of crisis brings them to the center of attention; and the revolutionary reconceptualization permits them to be seen in a new way."*<sup>52</sup> This seems to imply that it is possible to encounter experience that does not fit the conceptual system and which provokes changes, as Kuhn says *"Typically, that crisis ends only when some particularly imaginative individual, or a group of them, weaves a new fabric of laws, theories, and concepts, one which can assimilate the previous*

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<sup>49</sup> M. Polanyi (1966), p23.

<sup>50</sup> M. Polanyi (1966), p 24.

<sup>51</sup> T. Kuhn (1964), p 25.

<sup>52</sup> T. Kuhn (1964), p 25.



*incongruous experience and most or all of the previous assimilated experience as well.*"<sup>53</sup>. Nevertheless, I would like to underline precisely that this experience is not encountered as raw experience, completely out of the conceptual system. If we look at the examples offered by Kuhn, we realize that the experiences **almost** fitted the conceptual apparatus, and that it was the growing uneasiness about the possibility of a serious misfit that provided the impulse for the change of theory.

It is easier to understand the process described above, if we recall one of Piaget's experiments designed to teach children about the concept of speed, which, incidentally, is used by Kuhn to illustrate the relation between experience and thought experiments in change of theories. Children tend to think that, given two toy cars, the one that arrives first at the end of a set circuit is the faster, even if it has left before the others. They hold this belief until they see how a car that left later accelerates visibly during the race to arrive at the same time as the one that left first.<sup>54</sup> **The children transform their concept of speed when they realize that brings them into contradictions.** The change is only possible because they can understand the second situation with their existing concept of speed, even if, when made to think about it, they admit that it was insufficient and that it distorted what was really happening. The same happens with scientists, they have to be able to see the data that will change the theory via their old theory:

*"For sometime before we encountered them, our subjects had in their transactions with nature, successfully employed a conceptual fabric different from the one we use ourselves. That fabric was time tested; it had not yet encountered them, they had at last acquired a variety of experience which could not be assimilated by their traditional mode of dealing with the world. At this point they had at hand all the experience requisite to a fundamental recasting of their concepts, but there was something about that experience that they had not yet seen. Because they had not, they were subject to confusion and were perhaps already uneasy. Full confusion, however, came only in the thought-experimental situation, and then it came as prelude to its cure. By transforming felt anomaly to concrete contradiction, the thought experiment informed our subject what was wrong.*

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<sup>53</sup> T. Kuhn (1964), p 25.

<sup>54</sup> T. Kuhn (1964), p 8-10.



*That first clear view of the misfit between experience and implicit expectation provided the clues necessary to set the situation right.*"<sup>55</sup>

I began this section by saying that some knowers are able to apprehend reality in a way that is not captured by their conceptual framework. I have assessed Kuhn's idea that it is necessary to have a paradigm in mind, in order to be able to see the world in a new light. According to Kuhn, scientists' intuitions are the grounds for a change in paradigms, which are propitiated by their encounter with data that are not explained by the theories. I have analyzed his theory because, even if, on the first instance, it seems to challenge my suggestion that it is possible to have non-conceptual content, I think that, in actual fact, it helps me to show the importance of such a content in the change of paradigms.

I have argued that knowers are in the realm of reasons by means of having learned a language, so once they have been enculturated, and are able to see the world via their conceptual system, then , they are able to push the limits of their language by acknowledging that there are aspects of the world that are not included within it. Because they are in the realm of reasons, they are able to recognize rational relations between contents that have not been put propositionally. I claimed that knowers can apprehend non-conceptual content that it is not identical with 'raw experience'. I think that the same situation is encountered by scientists when they became aware that there are data that cannot be assimilated by their theories. They are able to sense a tension between their theories and some aspects of the world and they are able to do it because they can see the relation between those data and their theories, which means that their perceptions are mediated by their training. Clearly, someone who is not trained as a scientist would not be able to see those data as unassimilated by the theory. So, on the one hand, their perceptions are mediated by their theory but, on the other hand, the theory does not allow them to apprehend the world completely. Even if this is not enough to propitiate a change of paradigm, it is enough to show how scientists can begin to feel uncomfortable with their current theories before they have another one in sight. In the next section I will explain how this sense of inadequacy links with my general argument regarding intuition.

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<sup>55</sup> T. Kuhn (1964), p 26.



## 10. Epistemological implications.

In the previous section I claimed that the first step towards enlarging our existent conceptual systems is to be aware of the tension between them and the world. The next step is to be able to foresee, or apprehend, what it is obscured by our actual concepts. I have argued that this realization often takes the form of intuitions that allow particular subjects to engage, in an appropriate way, with the world without being able to explain how they know that this was the appropriate behavior. But while this seems to be a good way to explain how a car mechanic knows that the problem in the car is the carburetor and not the electrical system, it does not seem so obvious when we refer to scientific theories.

Nevertheless, I have already explained how scientists make discoveries in science by making coherent pictures of aspects of the world that had previously remained unrelated by existing theories. This is made clear when Polanyi points out that, given that all scientists receive the same training, then all of them should be able to make the data cohere in the same way, once they are confronted with them, but in actual fact, we can take two scientists with the same theoretical knowledge of a subject, and see that one of them will develop a new theory and the other one will be unable to do it. Polanyi attributed a central role to the imagination of particular scientists, who were able to make the transition, but I would like to give more weight to its social aspects.

I would like to point out that a factor with influence in scientific discoveries is the degree of marginality and novelty of the scientist involved in the investigation. Investigators who are trained in a field, but who are not at the center of it, are more likely to perceive “data” that do not fit the current theories. Kuhn mentions psychological experiments that illustrate how we all have a tendency to make the information that we gather into coherent pictures, and explains that people who expect certain results in their research might be blind to the results of those experiments that do not fit well. Therefore, on one hand, only those who are able to discriminate the results will be able to perceive subtle differences that might make all the difference.<sup>56</sup> But, on the other hand, Kuhn insists that the

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<sup>56</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p 62-65.



investigators involved in the origin of new paradigms are almost always very young scientists or very new to the paradigm that they want to change and, therefore, *“these men are men who, being little committed by prior practice to the traditional rules of normal science, are particularly likely to see that those rules no longer define a playable game and to conceive another set that can replace them.”*<sup>57</sup> Being at the margins of particular knowledge practices might offer a privileged perspective to the knowers. They are more likely to notice tensions between the theory and the data and also to have intuitions to produce alternatives.

I pointed out, in a previous section, that intuition relies on practices, that it is a skill that is acquired by experience and practice and, therefore it is socially learned and validated. I explained how we learned to solve mathematical problems by being able to see a problem as similar to another one that we already know how to solve. I want to claim now that skills acquired in particular knowledge practices might be useful in establishing new ways of solving problems in another area of knowledge. I think that this might explain why certain individuals can organize experience in a novel way, while others are unable to make the appropriate connections.

I will argue, in the next chapter, that epistemic marginality is desirable and that plurality in epistemic communities is more productive than uniformity. I will also argue that, in order to get objective knowledge, it is necessary to take the contributions of those at the margins of the epistemic communities seriously.

## **11. A New Paradigm of Reason.**

In this chapter I have argued for a concept of reason that does not rely closely on the relation between our language and the world. By supporting the view that intuition is a rational response to the world, I have showed how we are able to apprehend aspects of the world that escape our conceptual systems, but that are part of the realm of reason.

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<sup>57</sup> T. Kuhn (1996), p 90. He also offers the example of Dalton who changed the paradigm in chemistry: “partly because his training was in a different speciality and partly because of his own work in that speciality, he approached those problems with a paradigm different from that of contemporary chemists.” p 133.



It is one of the main aims of this thesis to show how we can change some of the links between reason and other concepts such as gender and knowledge. In order to further this aim, I have supported a concept of reason which is not linked to theoretical or propositional knowledge, and which is not opposed to intuition, therefore introducing into the equation concepts that were excluded because they were linked to the realm of the feminine. One obvious implication from this move is that women became more likely to be considered rational. Nevertheless, and even if I intended to promote the inclusion of women in the realm of reason, my strategy has not consisted in “weakening” the concept of reason in order to allow women to enter it. Rather, I have showed how the concept of reason at play in many theories, which exclude women, is also inappropriate for covering the activities of males. To this effect, I have claimed that it is not possible to have a concept of reason that is too close to language, because it impedes our accounting for changes in our conceptual systems. I have argued that, unless we accept the role of non-conceptual content, and of intuition, in our cognitive practices, we will not be able to explain how we can enlarge our conceptual systems, nor how we can understand opaque thinkers.

I have also suggested that some groups are more likely to apprehend these aspects of the world than others, because their involvement in some activities might provide them with abilities that allow them to see the world in a different way. In the next chapter I will argue that women, by engaging in particular practices, can apprehend aspects of the world that remain opaque to those who do not partake in these practices, which, added to their marginal status as knowers, provide them with a privileged perspective in some matters. I will also rely on some of my conclusions in this, and previous chapters, to analyze the centrality of embodiment in our acquisition of knowledge, avoiding essentialism, but claiming that having particular types of bodies has a bearing in our production of knowledge.



## CHAPTER 7

### 0. Introduction

In the introductory chapters I pointed out that the traditional form of feminist standpoint epistemology, as supported by Harstock, had many valuable features but, also, was subjected to some deserved criticism. I claimed that I would argue for a revised version of feminist standpoint epistemology and, in this chapter I will make my project explicit.

In previous chapters of the thesis I have offered arguments to counteract some of the criticisms put forward by postmodernist and postcolonial thinkers. To this effect, I claimed that, if we want to ground knowledge on the experiences of those who belong to marginalized groups, the concept of experience needs to be altered and, also, that the notion of group identity should be challenged in order to encompass diversity and avoid essentialism and universalism. Nevertheless, there are still some issues that have to be solved, such as the impossibility of grounding feminist standpoint epistemology on the basis of the object relation theory, and the need to solve the problems posited by the multiplication of standpoints.

I will begin by arguing that it is not necessary to rely on the object relation theory in order to explain the formation of a feminist standpoint. In previous chapters I have offered diverse arguments to support the view that the members of particular groups can access certain aspects of the world that remain opaque to others, who do not belong to the same epistemic communities. I will argue that the central role given by traditional standpoint to communities in the production of knowledge gives us the basis for explaining how women develop a feminist standpoint. Belonging to particular communities, taken together with the fact that there is epistemic marginalization of certain groups, can explain why there are some knowers who can apprehend aspects of the world that are opaque to others and, also, how they develop critical views on mainstream knowledge. Both facts will allow me to argue that there are some knowers with a privileged epistemic perspective.

Situated knowledge is at the center at this chapter, and I will argue that all knowledge is situated because it is mediated by particular types of embodiment, and by the communities



wherein it is produced. In the former chapter, I argued for an ideal of knowledge firmly based on practices. I underlined that it is personal in the sense that it has been acquired by undergoing experiences that enable the subject to develop certain epistemic skills and to access contents that cannot be acquired otherwise. I have argued that the content of these experiences might not be expressible in a propositional form, because it is a form of knowing how, or because the current conceptual system has not got enough resources for it. Equally, I will underline the importance of embodiment in the acquisition of knowledge, given that particular types of embodiment are necessary in order to acquire knowledge. Nevertheless, this knowledge is sanctioned and justified within communities. As I have already indicated, in this chapter. I will stress that the communities to which the knowing subject belong, are the grounds for knowledge, and are central to being able to make sense of his personal experiences and to justifying his knowledge.

The second question that I will consider is how the multiplication of standpoints seems to imply that we cannot have objective knowledge. I will analyse Harding's Strong Objectivity theory, which is an attempt to overcome the difficulties posited by the multiplication of standpoints, while preserving some of the central features of feminist standpoint epistemology.

## **1. The social nature of Knowledge.**

One of the factors that makes standpoint epistemology useful to feminism is that it acknowledges the importance of epistemic communities in the production of knowledge. Standpoint epistemology attempts to explain how the social location of an individual mediates her knowledge. In order to understand the importance of this claim, I will contrast standpoint epistemology with traditional epistemology and with other types of feminist epistemology.

In traditional epistemology, knowledge is produced by individuals. Feminists have argued against what has been called epistemological individualism<sup>1</sup>, both to show the

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<sup>1</sup> For a summary of different positions, see L. Hankinson Nelson (1993), p122.



implausibility of a solipsistic knower<sup>2</sup> and, also, in order to underline the importance of our locations in the production of knowledge. In traditional epistemology, groups of individuals can be at the center of the production of knowledge when they are taken to be members of professional bodies, because when epistemic expertise is discussed, it is always in relation to these bodies. But the fact that, within these communities, there are other possible groupings, such as by gender, race, age, etc... has remained unacknowledged. Feminists have argued for the importance of other epistemological communities. In particular, they have argued that women, as a group, might make important contributions to the future development of science.

What makes standpoint epistemology different from other types of epistemology in relation to this issue is that it aims to explain why belonging to certain communities allows you to have a particular perspective on the world. In the opening chapters of the thesis I explained how empiricist feminist epistemology assumes that there is a difference of perspective between male and female scientists, but does not attempt to explain why this is so. Postmodern thinkers argue that it is the multiplication of the axes of power that multiplies the possible standpoints, but they cannot explain why one should be preferable to others. I believe that standpoint epistemology can offer good reasons to explain why some groups acquire a perspective that is different from the mainstream one, that there is more than one group that can do it, and why their perspective is preferable to the one held by those who are not in the margins. In the next sections I will offer some arguments to support my claim, so, in (1.1), I will show how taking communities as the basis for knowledge allows us to explain the formation of standpoints and the development of theories that are alternative to the ones commonly accepted, while in sections (1.2) and (1.3) I will explain the mechanisms that allow some marginal knowers to develop critical views on mainstream theories.

### **1.1 Communities as the basis of knowledge.**

In a clear allusion to the multiplication of axes of power argued for by postmodernists, I will accept that there is a diversity of epistemic communities. Each of us belongs to more

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<sup>2</sup> See L. Hankinson Nelson (1993).



than one of them. Some of them we choose, but others we are “born” into. I am a member of several epistemic communities: I am a Spanish-speaker, and this implies that I share a common way of looking at the world with those who speak Spanish. I am also a philosopher, this time a community of my own choice, and then I am a feminist woman, a community that is half chosen, half born into.

According to traditional standpoint epistemology, I can develop a feminist standpoint due to the sexual division of labour, and biology also plays an important role in its formation. In this section I will show how it is possible to acquire a standpoint without relying on biology, and without using the object relation theory. The basis for the argument, in classic standpoint epistemology, was that women have privileged knowledge because there are material circumstances that allow them to undergo particular experiences, which get articulated by belonging to a marginalized epistemic group. I think that the argument is basically correct, that the reason why people belonging to certain communities develop certain epistemic skills has to be related to their engagement with the world. I will argue that it is the development of these skills that allows marginalized subjects to have a more creative role in the production of knowledge, and a more critical attitude towards commonly accepted theories.

In Chapter 5 I explained how McDowell claimed that entering the space of concepts is entering the space of reasons. Those who speak a language and, therefore, share a certain culture, stand in the same place in relation to the space of reasons. We are able to grasp different aspects of reality by means of our conceptual system, acquired by sharing a way of life, by belonging to particular societies. I have already said that we need to acknowledge the existence of a non-conceptual content in order to be able to explain how it is possible to envision aspects of the world that are not currently accessible via our conceptual system. By acknowledging the existence of different communities, whose identity is supported by their engagement in particular practices, I am grounding the possibility of having knowers who have developed different epistemic skills, which allow them to apprehend aspects of the world that remain unacknowledged by the mainstream.

In the previous chapter I argued that this theory is also applicable to the development of



our scientific theories, that it allows us to explain how scientists, who have been trained to “see” the world according to the ruling theories in their particular realm of science, are able to escape the paradigm imposed on them and to foresee other possibilities. For instance, Polanyi shows how Einstein developed a theory that contradicted the observational data that supported the current theory at the time, by following a hunch.<sup>3</sup> He suspected that his model would be better, without being able to explain why, and accordingly, even the scientific community was persuaded by Einstein’s theory before it was verified<sup>4</sup>. In this particular example there is a stress on individual genius, the product of Polanyi’s approach to the subject of creative imagination in science. But I have argued that, even if imagination plays an important role, the changes that the scientist envisions should be taken to be the product of cognitive abilities acquired by belonging to **particular communities**. We can pick up new aspects of the world by relying on the epistemic skills that we develop by belonging to particular communities, and we can do it even when the current theories do not have resources to accommodate those experiences. Scientists acquire **skills** that remain unknown to them while being trained in their particular topics of research. But they also acquire certain epistemic skills in their everyday lives that can transfer to their scientific work.

These skills are social in nature because they are acquired socially, the practices that allow us to acquire the skills are validated socially, and the knowledge that they produce is justified socially<sup>5</sup>. Given that skill acquisition is necessarily linked to practices in communities, the belonging of the scientist to these particular groups has a bearing on the possibility of their making discoveries. The sort of picture that emerges from my theory is that of scientists firmly located in **communities as the ground of new theories**. This would have traditionally been considered as a highly subjective kind of knowledge, given that the traditional picture of objective knowledge is based on the idea that equally well trained scientists who have to confront a particular cluster of data will reach the same conclusions. In this new model, particular scientists can bring to the research new cognitive skills that will allow them to make new discoveries. They might not be aware

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<sup>3</sup> He developed the theory of relativity by being prompted by the observations made by the Michelson-Morley experiment, but he believes, and has the testimony of Einstein to support it, that Einstein has the hunch of the theory much earlier in life. M. Polanyi (1998), p 11.

<sup>4</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 14.

<sup>5</sup> This particular aspect is developed in the previous chapter.



that they are bringing them in, because they have been acquired and put into use tacitly.

At this point I want to remark on the personal aspect of the acquisition of knowledge, because the scientist gets trained and acquires particular cognitive abilities that are not transferable unless one undergoes a particular training, which is made even more obvious if we remember that the acquisition of these abilities is not merely intellectual, it necessitates the involvement of whole embodied persons and of participation in ways of life. Linking the epistemic abilities of knowers with the communities where they have been trained, and the possibility of exporting skills acquired in one realm to others, explains why people whose provenance is diverse will make different contributions even when trained identically in a single trade. This type of argument can be adopted by standpoint epistemologists in order to explain why women will develop particular epistemic abilities and, therefore, why it is desirable to have diverse epistemic communities represented in the institutions that validate and produce knowledge.

In this section I have claimed that epistemic communities are important because they allow us to develop epistemic skills, which are acquired by taking part in particular practices that are regulated socially, an idea that it is supported by the arguments developed in previous chapters in order to show that the knowledge produced is justified socially. I have also showed how belonging to these communities allows the knowers to contribute with original theories that challenge the received views. In the next two sections I will argue that those belonging to marginal communities have the possibility of developing more critical views and, in this sense, have a privileged epistemic perspective over those who do not belong to those groups.

## **1.2. Privileged perspective of a particular group: On making strange what appeared familiar.**

*“Thinking from the perspective of women’s lives makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>6</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 150.



Harstock has argued that women take responsibility for certain areas of productive activity and this shapes their view of the world, providing them with a privileged standpoint. The product of this division of labor is that women are able to see that the social relations, as they are described by our common patriarchal discourses, are falsely represented. Women can see that the resources provided by our conceptual system are insufficient to describe an aspect of reality of which they became aware. The current description of particular parts of the world became unusable. This has been described as women<sup>7</sup> having the capacity for making strange what appeared familiar. I agree with the attribution of this capacity, and I will explain why this happens.

We all share a world by sharing a language and a way of life, we are equipped to deal with the world mediated by our conceptual systems. Occasionally, our language is insufficient to account for our experiences, because the conceptual system that encloses us is the reflection of a way of life that makes part of the world partially inaccessible to us. T. Elliot offers some good examples to illustrate how the experiences of some people make strange for them what appears familiar for the rest of their community, basically because they are excluded from accessing parts of the “common world”: *“Person A approaches a building and enters it unproblematically. As she approaches she sees something perfectly familiar which, if asked, she might call the Entrance. Person X approaches the same building and sees a great stack of stairs and the glaring lack of a ramp for his wheelchair.(...) Person C attends an interesting colloquium in the philosophy of religion in which he hears theorizing about the creative powers of That-than-which nothing-greater-can-be-thought. Person Z hears a whirring buzz of all-too-familiar worlds ‘he and him and ‘his nature’ and ‘his freedom and ‘his power’”*<sup>8</sup>

She explains why persons A and C experienced the world as strange, by recalling Heidegger’s Dasein,<sup>9</sup> according to which we get to know characteristics of the world by

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<sup>7</sup> Even women who do not partake in those activities, can share a feminist standpoint because they have been raised as women *“Whether or not all of us [contribute to subsistence and child bearing] women as a sex are institutionally responsible for producing both goods and human beings and all women are forced to become the kinds of people who can do both.”* N. Harstock (1983), p 291.

<sup>8</sup> T. Elliot (1994), p 426.

<sup>9</sup> This is how Elliot explains it: “When we concern ourselves with something, the entities which are more closely ready-to-hand may be met as something unusable, not properly adapted for the use we have decided upon. The tool turns out to be damaged, or the material unsuitable. In each of the cases equipment is here, ready- to -hand. We discover its unusability, however, not by looking at it and establishing its



engaging with it. When we cannot get engaged with the world, then it is present to us under a new aspect, accordingly: *“Aspects of the social order are conspicuous for oppressed people because they are unusable for them. They discover this unusability as a result of their engagement with the world. This is a sense in which a standpoint is earned rather than had ‘simply by ‘opening one’s eyes’. We discover its unusability, however, not by looking at it and establishing its properties, but rather, by the circumspection of the dealings in which we use it.”*<sup>10</sup>

I can link this with previous chapters of the thesis, so that, when our language (which encloses our current theories about the world) cannot be used as a tool to represent the world, then there are aspects of both language and the world that became conspicuous to us, and this is something that can be perceived only in **particular forms of engagement with the world**. We share a world that is shaped by the view of the ruling classes, and only those who do not belong to these can perceive some aspects of the world as unusable.

Nevertheless, as I have already pointed out, it is not enough to experience the world as unusable in order to develop a standpoint. It is important to remark that standpoints are acquired, they are achieved. To achieve a standpoint it is necessary to belong to a community, in order to make sense of these experiences of strangeness<sup>11</sup> T. Elliot illustrates this point with an example, wherein she explains how little she enjoyed biking until she was lent a bike that was right for her size, and makes an analogy with her lack of enjoyment of philosophy until she found out about feminist epistemology.<sup>12</sup> She points

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properties but, rather, by the circumspection of the dealings in which we use it. When its unusability is thus discovered, equipment becomes conspicuous. This conspicuousness presents the ready-to-hand. But this implies that what cannot be used just lies there; it shows itself as an equipment Thing which looks so and so, and which, in its readiness-to-hand as looking that way, has constantly been present-at-hand too. Pure presence-at-hand announces itself in such equipment.” T. Elliot (1994), p 428.

<sup>10</sup> T. Elliot claims that “women, for example, develop a shared vocabulary and understanding as a result of the similar ways in which we are engaged with the world. Beyond that, because the standpoint is a ‘mediated rather than a mediate understanding’ we must try to rely on networks of others who see the world as we do in certain crucial aspects” (1994), p 429.

<sup>11</sup> T. Elliot (1994), p 432.

<sup>12</sup> *“I’ve inherited an old one-speed Schwinn from my father: it has one bent rim, the tires are low on air, and the seat’s too high for me. But it’s my first bike. I balance precariously, I struggle up hills, I think to myself, ‘so this is biking, huh? Maybe roller skating would be more fun’. Then a friend of the family visits with a beautiful new ten-speed that’s just my size. She let’s me try it, and I’m amazed how fast I can go-so effortlessly. (...) Just so, I read the history of Philosophy, thinking, ‘so this is philosophy, huh?’ then stumble into a feminist philosophy class.”* T. Elliot (1994), p 431.



out that this is similar to the discomfort experienced by individuals when they have to confront the world with theories that are inadequate to fit it. She explains how she needed other people to realize that her intuitions about the unusitability of both the bike and the theory were right and also to find out why it was that she did not enjoy riding or doing philosophy; she remarks how Marilyn Frye discusses the importance of consciousness raising for pattern recognition: *“As long as a woman thinks that her experience alone is thus discrepant, she tends to trust the received wisdom and distrust her own senses and judgment. We need to communicate, Frye argues, in order to start making meanings that make sense of our experience(s) of the world. We need each other to say, “No, you’re not bad at biking. Look at that thing: the rim is bent! Here-try my ten-speed. You’’ see what I mean.”*<sup>13</sup>

By belonging to particular communities we are able to see as strange what appeared familiar, which makes clear that the world is shown to us as not being completely captured by our conceptual systems. I have already supported this claim with arguments in previous chapters, as well as arguing that we need a community in order to be able to give meanings to our experiences, and to be able to validate our knowledge claims based on our intuitions. I would like to concentrate, now, on another aspect of this process: just those who belong to those communities can experience the world as strange. By being able bodied, the world presents itself to me as usable. I do not have the type of involvement with the world that will allow me to experience some aspects of the world as strange. In my view, this implies that if we are going to begin our research from the lives of those at the margins, they have to be at the center of the production of knowledge, and those who are in non-marginal positions have to rely on their intuitions. I think that these claims are at the center of any standpoint epistemology.

### **1.3 The outsider within: the critical nature of the privileged perspective.**

An outsider within is someone who belongs to a particular group, within which she has a subjugated status. This position enables the agent to have a unique perspective with respect to the group.

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<sup>13</sup> T. Elliot (1994), p 432.



P.Hill Collins claims that black women are outsiders within in relation to the women's movement in general, and that black people are outsiders within in relation to society as a whole. The role of the outsider within is especially important in producing criticisms about biases in the system. In this sense, the outsider within is a privileged epistemic agent. For instance: most feminist theories have been developed by white women who have not given enough thought to questions of race. This fact was clear to black women because there are not "usable" theories to explain their experiences, which has allowed black feminist intellectuals to point out the bias in mainstream feminist theory.

In a more general context, the epistemic privilege of black women living in a racist society is made even more clear. Black women are treated as if they were invisible, almost like objects, so they can witness situations that will not happen in the presence of white people. One of the most common examples is that of the black woman who works as a cleaner in a private house or in an office environment.<sup>14</sup> She is present all the time but not acknowledged as important, which gives her the chance to see without being seen. Therefore, the way in which society is structured, gives Black women the opportunity to be "there" without being noticed, to be an outsider within. Their experiences provide them with a sort of knowledge, which is unavailable to other groups, therefore Black women's thought cannot be generated without Black women.<sup>15</sup>

In my introductory chapter I explained how postmodern thinkers have argued that there are no innocent positions, therefore the knowledge produced by Black women can also benefit from a critical approach. P.Hill Collins thinks that the relation between Black feminist thought and other groups should be one of collaboration *"By advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, other groups-such as Black men, white women, white men, and other people of color- further its development. Black women can produce an attenuated version of Black feminist thought separated from other groups."*<sup>16</sup> This collaboration is beneficial for black women, as well as for the rest of the

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<sup>14</sup> A good example of this attitude toward black working women and of the advantages that this 'invisibility' gives them, by allowing them to be unseen witnesses, is portrayed in the film *Ronald et Juliet*.

<sup>15</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990), p 33.

<sup>16</sup> P. Hill-Collins (1990), p 36.



spectrum of epistemic groups, because all epistemic locations have to be critically examined.

Summarizing section 1: Communities are necessary in order to make sense of experiences of strangeness. They are also necessary to justify claims of knowledge based on the experiences of particular communities. This knowledge can help us to realize the sections of our common theories that need to be changed. Given the critical value of marginalized knowledge, it is necessary to listen to the claims of these communities that have been marginalized if we want to obtain a fuller picture of the world. I have also claimed that marginalized knowledge benefits from the critical examination of their theories by other epistemic communities.

## **2. Standpoint feminism and the question of objectivity.**

In chapter 2 I explained how classic standpoint epistemology establishes that our social location biases our knowledge. Harstock has argued that those belonging to marginalized groups have a standpoint, or epistemic perspective, that is different from those who belong to the ruling classes. The origin of the difference was the sexual division of labour. Due to the influence of postcolonial and postmodern theories, we found out that accepting the existence of more than one marginalized group means accepting that there are other differences apart from the sexual division of labour that structure people's lives as different, given that it is central for the logic of the standpoint that there are material differences between the lives of people that allow some to get a better epistemic perspective. I think that the best way of describing the surge of privileged knowledge is to claim that it is situated knowledge, and that it is the product of **particular social locations** and **particular bodies**. What follows from the logic of standpoint is that the knowledge that we produce is always linked to our position in the world and we cannot transcend it, so, even if, from a theoretical stance it might be desirable to look at the world from a different standpoint, this is not possible. This opens up the problem of how to conjugate the knowledge claims made by people belonging to different epistemic groups. Introducing a diversity of privileged perspectives seems to imply the acceptance of relativism.



S.Harding argues that it is possible to encompass different views of reality in order to create more objective theories, and the way of doing it is by : applying the method of science to the context of discovery as well as to the context of justification in order to make visible the values ingrained in the making of science, by starting our research from the lives of marginalized people, and by approaching all productions of knowledge critically, accepting the criticisms that arise from different epistemic groups.

If we follow Harding's suggestion we will make visible those values in scientific theories that are invisible to those involved in the process, because we will bring people who belong to marginalized groups into the process of testing theories, and we will also be able to include the points of view of different groups by beginning our research from their lives. It is possible to apprehend these and to incorporate them in our theories. In the rest of the chapter I will offer arguments to support most of Harding's points, but I will also argue against the possibility of beginning the research from the lives of others in the sense suggested by Harding. But, before I analyse Harding's theory in detail, I will expand on the idea that situated knowledge is produced by particular bodies, because it will be central in my critique of Harding's theory.

### **3. Excluding the view from everywhere.**

In our cultural tradition, our descriptions of objective knowledge have been pervaded with metaphors of vision. Visual metaphors characterize the subject as a passive recipient of knowledge, which implies that her involvement in the perception of the world would not taint her theories with subjectivity. Also, visual metaphors, by distancing the subject from the object of study guaranteed that everybody would see the world in the same way when adopting the scientific stance. This is particularly important because the validity of scientific theories relies on the possibility of reproducing the process of testing, despite the particularities of the scientist. In relation to knowledge in general, the shared ideal of knowledge as justified true belief relies on the intuition that the process of justification has to be somehow universal, and therefore any reference to particular situations should be regarded as irrelevant.



On the one hand, feminist philosophers have criticized the use of vision as a metaphor for knowledge<sup>17</sup> for its implications for our conception of objectivity: it supports the belief that objective knowledge is a view from nowhere. But on the other hand, other feminists (such as D. Haraway<sup>18</sup>) have reappropriated the metaphor and given it new meanings. Haraway stresses that all vision is a view from somewhere, necessarily mediated by the materiality of the location and, also, as in the case of human vision, by our discursive constructions of the body. Taking this into account, I will argue that, despite the appearances, situated knowledge does not amount to relativism, and that it is possible to have a commitment towards objectivity while privileging certain epistemic perspectives.<sup>19</sup>

Before I explain my position regarding objectivity, I will explain how the above does not imply that in order to obtain it, we should attempt to see the world from every other perspective. I will argue that the embodied nature of knowledge precludes us from seeing from everywhere. I will develop my arguments in three different sections: (3.1) embodied knowledge, (3.2) the personal involvement of the knower in science, and (3.3) embodied experiences.

### **3.1 Embodied Knowledge.**

I will offer my first set of reasons in support of the importance of our embodiment in knowledge by recounting some of the points that I have already developed: I have argued that, in order to acquire some types of knowledge, the knower has undergone a training, for which particular types of embodiment are needed. I showed how, unless you have some capacities, you cannot develop certain abilities, and some of these capacities are directly dependent on bodily characteristics. I generalized my claim in a later chapter, where I showed how participation in practices is not a characteristic of particular types of knowledge, such as knowing-how, but rather, it permeates all knowledge. In a sense, all knowledge is a practice, and therefore, knowers have to be trained in order to be able to

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<sup>17</sup> See for instance "The Mind's Eye" By E. F. Keller and C. R. Grontkowski (1983).

<sup>18</sup> D. Haraway (1988).

<sup>19</sup> In the first chapter, I explained that not all feminist epistemologies agree with the way in which standpoint feminist epistemology privileges the female perspective. Nevertheless, feminist empiricists argue that our science would benefit from the inclusion of women, who would be able to point out certain biases in theories. For my argument, the acceptance that this could be the case, is enough to privilege one perspective over another, at least regarding particular aspects of reality.



participate in it. I explained that you can see certain aspects of the world only by belonging to particular groups with particular practices, which implies that only those who are perceived to be members of the group will be able to access certain knowledge. To be perceived as the member of a group is often related to the type of embodiment that one has so, in this very specific sense, the body of the knower matters. My picture of knowledge supports the idea that knowledge acquisition is not the product of minds at work, but rather, it implies the belonging to ways of life, a training of the whole person. This idea is supported further by the fact that, by partaking in practices knowers acquire skills that can pass unrecognized to them. I used the work of Polanyi to show how some of the knowledge acquired by using those skills can also remain unacknowledged, and how it can present itself in the form of hunches.

In my insistence on locating knowledge in particular bodies, I agree with Bordo that we should avoid considering knowers as able to see from any possible point of view, because this makes the locatedness of the knower irrelevant for the production of knowledge.<sup>20</sup> The reason why we cannot shift location at will is because of the limitations of our embodiment, as she points out when she wonders “*what sort of body is it that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel everywhere?*”<sup>21</sup> Taking difference seriously implies that we have to accept the limits of our own embodiment.

### 3.2 The personal involvement of the knower in science

In the introductory chapters, I analysed the use of “objectivity” in our ideal of scientific knowledge. I showed that objective knowledge is detached knowledge in the sense that any personal preference of the scientist is erased by the application of the scientific method. Polanyi claims that is unattainable because in all forms of knowledge, the knower is *inextricably linked with her knowledge*. I will offer here some of the examples that he uses in order to show how the personal history of the scientist influences her decisions while making science. He notices that, while doing science by applying the scientific

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<sup>20</sup> I agree with her general argument against the view from everywhere, even if I disagree with her characterization of postmodernist as holding this view.

<sup>21</sup> S. Bordo (1990), p 145.



method, a knower is personally involved in the search for knowledge in different ways:

First, Polanyi shows how the supposedly impersonal methods of measurement always have an element of decision making that is up to the scientist. He said that, even if science is supposed to establish control over experience by establishing precise rules, which can be formally set out and empirically tested, supposedly leaving out the element of personal judgment involved in applying the formulae to the facts of experience “*Even the most strictly mechanized procedures leave something to personal skill in the exercise of with an individual bias may enter*”.<sup>22</sup>

Second, he says that, in the process of verifying hypotheses, the scientist has to decide whether the results that do not fit the facts can be considered an anomaly or whether they render the theory false. Also the scientist develops a skill that makes her choose those hypotheses for verification that have at least a chance of being true.<sup>23</sup> The choice of hypothesis or questions to pursue is very similar to the recognition of patterns. The scientist, trained in a determinate way, develops the skill to recognize possible ways to follow in investigation. The training of the scientist precludes the many ways in which the scientist could go on making new discoveries in science.

Third, there also other personal factors that influence the choice of questions in research. For instance, he claims that even if it is not clear how scientific discoveries begin, there are some facts that are well stated: when approaching a scientific inquiry, the scientist is **already committed to certain projects** and has been **trained for years in particular methods of research**. Both factors bias the choice of a scientific problem on which to work. And the choice of problem has a direct influence in the discovery of new theories. Gelwick explains how Polanyi will agree that “*the choice of a problem affects directly the chances of discovery. Significant discoveries can only come from significant problems. Yet significant problems are not always clear until significant discoveries have followed from them.*”<sup>24</sup> Scientific discovery is highly influenced by who is doing the research, in the sense that the scientist will commit herself to work in a particular area according to her

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<sup>22</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 19.

<sup>23</sup> M. Polanyi (1998), p 30.

<sup>24</sup> R. Gelwick (1977), p 25.



**personal loyalties.** In a sense this is highly subjective, given that the choice of problems is relevant to the discovery. By choosing a particular problem the scientist is taking a risk based on little more than a hunch. In the early stages of her research, the scientist will probably be unable to explain, by using sound rational arguments, why she thinks that following a particular path will provide her with the answers that she is looking for. From the beginning of the research, the scientist is not detached from her knowledge, but rather she is very personally involved.

Finally, we should not forget that, according to Polanyi, tacit knowledge is acquired by individuals through training. As I argued in the previous chapter, the embodied nature of the scientist biases all her findings.

Summarizing, Polanyi claims that all knowledge, including science, which is supposed to be the paradigm of detached impersonal knowledge, is personal and this implies that our personal judgments, loyalties and the skills acquired while being trained for our cognitive practices all have an influence on our theoretical constructions of the world.

### **3.3 The embodied nature of experiences.**

In my explanation of how experience is appropriate for grounding marginalized knowledge, I alluded to the analysis that Scott offered of Delany's description of his visit to a bathhouse. I argued that she did not pay enough attention to the fact that Delany could have these experiences only because of his particular material circumstances. I quoted Stone Mediatore to support the point that, by focusing on the power of discourse to mediate reality, Scott was forgetting that there is a "reality" that is inscribed and apprehended by those discourses. I argued that Delany is constituted as the sort of subject who can have these experiences not just by the discourses that construct him as a black married gay male but, also, by the material circumstances that make him the recipient of these inscriptions in the first place. It is vital that we do not lose sight of the importance of his embodiment in the mediation of these experiences, because it is due to this that he has been able to have them. If we lose sight of it, then we cannot explain how he could perceive a tension between his perceptual system and his experiences.



As a conclusion for this section, and in contrast with both the “view from everywhere” and the view from nowhere, I suggest that, in order to obtain objective knowledge, we have to take into account that there is a diversity of points of view and that we should take those into account when constructing our representations of the world, but that *"All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability but of elaborate specificity and difference."*<sup>25</sup> All perspectives are the product of particular material circumstances, and are mediated by different discourses, which construct those who hold them. Therefore it is necessary to accept that they are not interchangeable. Haraway illustrates this very clearly when she says that *"A commitment to mobile positioning and to passionate detachment is dependent on the impossibility of entertaining innocent "identity" politics and epistemologies as strategies for seeing from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well. One cannot 'be' either a cell or molecule- or a woman, colonized person, laborer, and so on- if one intends to see and see from these positions critically. "Being" is much more problematic and contingent."*<sup>26</sup>

I have argued, following standpoint epistemology, that some epistemic perspectives are more desirable than others, but I would like to point out that, even if subjugated knowledges are considered to be privileged in a certain sense, this does not imply that they should be embraced uncritically. Being at the margins involves particular problems in the production of knowledge that I will analyse later, but which are suggested by Haraway in the following quotation: *"To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic, even if "we" "naturally" inhabit the great underground terrain of subjugated knowledges. (...) how to see from below is a problem requiring at least as much skill with bodies and language, with the mediations of vision, as the "highest" technoscientific visualizations."*<sup>27</sup>

In the following sections I will explain a theory that attempts to encompass different standpoints, while approaching their findings critically in order to attain more objective knowledge.

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<sup>25</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 583.

<sup>26</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 585.

<sup>27</sup> D. Haraway (1988), p 584.



#### 4. In Search of a New Objectivity: Against objectivism.

Up until now I have argued that all knowledge is situated, and that marginalized groups can provide us with critical insights on common theories and with the apprehension of parts of the world that would be inaccessible otherwise. I have underlined the positive aspects of accepting the claims of standpoint feminism. Now I want to face one of the most important problems for this theory. According to the logic of standpoint, there is more than one oppressed community, so does this mean that there is a cluster of theories and that all of them are privileged? What if they contradict with one another? Could we solve the difficulty by saying that they have a common content?

T.Elliot puts this last question in the following form: “ *Consider the difference between the activities of a poor black man working in a mine and an upper class woman working in her child’s nursery. Is there any way of thinking about epistemic privilege of different marginalized people which discloses the common core of this privilege?*”<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, both of them have the possibility of seeing as strange what appeared familiar, but on the other hand, they are not interchangeable, because they have different ways of being engaged with the world. So it seems that we have to face the difficulty of having different theories whose content is not common. The goal is to produce a workable, coherent view of the world, while keeping the multiplicity and diversity that we find desirable.

There are two standard ways of answering the question in the current state of feminist epistemology. One is Harding’s work on strong objectivity and the other has been put forward by Longino. I will explore Harding’s theory first and approach Longino’s in the next chapter.

Harding suggests that we have to aim to obtain a **strong objectivity**, which is different to objectivity as it is commonly used in our philosophical tradition. This latter type of objectivity, traditionally aimed at by empiricist epistemology is renamed by her as weak objectivity or **objectivism**. Objectivism considers that objective knowledge is value free,

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<sup>28</sup> T. Elliot (1994).



impartial and dispassionate. I have already looked at a number of feminist philosophers who argue that it is impossible to obtain that sort of knowledge. Harding focuses mainly on scientific knowledge and its biases regarding value in order to support her criticisms.

Harding questions our traditional concept of objectivity as value-neutral on the grounds that politically guided scientific projects have produced beliefs that are less partial and distorted than those guided by the ideal of value-neutrality.<sup>29</sup> Politically motivated groups are especially sensitive to the existence of certain values in science, and therefore they can make a very positive contribution to science from a merely critical point of view. For instance, feminist researchers have been able to disclose the androcentric values enclosed in many of our biological theories. Nevertheless, according to the objectivist theory, the goal of the scientific method was to purge science of values and, in actual fact, science has made some values disappear from its theories. Therefore, the role that feminist researchers have had in disclosing androcentric values should have been done by the scientific method as traditionally defined. However, it is interesting to note how the only values and interests that have disappeared from research are those that dissent from the ones held by the dominant scientific community.<sup>30</sup> This lack of parsimony is not necessarily due to a conscious effort to erase just some values and keep others but, rather, it is because there are certain values that became invisible when being shared by all the members in the community. Accepting that scientific theories are value laden and accepting the inputs from groups with different values will have the positive effect of making explicit the values that remain hidden in our current theories. So if we cannot have value neutral theories, at least, we will be aware of the values that we are embracing. This is one of the goals of strong objectivity that cannot be fulfilled by objectivism.

Harding's strong objectivity aims not only to make the current values ingrained in our scientific theories visible but, also, she tries to include the views of those who are on the margins. She claims that there are certain social positions from which we can produce a more objective knowledge. She says that breaching one of the "dogmas" of objectivity, i.e., being motivated by a political agenda, can produce less biased knowledge than if we

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<sup>29</sup> S. Harding (1993), p 49.

<sup>30</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 43.



try to make a value-free science. The reason being that it is a myth to believe that value-free science is possible, and acknowledging that all knowledge is biased opens the possibility of claiming that some epistemic positions are better than others, which will imply that it is possible to obtain more objective knowledge when researching from politically motivated positions. These positions are also biased, they also include values that pass unacknowledged to the knowers, so we have to approach them critically. The method, that Harding suggests of producing more objective knowledge, includes all these ingredients:

1. Scientists should also be the objects of knowledge, we should apply the method of science to the context of discovery in order to make the values visible.
2. The bearers of certain values are more likely to produce objective knowledge, and these are the people who live at the margins. We should start our research from the lives of marginalized people.
3. We should approach all productions of knowledge critically, accepting the criticisms that arise from different epistemic groups. Harding calls this critical exercise reflexivity.

According to Harding, in order to maximize our critical outlook on our scientific theories, we have to apply the method of science, not only to the hypotheses once they have been formulated, but also to the context of discovery, the context in which these hypotheses have been formulated.<sup>31</sup> Looking at the context of discovery will help us to determine which values are included in the process of discovery and why certain conceptual systems have been favoured.

The values are so ingrained in the way of thinking of the scientific community, that the researchers are not aware of them and, therefore, an effective scientific method should include strategies for making these values stand out.<sup>32</sup> The values that scientists are able to see are those that disagree with their own set of values, which can be the values that other groups of people would embrace if they were doing science. If we want to obtain a knowledge that is objective in a strong sense, then we have also to admit the possibility

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<sup>31</sup> S. Harding claims that " *Scientific method must be understood to begin back in the context of discovery, in which scientific 'problems' are identified and bold hypotheses conjectured*" (1993), p 73.

<sup>32</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 146-147.



that theories embracing a different set of values can be a valuable addition to our current ones. But addition is not always possible if we want to have a coherent vision of reality, we could have rival theories that are contradictory with one another. Therefore, once the diversity has been admitted, then we will have to **arbitrate a process** to decide if there are theories whose values are more desirable than others embodied in different theories. For Harding, the choice is obvious: These who live at the margins have a better critical perspective.

According to Harding, the alternative to objectivism is not epistemological relativism. She claims that enough attention must be paid to different values and interests, given that this can expand our vision and correct ethnocentrism, but that there are some social situations that produce more reliable knowledge than others. She thinks that we have both **rational and scientific grounds**<sup>33</sup> for deciding between two rival theories. She offers a good intuitive example to support that claim: *"women do not have the problem of how to accommodate intellectually both the sexist claim that women are inferior in some way or another and the feminist claim that they are not."*<sup>34</sup>

## 5. The reflexivity of Strong Objectivity

Our intellectual tradition has paid a lot of attention to the study of the formation of false beliefs within the scientific community, mainly by analysing their social origins. Harding requires that science should account for how all beliefs,<sup>35</sup> and not just those that are considered to be false, are socially formed. She shares this project with the followers of the Strong Program in the Sociology of Knowledge. However, there are differences between strong objectivity and the Strong Program in the Sociology of Knowledge: Harding points out that they do not provide an account of the sociological causes of their own production of knowledge. She claims that it is not possible to obtain objective knowledge without this element of **reflexivity** being present.

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<sup>33</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 152.

<sup>34</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 154.

<sup>35</sup> S. Harding explains how the weak program of the sociology of knowledge is different to that put forward by her and by the strong program in the sociology of knowledge because they did not think that it was necessary to analyse the beliefs that were accepted, for instance, why Copernican astronomy or Newtonian mechanics were taken to be true. (1991), p 166.



Reflexivity is a central feature in Harding's account of objectivity. When she insists on the analysis of the context of discovery as a condition *sine qua non* for objectivity, she is also aiming at taking the subject of knowledge as an object of scientific analysis. She says that *"The notion of 'strong objectivity' conceptualizes the value of putting the subject or agent of knowledge in the same critical, causal plane as the object of her or his inquiry. It permits us to see the scientific as well as the moral and political advantages of this way of trying to achieve a reciprocal relationship between the agent and object of knowledge."*<sup>36</sup>

The scientist, as bearer of values, must be aware or must be made aware of **how she is influencing her picture of science with background beliefs**. Given that these values are invisible to her, it is necessary that someone who does not share these values points them out to her. The same holds for scientific theories. But how can we detect these biases or background beliefs in scientific theories? By looking at how and by whom they have been developed. For instance, given that most science has been produced by males, there is a fair chance that some gender bias is present in it. According to Harding, the best way of detecting the sexist biases in science is to start from women's lives.

If we listen to the testimonies of women who have to live their lives by trying to match their perceptions of reality with theories that do not always fit, we will be aware that there are biases in these theories. As Harding says, *"starting from the perspective of women's lives makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry."*<sup>37</sup> By exploring why these theories do not seem to fit with the experiences of women, we will problematize our current theories, which is the beginning of any serious scientific inquiry. As I have already argued, we should pay attention to the perspective of others in order to see the bias in our own perspective, and in order to focus our inquiries in the right directions. We have to take into account two things when we become involved in this exercise, the first one is that we have to take the view of the other critically, given that all points of view are biased, we should not just accept what it is said uncritically.

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<sup>36</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 161.

<sup>37</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 150.



Second, in this exercise, we have to be aware of how their way of being in the world relates to our own way of being in the world.<sup>38</sup>.

I agree with Harding's claim that the first condition for aiming at a strong objectivity is to take into account the point of view of others, without forgetting to take it critically, that is, I agree that strong objectivity necessitates reflectivity. I even agree with Harding when she goes a bit further and claims that, in order to obtain a more objective, non sexist science, we should begin our research from the lives of others. I agree with her because we know that there are sexist values present in science and, if we want to make those values visible, then everybody, even those who are not women, have to take into account the testimonies of women in order to get more objective theories.

Nevertheless, this is not the only reading of her "beginning from the lives of women". There is a stronger interpretation of Harding's theory with which I disagree: Harding claims that everybody can produce knowledge from the lives of women **as well as women themselves do**. I will argue that there are limits to the type of knowledge that we can obtain from the lives of others and that there are types of knowledge that can only be produced by those actually living those lives.

## 6. Grounding Knowledge on Women's lives

It is difficult to know how can we begin the research from the lives of the others. At first sight, researching from the lives of the others seems to present at least two important problems. First, we have not had their experiences, we have not lived their lives and, second, we look at them with distorted perceptions of what they are, we bring into our view of them our own preconception of what they are.

Harding says that the subject of feminist liberatory knowledge must be the subject of every other liberatory knowledge. Among other things, this implies that feminist women can produce knowledge from the perspective of other marginal groups, but also that *"men in those movements be able to generate original feminist knowledge from the perspective of*

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<sup>38</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 151.



women's lives as, for example, J.S.Mill, Marx and Engels, Frederick Douglas, and later male feminists have done."<sup>39</sup> It is not just that they can generate knowledge by taking into account the lives of women but, rather, that they can produce feminist knowledge from women's lives: *"Men, too, must contribute distinctive forms of specifically feminist knowledge from their particular social situation. Men's thought, too, will begin first from women's lives in all the ways that feminist theory, with its rich and contradictory tendencies, has helped us all- women as well as men- to understand how to do."*<sup>40</sup>

The fact that men have not had women's experiences is not a problem for Harding. She claims that all women have women's experiences but not all women produce feminist knowledge out of them, some historical conditions have to be met in order to produce that sort of knowledge. Women's experiences are not sufficient for producing feminist knowledge and, in Harding view, are not necessary either *"it is not necessary to have any particular form of human experience in order to learn how to generate less partial and distorted belief from the perspective of women's lives. It is 'only' necessary to learn how to overcome- to get a critical, objective perspective on- the 'spontaneous consciousness' created by thought that begins in one's dominant social location."*<sup>41</sup>

Therefore, it is not necessary to have had the same experiences that women have had in order to be able to generate knowledge from the lives of women. Still, it seems to me that it is difficult to understand how to generate knowledge from the lives of others. I think that there are at least two different ways in which this could be interpreted:

1. **The first sense** is that I can change my own perceptions about, for instance, being coloured, by engaging in a dialogue about race with a person from a different race. Or we can be enlightened by reading the testimonies and arguments of women who belong to different racial groups. For instance, reading an article by Helen (charles),<sup>42</sup> a black feminist woman, I realized that I- a white woman- am also coloured, something that semantically sounds incorrect in Spanish, but that it is correct once you think about it. I

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<sup>39</sup> S. Harding (1993), p 66.

<sup>40</sup> S. Harding (1993), p 67.

<sup>41</sup> S. Harding, (1991), p 286-7.

<sup>42</sup> H.(charles) (1992).



have changed some beliefs by reading the arguments of another feminist woman and by thinking critically about my own beliefs. In a sense, I have generated some knowledge about belonging to a particular race by confronting two different sets of beliefs.

The work of Dorothy Smith illustrates this first interpretation of “starting from the lives of women”. She explains how, starting from the experiences of women, we can ask new critical questions about “*not only those women’s lives, but also about men’s lives and, most importantly, the causal relations between them.*”<sup>43</sup> If we begin thinking from women’s lives “*we (anyone) can see that women are assigned the work that men do not want to do for themselves.*”<sup>44</sup> Looking at the lives of women, we can begin to question our current institutions and the accounts that we give of them, and this questioning will lead to less partial and distorting accounts of reality,<sup>45</sup> which can benefit not only women, but also the rest of society.

In that limited sense, I agree with Harding when she says that “*it is starting from a contradictory social position that generates feminist knowledge.*”<sup>46</sup> From this assertion we can infer that “*The lives that provide the starting points for African American thought will then also be providing the starting points for feminist, socialist, gay ad lesbian, and other emancipatory thought.*”<sup>47</sup> I have an obligation to look at the lives of those who have been marginalized if I want to have a more objective knowledge about what being coloured is, or what being a woman in a patriarchal society is, for instance. In chapter 3 I examined the relation between the development of individual and collective identities. In addition, in section 8 I will support the idea that our identity is formed in relation to the identity of others, with whom we develop relationships. This implies that I cannot understand what it entails to be a white south European woman unless I know what being a black northern woman entails. Also, Harding thinks that having experienced any form of oppression helps in producing knowledge from the lives of other oppressed people, even if the reasons of oppression are different. As an example, she says that oppressed groups “*are part of the multiple subject or agent of every emancipatory thought. Thus it is not only African*

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<sup>43</sup> S. Harding (1993), p 55.

<sup>44</sup> S. Harding (1993), p 55.

<sup>45</sup> S. Harding (1993), p 55.

<sup>46</sup> S. Harding (1993), p 66.

<sup>47</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 287



Americans who must have the obligation to generate knowledge from the perspective of African American lives."<sup>48</sup> In this sense, I agree with Harding when she claims that even those who have always been privileged can take responsibility for their historical identity and learn how to generate knowledge from the lives of others. This is a painful and difficult task of critical reflection, because is not sufficient to repeat the words of a feminist in order to be considered one.<sup>49</sup>

2. There is a **second, stronger, interpretation** of Harding's claim that it is possible to produce knowledge from the lives of others. Harding thinks that thinking from the lives of others amounts to producing knowledge from their perspectives: *"Some men have clearly been able to think- at least occasionally- from the perspective of women's lives rather than from the immediately available understanding of their own lives."*<sup>50</sup> I disagree with this stronger interpretation, I think that thinking from the lives of women has clear limitations. First of all, nobody can see from the perspective of another. Second, even if this were possible, the one that is parasitic, will bring his own perspective into the new perspective, because you cannot become unlocated and disembodied and put yourself, with virgin eyes, in the perspective of the other. You cannot escape the "immediately available understanding" of your own life and make your knowledge claims from the perspective of women's lives if you are a man. From the point of view of strong objectivity this is not even conceivable, given that one of the theses that underlies Harding's position is that all knowledge is inescapably located. Also, occupying certain positions, people have epistemic advantages that are not available unless you actually live the lives of others.

Harding herself admits that feminist standpoint will allow us to see the gap between the current conceptualization of the world and the world as it is lived by oppressed people.<sup>51</sup> I have already argued that, unless you have a particular way of living, you cannot be aware

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<sup>48</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 287.

<sup>49</sup> S. Harding claims that "A functioning antiracist- one who can pass 'competency tests' as an antiracist- must be an actively thinking antiracist, not just a white robot 'programmed' to repeat what blacks say." (1991), p 291.

<sup>50</sup> S. Harding (1991), p 252.

<sup>51</sup> "Feminist standpoint epistemology focuses on the scientific and epistemological importance of the gap between the understanding of the world available if one starts from lives of people in the exploited, oppressed, and dominated groups and the understanding provided by the dominant conceptual schemes." S. Harding (1991), p 276.



of that sort of gap. To a certain extent, you can be made aware of the gap by being given information in a propositional way. Nevertheless, if there is a gap between the conceptual scheme widely accepted and the world as it is understood by people belonging to oppressed groups, the oppressed group has to make the pertinent transformations in the conceptual system in order to be able to transmit their perceptions! Someone who does not belong to the group will not be able to see the gap, rather, he will have to be told.

On the one hand I agree that trying to understand the point of view of other, you can see the flaws in your own perspective, you can have a partial criticism of your own theory. On the other hand, you cannot create new metaphors or models to reflect the new order, you need to live the lives of marginalized people in order to do that. Being a man, you can produce the sort of knowledge claims that come from understanding propositions about women's lives, but you will not be able to produce the kind of knowledge that is grounded in living as a woman.

Harding supports further her assertion that those from the centre can generate knowledge as if they were in the margins, by claiming that men can be outsiders within. The role of the outsider within is central for Harding, and she considers that it is an epistemic role that can be learned, so men can become outsiders within in relation to women's lives if they develop a critical attitude towards their own claims of knowledge. The problem with this claim is that, in order to be an outsider within, you have to be a member of the community in the first place. So black women are outsiders within the broader women's community, and they can be so because they have been marginalized members of the women's movement, but men have not been in the same position, therefore they cannot be outsiders within.

Summarizing, we cannot produce knowledge from a perspective that is not our own but, given that any knowledge claims should be the product of critical self-reflection, if we want them to be objective we have to be able to enter into a dialogue with different epistemic communities. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we can produce knowledge from the lives of others in the same way in which they do it. The situation is clearly expressed by an example used in section 4.2: According to Hill-Collins, a white woman



cannot produce black feminist thought but, taking the assertions made by black women on the subject seriously, she can produce a non-racist knowledge from her own standpoint. At the same time, black feminist knowledge also has need of this dialogue in order to be fully developed. This should not make us forget that, in order to produce black feminist thought, black women have to be at the centre of its production.<sup>52</sup> Therefore I think, in disagreement with Harding, that men can produce non-sexist knowledge, but only from their own perspective.

## 7. Starting from the lives of others.

I have disagreed with a strong interpretation of what it means to ground knowledge on the lives of others, i.e., seeing from their perspectives, but I agree with a weaker interpretation of Harding's claim: the collaboration with other epistemic groups is necessary in order to have a reflective point of view and, therefore, a strong objectivity. Still, there are two different ways in which this weak interpretation can be implemented, both valuable, but I will argue that one of them is more productive than the other.

Harding advocates (as Hill Collins and Haraway also do) that a responsible engagement with others must produce changes in our outlook on the world. Unless we take into account the views of others about the reasons for their domination, we will never be able to understand how oppression works. Harding insists that all axes of domination are related and that one cannot be eliminated without eliminating the others. So, when she claims that the subject of a liberatory group must also be the subject for all the others, what she is arguing for is that a feminist woman cannot produce liberatory knowledge unless she has engaged with other liberatory sorts of knowledge and critically reassessed her own position. We will find support for this position in the works that I will analyse in the following sections. The importance of making visible the unacknowledged relations between different communities will be underlined, in the sense that, unless we are made aware of how these relations of exclusion affect everybody (not only those marginalized

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<sup>52</sup> "Other groups cannot produce Black feminist thought without African -American women. Such groups can, however, develop self-defined knowledge reflecting their own standpoints. But the full actualization of Black feminist thought requires a collaborative enterprise with Black women at the center of a community based on coalitions among autonomous groups" P. Hill-Collins (1990). p 36.



by society) we will not be able to make sense either of other communities or of our own.

In the following sections I will have a close look at the problems that we have to solve when we intend to get into a dialogue or exchange between the members of different epistemic communities with the aim of obtaining a more reliable epistemic stance. I will explore different ways of establishing and developing the exchange. Let us keep in mind that I agree with Harding on the general point that we need a critical perspective of our own theories that is only available with the help of others, but that I disagree with Harding on the means to obtain it. I will argue for a strong objectivity based on reflexivity but not grounded on starting from the lives of others, in Harding's stronger sense.

How should this engagement between different groups take place to get the best results? How can we start from the lives of others? There are several models that can illustrate how we can start from the lives of others, and I am going to analyse some of them. My aim will be to develop a model in which we can respect difference while trying to find a coherent voice. I have argued that we cannot live the life of the other, that we cannot see from their perspective but, still, I want to be able to develop a relationship with the other that brings me as close as possible to her, in an effort to understand her perspective and in order to assess my own. Developing my project, I will also expose the many problems that understanding others implies and try to give a solution to at least some of them.

## **8. Lugones on world traveling.**

The work of Lugones has been very influential in the latest productions of feminist epistemologists, particularly her notion of world traveling. She thinks that we can all inhabit more than one world and, also, that we can travel to the world of others. Inhabiting a world is very similar to belonging to a particular epistemic community. I will explain the two senses of world traveling by using Lugones' own examples.

1.1 Lugones is aware that she can be defined as playful or serious by people who know her in different "worlds". She felt puzzled by those contradictory definitions of herself because she thought she could really be both, depending on the situation. When she travels



form one world to another, she adapts to the circumstances and shows different aspects of herself. This is an experience common to all of us, but she claims that is particularly acute for those who are outsiders to the mainstream because “ *the outsider has necessarily acquired flexibility in shifting from the mainstream construction of life where she is constructed as an outsider to the other constructions of life where she is more or less ‘at home’.*”<sup>53</sup> A clear example of this world traveling is the way in which one relates to stereotypes of race. For instance, she explains how latinos are expected to be “intense”, and how in her case, this is a trait of her own character. Therefore, when she characterizes herself as intense, she knows that she is not intense because she is latina but, rather, because she is Maria Lugones. When she describes herself as fitting the stereotype she is, at the same time, distancing herself of it, making an ironic use of the description.

1.2. Her ambiguity is described as survival rich. The continuous world traveling as a survival strategy (this practice becomes compulsory sometimes) allows those who live outside the mainstream to acquire skills that pass unacknowledged. The traveler has to become aware of how she is perceived by others, in order to survive. World traveling is compulsory for those on the margins, is born out of necessity, but it can be done by those at the centre as well.

This type of world traveling that I have described includes others, but it is mainly oriented towards oneself. Lugones was aware that she looked different to different groups of people, and became conscious of traveling between different worlds. The second type of traveling that she talks about is traveling to the world of others.

2. Lugones’ second example is how she traveled to her mother’s world. Lugones considers that, for many years, she did not love her mother properly. Given the conception of love that she was taught to embrace by a patriarchal society, to be loved by her own mother implied that her mother had to be enslaved by her, that her mother had to renounce to herself to satisfy the needs of her daughter. Lugones resented the role model and, therefore, thought that, by loving her mother as such, she was accepting this role for herself in the future. She felt that her relation with her mother was wrong because “*I was taught to practice enslavement of my mother and to learn to become a slave through this*

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<sup>53</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 3.



*practice.*”<sup>54</sup> Lugones realized that she was being unfair to her mother, that she was looking at her from the point of view that a patriarchal society imposed but, also, with the restrictions that her rejection of that type of society imposes. She reconstructed their relationship in a new loving way, by trying to see the world in the way in which her mother was seeing it. She says that “*loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go into my mother’s world.*”<sup>55</sup>

This looking through her mother eyes meant:

2.1 that Lugones had to try to separate her mother from the stereotypes of motherhood imposed on her by the society in which she lived. She had to see her mother in different worlds, just as her mother perceives herself, where she is not defined as a mother. Then Lugones discovered that “*she was not foldable and pliable, that she is not exhausted by the mainstream Argentinian patriarchal construction of her. I came to realize that there are “worlds” in which she shines as a creative being.*”<sup>56</sup> Lugones sees her mother as playing different roles in different worlds, she breaks the rigid pattern that her mother was playing in her eyes. Her mother is not just a mother any longer. Lugones has traveled to her mother’s world by loving her in a proper way, by looking at her without the constructions imposed by what she calls “*arrogant perceivers*”.<sup>57</sup> Lugones is able to make this change in her perspective because she loves her mother and because her motivation was not epistemological but, rather, essentially sentimental.

2.2 Lugones also discovered that her own self perception is different from that which her mother has of her. She says that “*seeing myself in her through traveling to her world has meant seeing how different from her I am in her world.*”<sup>58</sup> This new view of herself allows her to be critical about her own values and see how those affect others.

2.3 She is also made existentially aware that their relation to each other is at the centre of their selves and that they are not intelligible without one another. In this sense, she is able

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<sup>54</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 6.

<sup>55</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 8.

<sup>56</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 18.

<sup>57</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 18.

<sup>58</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 18.



to see through her mother's eyes, simply because they share the same standpoint by having this particular relationship.<sup>59</sup>

Which are the teachings of this world traveling in our relation to other women in general? I think that there are two useful discoveries, first we have to realize how we are all defined in relation to each other, we cannot pretend that we are self contained<sup>60</sup> and, second, that traveling to their worlds is done by getting involved in their ways of life and implies getting to know them and, therefore, loving them.<sup>61</sup> I want to underline that when Lugones says that you can see through the eyes of the others, this does not mean that we can see from their perspective, rather, her position can be summarized by the following quotation: *"The reason why I think that traveling to someone's worlds is a way of identifying with them is because by traveling to their world we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes."*<sup>62</sup>

## 9. World traveling in an academic context.

Fowles' interpretation of Lugones' work is a paradigm of how to use the strategy of world traveling within an academic context. She says that: *"Speaking with and to others across historically and socially constructed barriers enters into the spirit of what Lugones (1987) has called playful "world"-traveling. Speaking with and to entails traveling to the "worlds" of those different from the traveler, either literally or figuratively, through conversing or reading, as "a way of identifying with them [in order*

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<sup>59</sup> She says that "loving my mother also required that I see with her eyes, that I go to my mother's world, that I see both of us as we are constructed in her world, that I witness her own sense of herself from within her world. Only through this traveling to her 'world' could I identify with her because only then could I cease to ignore her and to be excluded and separated from her. (...) We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without his understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated; we are lacking. So traveling to each other's worlds would enable us to be, through loving each other." M. Lugones (1987), p 8.

<sup>60</sup> "Here, I am not particularly interested in cases of White women's parasitism onto women of colour but more pointedly in cases where the failure of identification is the manifestation of the relation. I am particularly interested here in those many cases in which White/Anglo women do one or more of the following to women of colour: they ignore us, ostracise us, render us invisible, stereotype us, leave us completely alone, interpret us crazy. All of this while we are in their midst. The more independent I am, the more independent I am left to be. Their world and their integrity do not require me at all. There is no sense of self-lost in them for my own lack of solidity. But they rob me of my solidity through indifference, an indifference they can afford and which seems sometimes studied." M. Lugones (1987), p 7.

<sup>61</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 17.

<sup>62</sup> M. Lugones (1987), p 17.



*to] understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Only when we have traveled to each other's worlds are we fully subjects to each other".*<sup>63</sup>

I think that Fowles' interpretation over intellectualizes the process of world traveling, forgetting that one of the central elements of world traveling is getting actually involved in the ways of life of the other and, also, developing a relationship based on love and friendship. She argues that you can travel to the world of others and, therefore, see yourself through their eyes merely by engaging in a conversation with them or by reading their works. Even if I agree that reading and speaking are very important vehicles for trying to understand others and that they can produce important changes in our views of the world, I think that this is a misrepresentation of Lugones' work. I think that the type of relationship that Lugones is trying to promote is more complex than the one suggested by Fowles, and therefore, I think that the kinds of world traveling for which each is arguing are very different. Fowles' description of the process of world traveling involves only an intellectual exercise and, even if understanding others is an intellectual process, it also necessitates getting involved with them on more levels, rather than just intellectually.

In her article, Fowles claims that the world traveling can be done by reading and publishing.<sup>64</sup> She also says that reading the work of other feminist scholars can make us *"feel a need and desire to join the struggle to change structures that oppress some in part by privileging others in part."*<sup>65</sup> Even if I agree with Fowles in the motivational value of the exchange of theories, I still do not think that this reading is enough in order to enable us to see the world through the eyes of others, or to travel to each other's worlds in the way in which Lugones suggests. There are various reasons to support my view: First, reading the work of other feminist scholars, however open minded the reader, does not amount to understanding what it is like to be the writer, and even less what it is to be ourselves in their eyes. Second, this form of world traveling is not going to take us to very remote places, only people who are already in a determinate word get to publish in

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<sup>63</sup> D. L. Fowles (1997), p 110.

<sup>64</sup> "Thus, if others both similar and different from the writers respond through reading these complex identity narratives, through speaking with and to these narrators, and through joining in strategically chosen political actions, then together these writers/narrators and readers/responders can build the coalitions we choose to build." D. L. Fowles (1997), p 121.

<sup>65</sup> D. L. Fowles (1997), p 121.



journals or produce monographs, and those who read them are already in that world as well. Third, world traveling by reading the work of others presupposes the complete sharing of a language, which means that one of the voices is being silenced.

Fowles' attempt to apply the work of Lugones toward improving academic feminism by means of reading and publishing captures just a small part of what world traveling implies and, therefore, it does not deliver the same results. This distribution and sharing of information plays an important role in the formation of theories, but it does not amount to understanding the other in the way in which Lugones suggests.

## 10. Lugones and Spellman: Why talking is not enough.

*"No quiero hablar por ti sino contigo. Pero si no aprendo tus modos y tu los míos la conversacion es solo aparente."*<sup>66</sup>

In this section I will analyse some of the most important problems of epistemic exchanges, some of which I have already hinted at in the previous section. Feminist theory has showed the importance of listening to those who have remained silent in the construction of our common view of the world. The theorists have argued that, unless we listen to women's voices, there are parts of the world that will not be represented adequately. One of the aims in this thesis is to show how it can be argued that women have experiences inadequately captured by our common conceptual systems.<sup>67</sup> Within the women's group we can find significant differences, so it is important to listen to all voices, because the variety of opinions *"invites some further directions in the exploration of women's lives and discourages or excludes others."*<sup>68</sup> One of the results of broadening the participation of different groups of women, is that we have realized how women who belong to privileged groups show more interest than those belonging to minorities in engaging in conversation about their different views of life. Oppressed groups within the women's

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<sup>66</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 573.

<sup>67</sup> *"One experiences life in terms of the impoverished and degrading concepts others have found it convenient to use to describe her. We can't separate lives from the accounts given of them; the articulation of our experience is part of our experience."* M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 574.

<sup>68</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 574.



communities are aware of the political value of articulating their own experiences<sup>69</sup> and making them available to the society as a whole, but at the same time, have also grown suspicious of the methods proposed by privileged groups for doing it. It has been proposed that in order to understand the other, we must get involved in a dialogue with different groups. However, this approach has been criticized by different oppressed groups, for the following reasons:

First of all, as I have already argued, we are aware that there are experiences that cannot be captured by a common language. This is made more evident when there is a group that shares those experiences and whose first language is different from the one spoken by the rest of the society. Experiences that can be expressed in a particular language might be untranslatable into another : *“we and you do not talk the same language. When we talk to you we use your language: the language of your experience and of your theories. We try to use it to communicate to our world experience. But since your language and your theories are inadequate in expressing our experiences, we only succeed in communicating our experience of exclusion.”*<sup>70</sup>

There is a clear asymmetry between what the common language can express and the experiences of latin women, which is parallel to that felt by women in general when raised within a patriarchal conceptual system, which defines males' experiences as universal. The inadequacy of universal discourses is also acutely felt by women belonging to non ruling classes when feminist theories try to speak in the name of all women. As Lugones puts it very clearly, in order to survive, las hispanas have to inhabit the world of white american women and learn their ways: *“we have to learn your culture and thus your language and self-conceptions.”*<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, *“in fact just in order to survive, brown and black women have to know a lot more about white/anglo women- not through the sustained contemplation theory requires, but through the sharp observation stark exigency demands.”*<sup>72</sup> So even if, apparently, there is a shared conception of the world, latinas get to know more about the world than their white counterparts, and also have access to a

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<sup>69</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983) claim that *“the articulation of experience (in myriad ways) is among the hallmarks of a self-determining individual or community.”* p 574.

<sup>70</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p575.

<sup>71</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p576.

<sup>72</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 575.



view of the world that is not accessible to them. The asymmetry stays in place even when there is an intention of mutual understanding on the part of the privileged group, because *"there is nothing that necessitates that you understand our world: understand, that is, not as an observer understand things, but as a participant, as someone who has a stake in them and understand them"*<sup>73</sup>

So the first difficulty for engaging in a dialogue is that the common language does not belong to both parties equally. And that distorts the experiences of some women.<sup>74</sup> The second difficulty is that, in order to understand the world inhabited by the latinas, white women should participate in it, get involved in their way of living in the same way that latinas have to participate in the lives of the ruling classes, but latinas are not happy to oblige, because they have been approached too many times as objects of study without getting anything in exchange, rather, being left more confused than before. Lugones and Spellman insists that understanding another does not amount to having information about them or theorizing about them. In order to understand others, one should immerse oneself in their world, which is different from adopting the stance of the researcher untouched by the source of knowledge *"the suggestion made here is that if white/anglo women have to understand our voices, they must understand our communities and us in them.(...) from within friendship you may be moved by friendship to undergo the very difficult task of understanding the text or our cultures by understanding our lives in our communities."*<sup>75</sup> In this task, the outsider also has to reconsider her role in respect to that other world, become aware of her own identity and be open-minded.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 576.

<sup>74</sup> *"None of the feminist theories developed so far seem to me to help Hispanas in the articulation of our experience. We have a sense that in using them we are distorting our experiences. Most Hispanas cannot even understand the language used in these theories- and only in some cases the reason is that the Hispana cannot understand English. We do not recognize ourselves in these theories. They create in us a schizophrenic split between our concern for ourselves as women and ourselves as Hispanas, one that we do not feel otherwise."* M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 576.

<sup>75</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 581.

<sup>76</sup> *"This learning calls for circumspection, for questioning of yourselves and your roles in your own culture. It necessitates a striving to understand while in the comfortable position of not having an official calling card (as 'scientific observers' of our communities have), it demands recognition that you do not have the authority of knowledge; it requires coming to the task without ready-made theories to frame our lives. This learning is then extremely hard because it requires openness (including openness to severe criticism of the white/anglo world), sensitivity, concentration, self questioning, circumspection."* M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 581.



I will argue, with Lugones, that in order to be able to understand the experiences that members of other groups have undergone, it is necessary to participate in their way of life and to introduce changes in our own conceptual system in order to accommodate those experiences. But how can we come to understand the meaning of the experiences of others? There are many ways in which we can try to make sense of the experiences of others, but the one that is favored by Lugones and Spellman is that in which there is a **genuine dialogue** between the two parties, in which both are **insiders and outsiders in each others' systems**.<sup>77</sup> As Lugones and Spellman say: "*It should be clear that it does not consist in a passive immersion in our cultures, but in striving to understand what it is that our voices are saying. Only then can we engage in a mutual dialogue that does not reduce each one of us to instances of the abstraction called 'woman'.*"<sup>78</sup> So the point is not just to go the world of the other but also to get the other into your world. It is also important to pay careful attention to the motivation for such a study. The only respectable motivation is that it will benefit those whose experiences or lives are being studied.

Summarizing, we are looking for ways in which to produce more objective theories of the world, and we have argued that listening to those who are at the margins is important because they have privileged access to certain aspects of the world and, also, because they can point out biases in our own theories. But we have encountered various difficulties in pursuing this project: the first one is that this ideal puts too much weight on the merely intellectual understanding of the other, without taking into account that, in order to understand, it is also necessary to become emotionally involved with the other. The second difficulty is that it postulates a false distance between ourselves and others. It does not allow us to recognize how much their situation defines our own. The third difficulty that we have to face is the asymmetry of our exchange; in all cases there is a party who has more power than the other, the one who belongs to the ruling group is the one whose

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<sup>77</sup> "Our suggestion in this paper, and at this time it is no more than a suggestion, is that only when genuine and reciprocal dialogue takes place between 'outsiders' and 'insiders' can we trust the outsider's account. At first sight it may appear that the insider/outsider distinction disappears in the dialogue, but it is important to notice that all that happens is that we are now both outsider and insider with respect to each other. The dialogue puts us both in position to give a better account of each other's and our own experience. Here we should again note that white/anglo women are much less prepared for this dialogue with women of colour than women of colour are for dialogue with them in that women of colour have had to learn white/Anglo ways, self-conceptions, and conceptions of them." M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 577.

<sup>78</sup> M. Lugones and E. Spellman (1983), p 581.



language and or culture is shared by both parties, and this is the one who imposes the common view of the world, so there are a set of experiences that cannot be expressed. Those experiences can only be shared by sharing a way of life but, even if the one belonging to the privileged group wants to join the underprivileged, there is still a natural resistance to accepting her in the community. Why should the community accept him/her?

We have established that a set of conditions have to be spelled out in order to obtain a fair exchange in which both the motivations of the “researcher” and the personal relation that is established with the members of the community are of central importance. The picture that is beginning to emerge is different from the one with which we began: it emphasizes a more holistic involvement, the end result of our search will be that our view of the world will be changed. The “other” is not there solely to provide us with a set of useful criticisms, but rather, a personal involvement with a different community will make us change our own perspective. Let’s us explore this process in more detail.

## 11. Seller on traveling the world.

A serious engagement with the position of the other is only viable if we share their world. But this project has difficulties to overcome, as the work of A.Seller illustrates very clearly. I am going to analyse her work closely because she encountered many of the difficulties that I have already listed, and she attempted to surpass them in effective ways.

A. Seller is a white, British, single philosopher who was invited to lecture in an Indian university. She was committed to what she called Democratic epistemology which does not privilege the view of intellectually educated women, but rather, considers that everybody’s experiences are equally valid, and believed that the best way of enhance our picture of reality is to listen to others and compare “*experiences and beliefs with others who share at least some of our meanings and values.*”<sup>79</sup> She thought that her visit to the Indian university would be especially fruitful because their differences would provide a very fertile ground for discussion. Her own views on knowledge supported her expectations: “*Thus knowledge is not so much an achievement as a process, an ongoing*

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<sup>79</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 230.



*engagement in a conversation with a community in which we both discover and recreate our world. With these views, I assumed that our first talk would be to set an agenda and exchange reading materials.*”<sup>80</sup>

As many other feminists interested in epistemological questions, her expectations were that she would engage in a constructive dialogue with her colleagues and students in India and that both parties would benefit from the exchange. As we have already seen, her expectations fit well with that of a member of a privileged class (an academic in a western university) who believes that the “other” is going to be willing to engage in a dialogue on her own terms and that both will benefit from it. Nevertheless, her experience was very different from what she expected. The following are some of the difficulties that she encountered:

The first difficulty was that the expectations of the women in the Indian university were very different from her own. They wanted her to lecture in a traditional way and were not interested in discussing the theories from their own tradition. They did not want to talk about their personal experiences, and rejected this particular tendency of Western feminism <sup>81</sup> because they considered it to be too individualistic and self-centred, supporting an ideal of autonomy that clashed with their own values of community and family. This was closely related to their lack of interest in theoretical issues, given that they considered that universities must be pragmatic institutions, providing appropriate solutions to practical problems <sup>82</sup> in order to benefit the community. Equally, their main interest was not critical, they did not want to change structures, *“they saw their own activity as a continuation of reform by government, in full co-operation with, and often initiated by men.”*<sup>83</sup> In previous sections I have explained how common this attitude is within academic feminism, it is taken for granted that it is desirable to engage in theoretical discussions with people from other groups, without thinking that they might not find this necessary or desirable.

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<sup>80</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 231.

<sup>81</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 234.

<sup>82</sup> A. Seller (1994), p235.

<sup>83</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 235.



Second, she found that even if they both spoke English, in important ways they did not share the same world, so they had problems of understanding.: *“Now the problem of the feminist philosopher abroad looms clearly. If she does not know or understand the culture that she visits, does not understand it conceptually, how can she work? I spent a lot of time simply not understanding how the concepts worked, what meaning words had in this changed context (...) We had to create and recreate a vocabulary between us, explaining and re-explaining our terms to each other, with no agreed canon to work upon, particularly since I was resisting their pressure to base our discussions on western feminist texts.”*<sup>84</sup>

Finally, she recognized that the dialogue was not possible because they did not share the same values and because there were important issues about power that were not acknowledged. Given that I have already explored the other two difficulties in former sections, I will focus now on the last one:

She had to confront the fact that there were inequalities of power in their relationship and that their relationship was heavily mediated by their common history, as the coloniser and the colonised. Also, given the structure of university education in India, the dialogue that she was aiming at was almost impossible. It was not a dialogue between equals, in the sense that she was in a position that allowed to her to impose her own views on the way in which their relationship developed. On the one hand, she admitted the necessity of engaging in a dialogue about their different values but, given her position as British in India, she felt she had no right to interfere.<sup>85</sup> While, on the other hand, her daily engagement with her colleagues meant that she had to make judgements and intervene!<sup>86</sup> For instance, she perceived the university in India as an authoritarian<sup>87</sup> institution that precludes dialogue, therefore, she considered that, in order to understand her colleagues there, she had to challenge their structures. But then she found out that, by insisting on a certain approach to dialogue and exchange, she was actually inhibiting a dialogue.<sup>88</sup> She describes the situation in the following terms: *“I failed to notice that the form of*

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<sup>84</sup> A. Sellar (1994), p 232.

<sup>85</sup> A. Sellar (1994), p 232.

<sup>86</sup> A. Sellar (1994), p 233.

<sup>87</sup> A. Sellar (1994), p 237.

<sup>88</sup> A. Sellar (1994), p 238.



*discussion I aspired to was an idealisation of western liberalism. I had unwittingly fallen into seeing the women in the seminar as radically "other", paralleling this with an unreflective ideal of autonomous thought as wholly independent of outside influences, whilst being highly critical of both these positions in the abstract."* <sup>89</sup> Finally, she was acutely aware that they had different values that could not be discussed, only acknowledged. She expresses her feelings very clearly in the following quotation: *"When equals set about trying to change each other's minds, something like dialogue emerges; indeed the difficulties I have written of seemed to imply that dialogue is only achievable between peers within a community of shared values. Not only were we not equal, but we seemed not to share those very values which I deemed essential for meaningful dialogue"*<sup>90</sup>

Did Seller surpass the difficulties listed above and get to any useful level of understanding? She was actually able to have glimpses into their lives, she was able to engage with them occasionally. But not in the ways that she expected, and not in the terms that she expected. She puts it very clearly when she says that *"The situation was saved, I suspect, only because of relationships outside the seminar."*<sup>91</sup> The communication emerged in contexts other than the classroom, and sometimes was not verbal. For instance, she learned what *awareness creation* is, not by discussing the concept with her colleagues in the university, but rather by visiting GANDHIGRAM where she discovered that *"at MTVU, the justification lay in what can be done for the group that has been studied."*<sup>92</sup>

A. Seller discovered the importance of being involved into the other's way of living as much as possible, in order to understand the other. She reached an understanding by sharing experiences with the Ghanaian workers, by sharing emotions and efforts. For instance, after she lived there for a few days, was able to explain to the Indian students that the feminist ideal of autonomy (which they loathed) was in actual fact more similar to their conception of *swarej* than to the concept of egoism. She realised that understanding was not based on dialogue but on shared ways of life *"What I was discovering was a way*

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<sup>89</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 240.

<sup>90</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 240.

<sup>91</sup> A. Seller (1994), p, 240.

<sup>92</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 236.



*of being with others whose immediate understandings were not my own. This required a full engagement, with all of my skills and values in play, helping me to feel my way.*"<sup>93</sup>

By engaging in personal relations with the women in the university, she felt more comfortable in passing judgement about their conflicting values: *"the friendships I made, my engagement in and responsiveness to their lives necessarily involved my emotions and concerns, my values. To feel your way through a countryside, you must have feelings."*<sup>94</sup>

For instance, she realised that it was not constructive to critique their way of life continuously, because this implied the imposition of a western way of thinking. Also, she began to analyse her own beliefs (is arranged marriage that bad, after all?).<sup>95</sup> She still wanted them to attain a critical perspective on their institutions by engaging in a dialogue but, at the same time, realised that by resisting her desires, they made her aware that she was using her own power to manipulate their relationship: she was wrongly *"simply persuaded of my right to determine the quality of our exchanges, behaving like a teacher whilst refusing to be one, and actually teach."*<sup>96</sup>

Her initial tendency to not pass judgement was changed when she developed closer relationships with her colleges, now *"Sometimes when I did not understand, I thought that they simply had different values to mine, without any inclination to judge."*<sup>97</sup> She recognised the appeal of their position, she could not apply those values to her own life. Other times, she as a feminist, simply could not share their values, but she also realised that even if they would support them in public, in private they would also have doubts about them.<sup>98</sup>

The main lesson that we can draw from Seller's experience is something that has already been discussed in relation to the work of other feminist academics, and this is that *"A dialectic was underway, of friendship, shared concerns and political alignments. I was not in dialogue with a system of thought, not even with an institution. (...) I am not simply*

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<sup>93</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 245.

<sup>94</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 245.

<sup>95</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 239.

<sup>96</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 299.

<sup>97</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 240.

<sup>98</sup> A. Seller (1994), p 241.



*saying: people, not systems, have dialogues. Rather that people engage in the world, developing and changing identities, commitments and concerns. The way that we bear those commitments and concerns determines whether or not dialogue is possible.”*<sup>99</sup>

Instead of a useful dialogue, in which information was exchanged about different theories she found out that the way of getting to understand others is by trying to develop relationships with them and becoming a changed person in the process: *“On my return to Britain, I asked myself ‘how shall I live the rest of my life?’ for I felt that we shared one world. This does not mean thinking about how to solve ‘their’ problems (what can I suggest to improve the income of head-loaders?), but rather rethinking my own problems within a context that includes them ( how can I continue to enjoy my life of wealth in a world that contains head-loaders?).”*<sup>100</sup>

## **12 On building bridges: the protocol of understanding across differences.**

In this section I will put forward a protocol of understanding across differences in which I will try to encompass all the points that I have been making in the former sections. I will rely on the work of S.P Schach and D.Ewin to illustrate and to explain the process.<sup>101</sup>

Steve and Doris, the authors of the work mentioned above, have been engaged in the project of searching for ways in which men can acquire a feminist perspective. Steve is aware that he has to be guided by women in order to obtain this new point of view<sup>102</sup> and he explains how the friendship and companionship of feminist women (not just the theories that they produce) have helped him to step out of his world dominated by patriarchal experiences. Doris points out that even if she has a favorable attitude towards males and their interest in feminism, she is troubled by the asymmetry of their relationship.<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> A. Sella (1994), p 243.

<sup>100</sup> A. Sella (1994), p 247.

<sup>101</sup> On the same line, see U. Narayan (1988).

<sup>102</sup> S. P. Schach and D. Ewin (1997) *“Only women can be midwives in the birth of any sort of feminist consciousness.”* p 161.

<sup>103</sup> S. P. Schach and D. Ewin (1997) *“I recognised the need to work co-operatively with men, but my previous experiences have taught me to proceed with caution. Such relationships are seldom based on equal power.”* p 163.



Unlike Harding, they are aware that men cannot share the same standpoint that feminist women share. They offer a traditional analysis of how women acquired a feminist standpoint and consider that they do it by undergoing certain experiences that men cannot have access to, so the source of a feminist perspective for men has to be different. In this case, they suggest both women and books as the source of this knowledge. Apart from acquiring information, men have to take a few steps in their lives in order to become enlightened by feminism:

*"We propose that there are four basic principles a man should consider addressing and acting upon if he hopes to gain a feminist consciousness: (1) through the reading of feminist works and actually listening to women, he should try to learn about the depth and unjust nature of women's oppression; (2) he should consider asking himself in what ways does he personally, and as a man in general (structurally) , oppress women; (3) he should consider ways to reject traditional notions of masculinity that are oppressive to others and replace them with women and feminism as his referent; ; and in sum (4) he should consider ways to put women's needs as equal to, or even greater than his own."*<sup>104</sup>

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They explore, in some detail, those four points and, in doing so, they express the same sort of worries as we have already seen in other feminist writers. For instance, they realize that men have to re-learn their habits in relation to listening to people, so they analyze the way in which they are relating to one another in the same manner that Seller was careful in engaging in a fair exchange with the women in the Indian university. The way in which we communicate with each other has to be scrutinized and not taken for granted.

They underline that men should be respectful of the opinions expressed, and suggest that when a man is in a female space he should suspend any advice or judgmental attitudes he might have unless he is asked to participate. There is a difference with the work of Seller who thinks that value judgment is appropriate once a relationship based on friendships is formed. They suggest that men should question the ways in which they personally oppress women and should learn to appreciate the traditional values and activities associated to being a woman. Here, we find echoes of Lugones' work, where she insisted that, in any

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<sup>104</sup> S. P. Schach and D. Ewing. (1997). p 169.



relationship, both parties define each other, and that we are supporting the structures of oppression if we do not fight against the way in which the other is defined by these structures (let us remember the way in which she used to relate to her mother, mediated by an androcentric culture). As a result, they argue that males should find new ways of relating to women, here again we find echoes of Lugones' work when she explained how her challenge to the acquired view of her mother made her "love" her mother properly. Another of their recommendations led them to claim that men will be transformed by maintaining this sort of behavior on all occasions, you cannot be feminist just part time. This idea was particularly well expressed by A. Seller, when she claimed that her travel to India made her see her own life in a new light. Finally, they claim that men have to rank women's need as equal to or greater than their own. And this includes respecting women's spaces, giving up their privileges, and waiting to be asked to enter women spaces. They should decline any invitation to activities to which they cannot add anything. We should remember Lugones' recommendations on when a member of any privileged group should enter the communities of those at the margins and how it should be done: she claimed there was a single reason to allow this encounter and this was if it benefited the marginalized group and if it was founded in a relationship grounded in friendship. The world of those who are marginalized should be the main beneficiary of the exchange. They claim that this is the case when men follow the protocol that has been developed above and that, if they do it they can assume a bridge role:

*"A truly feminist oriented man can perform four important functions when he assumes a bridge role: (1) he can educate other men and build a strong foundation for feminist social change among them; (2) he can gain access to settings where women are excluded, and utilising a feminist lens, explore and expose these settings for a larger feminist audience; (3) he can serve as a bridge to the established power structures translating feminist agendas to the 'good old boys', and overall (4) he can provide an important linkage between feminist women and men."*<sup>105</sup>

I think that this is an excellent example to explain how we should take the task of understanding each other, as women approaching other groups of women or in our

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<sup>105</sup> P. Schacht, D. Ewing (1997), p 169.



dealings as feminists with different communities. In the last section of the chapter I will explain how this relates to the question that prompted the analysis: Harding's Strong Objectivity.

### **13. Is Harding's Strong Objectivity a viable project?**

Strong Objectivity has two main goals, first to make visible the values that are embedded in any scientific research, by relying on reflexivity, and second, to begin our research from the lives of marginalized people in order to get a better starting point for our models.

I have agreed with Harding that we get a better critical perspective on our own theories if we listen to the criticisms that people belonging to different groups make and also, if we attempt to understand their own theories and perspectives. But I have argued against Harding's project of beginning our research from the lives of others in any stronger sense. In actual fact, the examples and criticisms that I have brought into the debate seem to suggest the extreme difficulty of engaging in a dialogue with others who belong to different epistemic communities. I have argued that a proper understanding is only possible if we become engaged in the lives of others. And I have underlined the importance of actually doing it, because a metaphoric or imaginary world traveling is insufficient to produce a proper understanding.

I have argued that understanding has to imply more than a mere intellectual exercise, having an emotional link with those whom we are trying to understand seems to be an important factor in the process of understanding, but I have also pointed out how those belonging to marginal groups feel threatened by this invasion of their worlds and consider that it is only justifiable if it is done for their benefit. Also, I have explained how the perspective of marginal groups is not innocent and it has its own problems, so we should not think that we will simply obtain a better view of the world as soon as we become engaged with a different way of life or set of practices. Rather, we will still see the world from our own perspective. Maybe we would have developed new skills that would change slightly our capacity to see new aspects of the world, and maybe we would begin to feel that what appeared familiar is, after all, strange.



Nevertheless, this is a project that has difficulties. Given that there are many epistemic communities, how can we become involved in the ways of life of all of them? To what degree do we have to travel to one another's world? I am aware of the difficulties that this ideal raises, I will try to spell out some problems by introducing the idea that there are several stages in which this exchange can take place:

-There is a level of exchange, on which we are able to talk about our different worlds and to exchange information about them. We can read about the world of others and understand them. We can work in a mixed community environment and be able to exchange points of view. This sort of exchange can even be about practices, (in chapter 4 I explained how, in some cases, those who have a practical knowledge can express it propositionally and can be share it with many others).

-There is another level of exchange, on which two people belonging to different groups express their differing opinions, and the one from the marginalized group is accepted on the basis of trust in their expertise, even when they cannot justify their knowledge in the sense of providing us with a set of propositions, logically linked. For instance, let us imagine that we travel to some country with which we are not familiar and encounter a problem that we have not faced before. The people of that country solve the problem daily and present us with an answer. We would probably accepted without asking them to justify their knowledge. The same can be true in a community in which a marginalized group has developed skills that allow them to solve particular problems. You would accept their expertise. It is importance to notice that you would have to be told (or shown) the solution, you would not be able to see the problem from their point of view.

Unlike the first type of knowledge to which I referred, this type of knowledge, based on the expertise acquired by practices which cannot be justified in a traditional way or verbalized, has been marginalized in our epistemological traditions. Occasionally this has been because we have denied expertise to the sources of this knowledge, not simply because it is grounded on practical knowledge.<sup>106</sup> I suggest that we should alter our

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<sup>106</sup> See L. Alcoff and V. Dalmiya (1993).



epistemological evaluations and re-evaluate knowledge based on experience and practical knowledge in general, promoting especially the knowledge of those who have been kept silent, because this will give us a better critical insight into our own practices and also improve chances for the creation of new theories.

-A different level of dialogue is reached when people from different groups get involved in each other's lives. Then it is possible to acquire new skills and to see our own theories critically without relying only on the judgement of others. Those who belong to the marginalized groups have less to learn because the common culture belong to the ruling groups and it is imposed on them, but they also have to approach their own knowledge critically in order to improve their theories.

Summarizing: strong objectivity is obtained by self-reflectivity and we can get it to a certain point by promoting dialogue between different groups. We can begin our research from the lives of others by listening to their descriptions of their experiences, and by getting involved in their practices, but never by looking at the world from their point of view. Therefore, we should make an effort to integrate as many different perspectives as possible when we are developing new theories, by giving people the possibility of making contributions towards the common theories. We should also try to maximize self-reflection by world traveling.

#### **14. Implications for a feminist epistemology**

The implications for a feminist epistemology will be developed in detail in the following chapters, but I will mention briefly some of them.

I explained in the opening chapter of the thesis how, often, philosophers trying to develop a feminist epistemology have relied on what they have called women's experiences as the grounds for a different epistemology. In the former chapters I have argued that, even if these experiences are not the basis of women as an epistemic group, they can, nevertheless, ground knowledge. I will argue that these experiences are the product of particular practices within communities. The members of different communities develop



different skills, which allow them to organize some aspects of the world in diverse ways. I will discuss to what extent particular types of embodiment preclude subjects engaging in particular communities. We all belong to several different communities, which in this context I will call epistemic communities, and we can make use of the different skills that we acquire by belonging to them while changing from one community to the other. Given that many of those skills are only tacitly known by us, we will not be making an explicit use of them, but rather they will be part of our cognitive make up. Those skills are acquired by having particular ways of living, by performing and understanding diverse practices.

In chapter 5 I claimed that entering the space of reasons is a process closely linked with sharing a particular way of life and with speaking a language. Those who belong to the same community, share a world. But within these communities there are other possible groupings, and the members of these might be able to relate to certain aspects of the world in a different way. Then the common language shows that it is insufficient to capture all aspects of the world as it is experienced by some members of the community. The dissidents, by belonging to a group of people who are able to capture somehow those aspects of the world, might develop ways of articulating what they are perceiving by changing the common language. Some of these changes are comparable to changes of paradigms in the Kuhnian sense, while others are just smaller changes in the use of words. Sometimes the insights acquired by the members of these groups will not be of the kind that can be put into words, and therefore will not be transmissible by any other mean than by joining the practices that are particular to that group. Occasionally, the expertise of those in the know will have to be accepted even if they are not able to explain why they know what they know. I will develop all these claims in more detail in the next two chapters, but now, in order to illustrate my claims, I will rely on two examples taken from feminist writers:

The general arguments in this chapter support the view that women, as a group prone to having particular experiences, are justified in arranging reality in a different way from that generally accepted. For instance, before the creation and spread of the expression “sexual harassment” women who were undergoing situations of that type were lost when trying to



fit those behaviours to the then current descriptions of reality. The conclusion reached in this chapter means that it is possible to validate and justify dissenting views of the world.

The following (fictional) story illustrates how a non-traditional way of research, closely linked to the practices of women, can help to make sense of certain situations better than a more “detached” and supposedly “scientific” one:

A man dies on his remote farm. His wife declares that he died in his sleep. The sheriff goes to the farm, accompanied by another man and both their wives, who go there to collect a few things for the victims' wife who is in prison. While their husbands go around the house following the normal procedures for discovering the truth, the wives reconstructed the story by putting together clues that they collect by wandering around the house. *"their 'knowing-why' is no mere accumulation of facts. This is an effective, multiple-textured knowing, a knowing in depth of aspects of Mrs. Broke's life that are palpable from what these women, her peers, have known of her in the past, and from the analogies they can construct, empathetically, with their own lives."*<sup>107</sup>

Those women are able to see things that their husbands cannot perceive because they have a personal interest in the search, and they can identify with the woman who is being investigated, which is something which is not appropriate in the light of traditional methods for investigating the “truth” in which detachment is desirable in order to promote objectivity, also because they seek the clues both empirically and also affectively, and finally, because their activity is random.<sup>108</sup> The result of the search is that *"out of the bareness and isolation of the farmhouse, with no near neighbors and no telephone, out of their memories of Minnie Burke as a young girl, out of too many things broken, not functioning, destroyed, out of 'trivia', 'trifles' that a standard, formal investigation would pass over without notice, the women read a story of relentless brutality, coldness, and despair. When they find Mrs. Burke's canary with its neck wrung, its cage broken, its body wrapped in pieces of cloth in her quilting box, they have no doubt about who murdered John Burke, and why."*<sup>109</sup> The wives can perceive aspects of the life of Mr. Burke that

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<sup>107</sup> L. Code (1995), p 145.

<sup>108</sup> L. Code (1995), p 146.

<sup>109</sup> L. Code (1995), p 145.



escape their husbands, and by putting all these together, they can guess that she was the one who murdered her husband. They might not be able to produce “objective” proofs for use in a trial, but they guess correctly what happened.



## CHAPTER 8

### 0. Introduction.

In this chapter I will review some of the questions that arose in previous chapters and which are still unresolved. First, I will expand on the concept of expertise, which I mentioned briefly at the end of chapter 7. In my analysis of the relations that are established between agents belonging to different epistemic communities, I argued that there are occasions on which we should accept that the knowledge provided by some epistemic agents is justified on the basis of their expertise. In this chapter I will explain the implications of such a move and I will introduce the concept of virtue epistemology.

In the second part of the chapter I will address issues related to encompassing the inputs of different communities in order to obtain objective knowledge. I will be arguing for a realist pluralist epistemology that avoids relativism. I will rely on the work of Longino and Haraway in arguing my case.

### 1. Knowledge as expertise.

In the last section of the last chapter, I distinguished different levels of exchange between individuals belonging to diverse epistemic communities. The first level to which I referred was an exchange of information, mainly verbal, which did not involve travelling to each other's world. The second level of exchange that I acknowledged was that in which the information provided by one of the groups is accepted as more reliable, on the basis of their expertise, even when they are unable to give reasons for their knowledge. I argued then that we would consider it to be reliable because it is based on community practices and based on experience. The last type of exchange that I considered was that of getting involved in one another's lives. In the following sections I will analyse more closely the second type of knowledge to which I referred, that of expertise, which is attributed on the basis of experience.

I have already said that we should alter our epistemological evaluations and re-evaluate



knowledge based on experience and practical knowledge in general. I have explained how certain knowledge claims have been marginalized because of their sources, being produced by “lesser” epistemic agents or/and because, being based on experiential or practical knowledge, they could not be put into a propositional form. I have pointed out that, in general, knowledge obtained by means other than the application of the scientific method has been considered unreliable, unless their findings have been sanctioned *a posteriori* by science. We have trusted the expertise of scientists and denied the value of knowledge acquired by experience or in a more traditional (and non-scientific) way. I will argue that we should revise our actual concept of expertise, to include those who have acquired their knowledge as a result of an involvement in practices sanctioned by their epistemic groups, even when those practices seem “unscientific”.

Furthermore, I want to take a step further by suggesting that we should develop an epistemology that takes into account the epistemic character of the knowers as another criteria for attributing and justifying knowledge. On some occasions, the knowledge endorsed by experts who are the bearers of particular epistemic virtues should be taken to be justified on the basis of having been obtained from a reliable source. In this way, we will be supporting the knowledge of those who have been kept silent because they were not considered as reliable knowers in a traditional epistemology, given that, now, they could count as experts in their spheres of activity. The acceptance of these knowledge claims will enlarge our body of knowledge, and I believe that this will give us a better critical insight into our own practices, by means of contrasts and, also, improve our chances for the creation of new theories.

## **2. On the concept of expertise.**

In chapter 4 I explained how the body of knowledge that midwives had before the medicalization of childbirth was ignored as soon as the medical establishment developed their own theories. The marginalization of this knowledge was due to several causes. In the first place, it was based on practices and transmitted in a practical way, that is, it was a practical knowledge, as opposed to the new knowledge, which was highly theoretical. Also, it was produced by midwives, who did not have enough “scientific” knowledge and



their training was not validated by the scientific community, the result was that their knowledge was considered to be “Old wives’ tales”. This is just an example of a story that has been repeated again and again, in different spheres of knowledge and with different epistemic groups.

In chapter 2 I explained how, in our epistemic tradition, we have attributed epistemic authority to those who have acquired their knowledge by particular means but, also, and this has been a determinant factor in the exclusion of many, to those who, due to their personal characteristics, can be considered to be reliable epistemic agents. By relying on the work of D. Haraway, I pointed out how it has been stipulated that only certain types of people count as reliable witnesses in science, how their testimony is considered to be acceptable and how many others, women and working class people, were not counted as reliable epistemic agents. M. Jarnack refers to work by Shapin, who explains that the XVIIIth century development of the ideal that gentlemen were reliable epistemic agents is based on a *“long tradition of associating bloodline with intelligence and competence [that] flowed from Aristotle and still prevailed in Tudor and Stuart courtesy literature.”*<sup>1</sup> It was the independence of gentlemen that supposedly allowed them to be disinterested observers, and that precluded women and working class people from being such. Currently, the same criteria apply, because *“if we do not have first-hand knowledge about how reliable, sincere, and honest a person is, we must go on ‘outward signs’”*<sup>2</sup>, and these signs are still linked to the assumptions that we make about people based on their education plus their perceived class, race or gender.<sup>3</sup>

I aim to support an epistemology in which expertise is attributed on different criteria. I agree with the idea that there are two factors to be taken into account when deciding who is to count as an expert: the way in which knowledge has been acquired and, also, the personal characteristics of the epistemic agents. But, by changing our concept of Knowledge in the ways that I have been suggesting, we will also vary the perception of who is to count as a reliable epistemic agent.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Jarnack (1997), p 134.

<sup>2</sup> H. Jarnack (1997), p 135.

<sup>3</sup> H. Jarnack (1997) cites empirical studies to report her assertions.



By revaluing practical, experiential knowledge and not making it reducible to propositional knowledge, and by supporting the view that those who have epistemological privilege are those who are involved in the production of knowledge and who are perceived as “situated” knowers, instead of as external “objective” observers, we will be able to attribute epistemic authority to agents to whom it has been denied.

Scientists are beginning to acknowledge that, in many cases, ignoring the knowledge of those who have acquired it in a traditional way, by being initiated in particular practices, means that they lose their time and their money, funding unnecessary projects. In a recent article in *New Scientist* it is claimed that *“All around the globe, scientists have too often ignored local or traditional understanding of the environment. But biologists are beginning to realise that information amassed over the centuries by indigenous peoples about wildlife, agriculture and medicine can be more accurate than information gained from modern investigation.”*<sup>4</sup> In the same article, Daniel Buckles, a senior scientist with the Canadian government’s International Development Research Centre claims *“Science is standing on the shoulders of centuries of innovation by traditional hunters, healers and farmers.”*<sup>5</sup>

There are a variety of examples that illustrate how scientists have been unable to match the results of non-scientist experts: how geneticists have failed to produce more productive yaks while the indigenous nomadic herdsman of the area have succeeded, plus, at the same time, caring for the environment, or how hill farmers in Honduras have devised a system to fertilize their crops, which scientists have not been able to improve upon. Scientists recognise that if they had paid more attention to what the “real” experts had to say, they would have saved time and money. But how it is possible that the information provided by a non-scientist is more accurate than that provided by a scientist? It has been suggested that this is the case because scientists are constrained by their budget, by their traditional methods of investigation, and are only able to gain a fragmented understanding of their surroundings.

A revaluation of our concept of expertise would allow us to include, as such, knowers

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<sup>4</sup> R. Edwards (1998), p18.

<sup>5</sup> R. Edwards (1998), p18.



who belong to epistemic communities that have traditionally been marginalized. Their input in the development of science is beginning to be considered invaluable, and I believe that science is not the only activity where this sort of knowledge can be useful.

Nevertheless, as I have already argued, we have to approach any epistemic contribution critically, because having good information about a particular issue does not guarantee that the knower is going to make the best use of it<sup>6</sup> and also, there are limits to what reasonably be accepted without any other guarantee apart from that which comes from authority. If we develop an epistemology in which expertise is enough justification for validating certain knowledge claims, we would have to pay more attention to the following questions: given that the expertise is based on practices and is community sanctioned, we should look closely at these processes in order to decide on the reliability of the knowledge. Also, we should learn to recognize good epistemic traits in knowers, given that expertise is mainly the acquisition of certain abilities.

### **3. Knowers as virtuous epistemic agents.**

In this section I am going to argue for a model of virtue epistemology that will allow us to develop the concept of good epistemic character. There is a central issue in virtue ethics that is very relevant for a virtue epistemology of the kind for which I am trying to argue. Most virtue ethics are based on the idea that we can decide what a virtue is if it procures happiness for the others, so the criteria for what is a virtue is its relation to benevolence, which is the virtue “model”. In virtue epistemology, epistemic virtues are such because of their relation to truth. Traditional epistemic virtues are those that we can rely on as sources for true beliefs. There is an alternative virtue ethics<sup>7</sup> that does not have

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<sup>6</sup> In the article quoted above, there are some examples that illustrate that local knowledge has not stopped the population living in particular areas from damaging the environment.

<sup>7</sup> P. Foot (1998) offers some convincing arguments against consequentialism in ethics and provides us with a non-consequentialist virtue ethics. She argues that consequentialism in ethics cannot make sense of the idea of “the best state of affairs”, which is central for it, without making reference to a theory of general welfare, which cannot be justified unless is related to the virtue of benevolence. Furthermore, for a consequentialist theory of virtue we must consider the outcome that virtues produce in order to determine if they are virtues or not. P. Foot's arguments against this kind of ethical theory imply that we have to show first why all virtues should be directed to the promotion of happiness and consider desirable only if this is its end. But it is possible to decide whether or not a virtue is a desirable trait of character without considering its relation to benevolence. She claims that benevolence is a desirable virtue, but *“We have no reason to think that whatever is done with the aim of improving the lot of other people will be*



benevolence as the model for the rest of the virtues. I want to argue for a virtue epistemology that does not use truth as the model for deciding what the way of obtaining reliable beliefs is.

According to a consequentialist theory of epistemic virtues, epistemic virtues are those that will help us to achieve the truth. E. Sosa supports this sort of theory and claims that *"justification emerges from the operation of the epistemic virtues. A belief is justified if it is the product of a reputable epistemic faculty (intuition, memory, perception, reason, introspection)"*<sup>8</sup> and these are epistemic virtues in *"relation to truth as an end that unifies the different virtues."*<sup>9</sup>

I will argue for an epistemology in which truth is not solely the end of our inquiries, and in which justification is not only linked with truth. Therefore, I am very sympathetic to J. Dancy's suggestion that there is a second possibility for deciding what counts as an intellectual virtue. He thinks that we can *"recognize the states of a character trait as a virtue before examining its relation to truth"* and, also, that there are intellectual virtues *"whose status as such does not derive from their relation to truth"* but, rather, *"it derives from consideration of the sort of intellectual being one should be."*<sup>10</sup> He offers examples of character traits that are epistemic virtues and that do not have a relation with the production of truth: intellectual diffidence, curiosity, tolerance. He points out how there are epistemic virtues that are an end in themselves, such as wisdom. In the case of wisdom is clear that it is not its relation to truth that makes it valuable.

In a consequentialist theory of reliabilism, such as the one supported by E. Sosa, the relation between truth and justified belief seems quite straightforward: we have a justified belief when it has been reached through the right method. The question that I have to answer now is how can we have justified beliefs if we switch our attention from the methods of obtaining beliefs to a virtuous life/character? I will rely on C. Hookway's work

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*morally required or even morally permissible.*" (1998), p 235. She adds that benevolence is not the only desirable virtue and that, sometimes, its application clashes with other virtues such as justice. Therefore it is not right to use benevolence- the desire of happiness for other human beings- as the paradigm to decide when an action is right or wrong.

<sup>8</sup> J. Dancy (1995), p 189.

<sup>9</sup> J. Dancy (1995), p 196.

<sup>10</sup> J. Dancy (1995), p195.



to answer this question. He argues for a different use of the term **justification** and claims that *“a general notion of ‘justification’ may have relatively little work to do in a developed account of epistemic evaluation: at best we might say that someone is justified in believing something if their belief issues from responsible and virtuous inquiry. Justified beliefs are those that issue from the responsible inquiries of virtuous inquirers. It is a mistake to put it the other way round: epistemic virtues are those habits and dispositions which leads us to have justified beliefs. The primary focus is on how we order activities directed at answering questions; it is not upon the epistemic status of beliefs.”*<sup>11</sup> Therefore, what is relevant for justifying certain beliefs is having the appropriate epistemic character, which is acquired through the right training: *“I am a good epistemic character if, in general, I treat belief as not needing defence when those beliefs are formed or sustained in ways that make it likely that they are true. So far, we are in agreement with the reliability theory: one goal for education, presumably, is to train people’s epistemic sensibilities so that their instincts about which questions to ask and which to ignore are sound (...) we should be sensitive to the kinds of information that should lead us to doubt current certainties; we should be good at asking the right questions.”*<sup>12</sup>

We could recognise that some knowers, by means of their participation in certain practices of which we have not got much knowledge, have become experts in particular areas of knowledge. In order to decide who counts as such, we have to rely on our perception of who is a reliable epistemic agent, instead of an analysis of the methods that they have used in order to obtain their knowledge. C. Hookway argue that there are certain traits of character that are desirable in order to make good epistemic evaluations. I think that this does not imply that there are epistemic traits that the members of all communities should share in order to count as reliable epistemic agents. I think it improbable because the sort of practices that will make a knower competent in one community do not have to be shared necessarily by the members of another community, which means that knowers will develop different abilities and epistemic virtues. The question of what it is to count as a good epistemic character remains open. But an analysis of what counts or could count as

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<sup>11</sup> C. Hookway (1994), p 225.

<sup>12</sup> C. Hookway (1994), p 221.



one can help us to re-evaluate what counts as a good epistemic trait. I will give an example in section 4.

#### 4. Some undervalued epistemic virtues.

I have pointed out that some forms of knowledge have been marginalized because they were produced by agents who were considered to be unreliable, using methods that were not sanctioned by the ruling communities. V. Camps remarks how the virtues that have been traditionally attributed to women have been considered inferior to those attributed to males.<sup>13</sup> These virtues have actually been rightly attributed to women who acquired them while fulfilling their roles as women in particular societies, but I have already argued that there is nothing essentially “feminine” about any of these “virtues”. V. Camps thinks that we should re-evaluate those virtues that have been marginalized because of their origin.<sup>14</sup> She underlines that the fact that these virtues are the product of subordination should not make us forget that they can have very positive uses.<sup>15</sup>

I will put forward an example of an epistemic trait that has been attributed to women and that has been considered to preclude rational judgement: caring. Traditionally, it has been considered that emotions and feelings will cloud our understanding and, therefore, should be avoided in our rational judgements. M. O. Little defends the importance of the epistemic roles of emotion and desire in gaining moral knowledge. She says that “*there are some truths (...) that can be apprehended only from a stance of cognitive engagement.*”<sup>16</sup> She uses the example of caring for people, a feminine virtue, to show how

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<sup>13</sup> “La subcultura femenina, precisamente por su inferioridad con respecto a la cultura predominante, ha dado origen a una serie de ‘valores’ propios y, en muchos casos, contrapuestos a los típicamente masculinos: la paciencia, la falta de agresividad o de competencia, la discreción, la ternura, la receptividad. Desde Aristoteles, que sepamos, se habla de unas ‘virtudes’ de la mujer distintas de las del varón, porque la función de la mujer en la casa, en la polis, es también diversa.” V. Camps (1990), p 129.

<sup>14</sup> V. Camp (1990) argues that the fact that those virtues have been generated as a product of the oppression against women is not enough to make them undesirable, in the same way that it is slavery what we should fight against, but that the values generated by slavery are not bad in themselves.

<sup>15</sup> She argues that most feminine values “*aparecen como negativos y nihilistas, porque son la antítesis del poder, las cualidades que, por fuerza, han de desarrollar los seres dominados. Pero, Es imposible verlos desde otra perspectiva? O podrían llegar a afirmarse como valores una vez puedan ser predicados de seres libres e iguales?*” V. Camp (1990), p 130.

<sup>16</sup> M. O. Little (1995), p 118.



that particular character trait can enhance our moral judgements.

She acknowledges that, on the one hand, it looks like in taking away emotions and desires we can see situations more clearly but, on the other hand, if we want to take into account all the relevant aspects of a situation, we have to admit that our attention reflects what things we care about. A very simple example that illustrates this is to think of how different it is to listen to a person for whom you care from listening to another for whom you do not. In the second case *“we objectify the person in a certain way: we see her as a means of aiming our agenda, including agendas as laudable as furthering justice or diminishing suffering.”*<sup>17</sup> We can take Lugones’ analysis of her relationship with her mother as a good example of how acknowledging our feelings towards our interlocutor can help us reach a better knowledge of her. Little claims that it is because mothers love their children, and care for them that they have what might sometimes look like privilege knowledge (often called women's intuition) about them. *“It is because the mother cares for her child that she is attuned to subtle dangers, picks up on delicate signals, notices when help is needed.”*<sup>18</sup>

She offers a further example that illustrates how a change in attitude towards someone can help to see the whole context from a completely different perspective: *“take, for instance, someone who gives change daily to the homeless person near her office but who does so to qualm her furtive feelings of guilt, to compensate for the irritation she can’t help feeling at his presence, and to maintain a self-image she can tolerate. Now imagine that one day, walking toward the homeless person, she suddenly sees the situation differently. Her perspective shifts; the elements fall into place; she has fit the case into a different context. Perhaps she suddenly sees in this person the loneliness she herself has felt, and the picture resolves itself into a simple case of helping a fellow human in a bit of need. This change is a change in her apprehension of the situation. This is not to say that she necessarily came to know some new detail of the case. Seeing more clearly is often a matter of discerning a different Gestalt of the individual elements in a way that lets one recognise some further property they together fix.”*<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> M. O. Little (1995), p 124.

<sup>18</sup> M. O. Little (1995), p122.

<sup>19</sup> M. O. Little (1995), p 127.



In all the former examples M. O. Little has showed how having or acknowledging that we have certain feelings helps us to make different judgements, it provides us with more information that will allow us to make better judgements and also, it allows us to engage more appropriately with others. Furthermore, her main argument is stronger, she argues that having certain feelings is **necessary** in order to be able to make moral judgements: she thinks that, in the same way in which a person who has not seen green as such can label what is green, a person who has no moral feelings can label what it is good or bad, but he does not know why something is called good or bad, his use of moral terms is parasitic on the use made of them by others who do know this. They will err in the long term in their moral judgements because *“there are no conversion manuals-not even immensely complex ones- for inferring moral properties from nonmoral properties, no algorithms into which one can feed the latter to derive all and only the right moral answers.”*<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, according to Little, being emotionally involved with people can make us better epistemic agents, because: first caring for people makes available information about others that we could not access otherwise. We can therefore make more informed judgements. Caring make us aware of certain facts about them that would be invisible otherwise, because it make us more receptive to our own surroundings and their needs. Second, caring for someone switches our perspective so, even if we are not aware of new "data", we can see the whole situation from a new light. Third, it helps us to adopt the right attitude regarding the testimony of others. And finally, regarding moral judgements, it help us to understand the meaning of moral terms and therefore, it is necessary in order to make good moral judgements.

In the previous chapter, I remarked that, in order to be able to understand across differences, feelings of friendship or love were the key to smoothing and initiating the process.<sup>21</sup> Given the importance that exchanges between epistemic communities have in my overall project, it is obvious that epistemic agents who are sensitive to feelings and emotions will be better able to undertake this task than those who are not. In later sections

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<sup>20</sup> M. O. Little (1995), p 129.

<sup>21</sup> U. Narayan (1988) argues that it is important to take into account several emotions and feelings in order to be able to understand across differences.



I will explain how understanding across differences is an essential step in order to obtain objective knowledge, then the need to revalue some epistemic virtues, and to reconsider who should count as reliable epistemic agents will become evident.

## **5. Towards a different epistemic project.**

Little shows how certain practices provide agents with particular epistemic traits. She chooses the example of caring in order to illustrate a more general thesis on the value of feelings in moral evaluations. The choice of this particular example helps us to re-evaluate epistemically certain traits of character that have traditionally been devalued by their attribution to women. I have suggested that caring for others is a trait of character that can produce more reliable epistemic judgements. As I explained in the first chapter, traditionally, but especially in the Enlightenment, philosophers have identified feelings with women and men with reason. Feelings have been considered to contaminate our judgements and also to be inferior to reason. Little shows how feelings are necessary in order to reach appropriate moral explanations. Agents who are used to 'listening' to their feelings instead of trying to distance themselves from them in moral judgements will be better off than those who are not trained to do the same. Given that, traditionally, women have been encouraged to develop this part of their personalities, it could be argued that they are more likely to have these epistemic virtues. What Little has done with her choice of example and her argument is a revaluation of some of our more deeply entrenched notions in relation to reason, knowledge and gender.

A virtue epistemology that focuses on a good epistemic character as well as on a reliable method of acquiring justified beliefs will not centre its investigation solely on the concept of truth and will not favour propositional knowledge as the paradigm of knowledge. This does not mean that truth will not be an important part of epistemology, but rather, that it will not be the only one. To illustrate my claim I will look again at the project developed by Alcoff and Dalmiya. They claim that traditional women's knowledge has been unjustly marginalized because it does not fulfil the standard criteria for justification. They argue that women's knowledge is not expressible in propositional form, due to the fact that ordinary language is defective. Its content could, nevertheless, be expressed in a gender-specific



idiolect. They try to justify knowing how by converting it into knowing that.<sup>22</sup> They try to accommodate feminist epistemology into a traditional epistemological framework, but acknowledge that there is a second way of justifying women's knowledge that it is not based on this framework: *"On the other hand this strategy for legitimising knowing how is informed by an attempt to question and overthrow these assumptions about knowledge and to dislodge truth as the sole epistemological norm. Knowing is not necessarily a matter of saying and representing what is the case but can also be a kind of practical involvement with the world."*<sup>23</sup>

They have favoured the first alternative because they think that *"if we can show that knowing how can be a feminine use of knowing even when knowledge is conceived as involving propositions, then the discriminatory exclusionism of the traditional epistemology becomes all the more suspect on its own terms."*<sup>24</sup> The second alternative is more congenial to the sort of epistemology that I have been defending. My choice of a non-consequentialist virtue epistemology over a consequentialist one is in tune with this project. This move will allow us to switch the focus in epistemology from truth to epistemic virtues such as wisdom. It is interesting for feminist epistemology because it will also re-evaluate practical knowledge and virtues that have been marginalized due to their origins.

There is a question that still remains and that links with the issue that I will address in the second part of this chapter. I have claimed that different communities with different practices will nourish diverse epistemic virtues. Occasionally, when we have to confront the theories of other epistemic communities, we will accept their discourses merely on the basis of their expertise, we will be able to recognise that they are making justified knowledge claims. But, often, there will be a conflict between the accounts given by different communities.

I have already looked at the possibility of understanding across differences, and I claimed that understanding across differences is possible even if it is more difficult than some

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<sup>22</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmyia (1993), p 235.

<sup>23</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmyia (1993), p 235.

<sup>24</sup> L. Alcoff and V. Dalmyia (1993), p 236.



epistemologies suggest. I showed how sometimes understanding implies getting engaged in practices that are different from our own. In some cases the question of evaluation does not arise, they are simply different practices, but in other cases, the knower has to make judgements. Some of which will be moral judgements. I talked about this issue in chapter 7 where I concluded that if the relationship between the knower and the epistemic group fulfils certain criteria it is appropriate to make moral judgements. But I have not yet answered the question of how to make epistemological choices, ie, how to make epistemological judgements when confronted with a theory that is different from the one that we hold and that we can understand without having to engage in any new set of practices. I will attempt to answer this question in the next sections.

## **6. Longino's account of objectivity.**

In the former chapter, I explained why people belonging to different epistemic communities hold different theories on particular aspects of the world. I have argued that it is important to promote diversity in order to get more objective theories: in this way we obtain the critical element necessary for acknowledging our own biases, and also obtain interesting new metaphors and models that can give rise to theories that will illuminate aspects of the world that remain hidden in our actual theoretical structures. On a number of occasions I have said that a diversity of theories does not necessarily imply relativism, but acknowledged the fact that I have not explained how this is possible. In this chapter I will argue for a concept of objectivity that will allow us to account for diversity, while, at the same time, claiming that it is possible to choose between rival theories on the basis of their representational value. I will argue for a realist epistemology able to embrace diversity.

Realist theories support the view that there is an empirical adequacy between our theories and the world. Traditionally, realist theories have a commitment towards truth as correspondence and a tendency to accept the idea of progress in science. At first sight it is difficult to see how a realist theory of science can be pluralist, that is, admitting the possibility of a variety of theories offering different representations of the world. And this problem takes us back, again, to the concept of objectivity as it has been traditionally



used: we seem to be accepting both subjectivity and relativism in our picture of science, so how can we still claim to have objective knowledge?

In chapter 1 I explained how our traditional view of objectivity implied two presuppositions. the first one is that subjectivity was erased from science by applying the scientific method, and the second one, that observation was the basis of change in science and of choice between rival theories. It was possible to arbitrate between rival theories by assessing which one fitted better our “theory-neutral” data. Longino challenges both assumptions. First, she believes that, in the production of our theories, there are values that remain undetected by the methods of science and that bias our theory evaluation. She thinks that values are intrinsic to our theories of the world, and that we should be aware of them if we want to obtain proper objectivity. Second, she challenges the neutrality of observation, by arguing that observation is theory laden and, also, supports the thesis that theories are underdetermined by data. This is a direct attack on what has classically constituted objectivity because *“One claim challenges the stability of observations themselves, the other the stability of evidential relations. (...) If observation is theory laden, then observation cannot serve as an independent constraint on theories, thus permitting subjective elements to constrain theory choice. Similarly, if observations acquire evidential relevance that changes with a suitable change in assumptions, then it's not clear what protects theory choice from subjective elements hidden in background assumptions.”*<sup>25</sup>

Longino wants to preserve the criterion of empirical adequacy of theories because she is committed to realism, but at the same she is aware that this is not the only criterion that we use in our theory choice. She points out that some of the elements present in our theory choice remain hidden to the scientists themselves, for instance, the values that all of them share by belonging to the same epistemic groups (their belonging to the group is partially constituted by the acceptance of certain values). Longino includes “values” among what she calls subjective background assumptions and claims that these are central to our theories because *“in light of the semantic gap between hypotheses and the statements describing data, the latter acquire evidential relevance for hypotheses only in*

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<sup>25</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 110-111.



*light of background assumptions.*"<sup>26</sup> Following closely the rules of the scientific method does not make them visible, but Longino argues that these assumptions can be made obvious by including in the research projects people who belong to other epistemic communities that have traditionally been excluded from scientific communities. The model of science that she proposes is based on a dialogue between members of different communities: *"Scientific knowledge, on this view, is an outcome of the critical dialogue in which individuals and groups holding different points of view engage with each other. It is constructed not by individuals but by an interactive dialogic community."*<sup>27</sup>

Harding and Longino agree on the critical value of the contributions made by members of communities that have traditionally been outside science, but they disagree on how to use their input in science. Harding wants the scientist, as an individual belonging to a particular group, to make changes in his/her own way of approaching the world, and to begin from the experience of the other; while Longino does not require this individual change of vision, but rather, considers that we should change the constitution of scientific communities.

## **7. Justificatory practices.**

I have just explained how the role of background assumptions must be recognised if attempting to obtain proper objectivity. So, in opposition to our traditional view on the methodology of science, I will claim that justification is not obtained only by testing the hypothesis against the data in our theories, but rather, we have to make sure that our theories receive criticisms from a variety of perspectives to make obvious our background assumptions. Longino thinks that in our justificatory practices we must make sure that *"intersubjective discursive interaction is added to interaction with the material world under investigation as components of methodology."*<sup>28</sup> Empirical adequacy and plurality in the constitution of epistemic communities are two of the factors that should guide us in our theory choice. Empirical adequacy is possible because *"observation provides the least*

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<sup>26</sup> H. Longino (1997), p 29.

<sup>27</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 112.

<sup>28</sup> H. Longino (1997), p29.



*defeasible evidence we have about the world*”<sup>29</sup> and she believes that objectivity will be promoted by assuring diversity within epistemic communities.

Longino puts forward some conditions for considering communities as legitimated in producing knowledge. She considers that a legitimate epistemic community “*must have structural features that ensure ‘the effectiveness of critical discourse taking place within it’.*”<sup>30</sup> She suggests four conditions that all communities have to fulfil in order to guarantee diversity and an appropriate level of critical activity: “*a) the provision of venues for the articulation of criticism, b) uptake (rather than mere toleration) of criticism, c) public standards to which discursive interactions are reference, d) equality of intellectual authority for all (qualified) members of the community.*”<sup>31</sup> Communities constituted in such a way as to guarantee that the above conditions take place will be the appropriate site for theory development and theory choice.

Longino thinks that the criterion of empirical adequacy must be shared by all epistemic communities, but the rest of criteria adopted by legitimate communities for theory choice are only locally normative. Longino call these criteria epistemic virtues, and claims that they differ according to the community that is evaluating the theory. Therefore, the normativity of those virtues applies only to the epistemological community that has put them forward: “*the alternative virtues are only binding in those communities sharing a cognitive goal that is advanced by those virtues.*”<sup>32</sup> To illustrate her claim, she gives a list of feminist epistemic virtues with which feminists should evaluate theories, but claims that it is only provisional. The goal of feminist communities is to reveal the operation of gender, to make visible how it has been naturalised, etc... so these virtues could be different in time or even different for different feminist communities with different concepts of gender.<sup>33</sup> Each group has to agree on the criteria for theory choice, but their criteria can be changed. These virtues regulate the discourse in the communities but they “*can be criticised or challenged relative to the cognitive aims they are taken to advance or to other values assigned higher priority and they can in turn serve as grounds for*

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<sup>29</sup> E. Anderson (1995), p51.

<sup>30</sup> K. Lennon (1997), p 45.

<sup>31</sup> H. Longino (1997), p29.

<sup>32</sup> H. Longino (1997), p28.

<sup>33</sup> For a good summary on the different ways in which gender influences theories see E. Anderson (1995).



critique.”<sup>34</sup>

As I have pointed out already, this is a very important feature of epistemic communities, their willingness to change their own normative discourses, given that they should ideally be constituted by a diversity of agents from a variety of groups in continuous dialogue. But, even if there is scope for value change and discussion in each epistemic community, there will always be tensions within communities, because on the one hand, objectivity requires dialogue and negotiation, but on the other hand, it is necessary to reach agreements and this could mean marginalizing certain options, so it is very important to keep in mind that agreement should not be obtained at the price of consensus. According to Longino, when you have different values in a community *“what is called for is not integration of the virtues by one research community, but the tolerance and interaction with research guided by different theoretical virtues, the construction of larger meta-communities characterised by mutual respect for divergent points of view, i.e., by pluralism.”*<sup>35</sup> We have the difficult task of keeping a balance between preserving diversity and reaching a comprehensive model in each community. It is very important to remember, as Lennon points out, that for Longino *“the legitimacy of the criteria employed depends on the constitution of the community from which they are derived.”*<sup>36</sup>

In the following sections I will analyse the three most important features of Longino's theory:

- The possibility of developing local epistemologies.
- The empirical adequacy of our theories.
- The consequences of developing an epistemology based on virtues.

## 8. Local Epistemologies.

Apart from the reliance on the criticisms originated within different epistemic groups in order to improve our own theory, we can argue that pluralism promotes more empirically adequate theories on other grounds. I argued, in the previous chapter, that people who

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<sup>34</sup> H. Longino (1997), p 29.

<sup>35</sup> H. Longino (1997), p 30.

<sup>36</sup> H. Longino (1997), p 44.



belong to particular epistemic groups can access aspects of the world that would pass undetected otherwise. We can presume that different communities will capture different aspects of the world and they will reflect it with the creation of different models, their different contributions can help us to create more complete representations. This idea of complementarity, even if it is desirable, does not come without problems. Longino asserts that there are public and non-arbitrary criteria for the assessment of theories, but as I have already pointed out, she also thinks that these criteria are community related, they cannot be claimed to be universally applicable. The view of an all-encompassing theory that benefits from the discoveries of different epistemic communities does not seem to be an attainable ideal.

It has been argued that, if rational engagement is possible intra-communities, then it should also be possible across communities, therefore local epistemology does not have to be local.<sup>37</sup> Longino makes a contribution towards this possibly when she claims that criticism is not limited to intra-community discourse because “*The areas of overlap or intersection make possible critical interaction among as well as within communities.*”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, there is still the unanswered question of how this interaction is going to take place if the communities do not share a set of criteria to guide theory choice. I will tackle this problem in my next section.

## 9. A pluralist realism.

We have already seen that there are two criteria that should be applied equally by all epistemic communities. The first one is empirical adequacy, and the second one, the constitution of the epistemic communities. I have already talked about the problems presented by the appropriate constitutions of epistemic communities, and I will concentrate now on the criteria for empirical adequacy.

At the beginning of the chapter I claimed that I will be arguing for a realist epistemology that allows for diversity. I signalled, then, that traditional realist theories support an ideal

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<sup>37</sup> K. Lennon (1997).

<sup>38</sup> H. Longino (1997), p 29.



of truth as correspondence and the ideal of progress. Now I will analyse Longino's theory in order to see how she develops an epistemology, the theories of which are constrained by empirical adequacy, are plural and at the same time, capture the world appropriately.

Longino insists that we should move away from models of science that consider that "truth" is at the end of the scientific enquiry, so the view of epistemic communities as rival communities that aim for a complete and exclusive explanation of the world should be changed. She promotes a picture of scientific theories in which many different models or theories can function at the same time, while being all of them constrained by empirical considerations.

It does not seem possible that there are different theories that describe the world in different ways and that all of them are empirically adequate. In order to make sense of this apparent impossibility, Longino thinks that we should take science to be a practice or set of practices and also we should characterise it under some version of a semantic or model-theoretic theory of theories.<sup>39</sup>

Let us begin with the second move, taking a semantic view of science means that we have to move away from the idea that science is a set of propositions. We will take science to be a structure, and Longino claims that *"A structure is neither true or false, is just a structure. The theoretical claim is that the structure is realised in some actual system."*<sup>40</sup>

The switch from truth to another model of theoretical adequacy is explained in the following way *"The adequacy of a theory conceived as a model is determined by our being able to map some subset of the relations/structures posited in the model onto some portion of the experienced world. (...) Any Given model or schema will necessarily select among those relations. So its adequacy is not just a function of isomorphism of one of the interpretations of the theory with a portion of the world but of the fact that the relations it picks out are ones in which we are interested. A model guides our interactions with and interventions in the world."*<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 114.

<sup>40</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 114.

<sup>41</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 115.



This characterisation of theories as being something other than a collection of propositions with a truth value is very congenial to the model of knowledge for which I have been arguing, as the following quotation illustrates: *“Knowledge is not detached from knowers in a set of propositions but consists in our ability to understand the structural features of a model and to apply it to some particular portion of the world; it is knowledge of that portion of the world through is structuring by the model we use.”*<sup>42</sup> Also, it allows that members of different communities, will provide us with different models, preserving the pluralism necessary for obtaining objective knowledge *“(…) Given that different subcommunities within the larger scientific community may be interested in different relations or that they may be interested in objects under different descriptions, different models (that if taken as claims about an underlying reality would be incompatible) may well be equally adequate and provide knowledge, in the sense of and ability to direct our interactions and interventions, even in the absence of a general consensus as to what’s important.”*<sup>43</sup>

Longino promotes partiality and multiplicity, complementarity and a criterion of adequacy that substitutes for that of truth. In her view, knowledge does not offer a transparent propositional account of the world any longer, but rather knowledge is an ability to direct our interactions and interventions. This links with the second move that I mentioned before, which consists in taking science as a practice, *“we understand inquiry as ongoing, that is, we give up the idea that there is a terminus of inquiry that just is the set of truths about the world (…) scientific knowledge from this perspective is not the static end point of inquiry, but a cognitive or intellectual expression of an ongoing interaction with our natural and social environments.”*<sup>44</sup>

In the previous chapter I explained how our different ways of engaging with the word make different aspects of it available. I also argued that the justification of theories relies on the practices shared by determinate epistemic communities. Propositional knowledge is not the only type of knowledge that can be justified. One of the most interesting implications of this characterisation of theories is that it is possible to hold rival theories

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<sup>42</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 115.

<sup>43</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 115.

<sup>44</sup> H. Longino (1993), p 116.



simultaneously without danger of contradiction. Different theories attend to different relations between elements present in the world, so we can maintain their empirical adequacy while accepting different accounts of it. I think Longino's epistemology allows us to argue for a pluralist realism. Nevertheless, If we take the more salient elements from the account that I have just given of Longino's epistemology, we can see that, from the point of view of a traditional epistemology, she could be classified as anti-realist. She denies that truth is at the end of scientific inquiry and also promotes the validity of more than one model or theory.

I will argue that:

1. The model of "reality" or the "world" as the ground for our theories that is suggested by this epistemology is one that does not correspond easily with our traditional concepts. Therefore, it is necessary to adjust our conceptual system. I will support Haraway's characterisation of the world as agent as a good model for understanding the relation between our theories and what it is represented.

2. I will support the thesis that Longino is not an anti-realist philosopher by looking at her use of models.

In the next section I will argue for 2, leaving 1 for section 11.

## **10. The threat of anti-realism.**

The threat of anti-realism is also present for another philosopher who maintained a similar position. Kuhn claimed that we can see the world in different ways according to the theories that we hold, and he says that, in a sense, scientists who look at the world from different paradigms live in different worlds: *"Something even more fundamental than standards and values is, however, at stake. I have so far argued only that paradigms are constitutive of science. Now I wish to display a sense in which they are constitutive of nature as well. In a sense that I am unable to explicate further, the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. One contains constrained bodies that fall slowly, the other pendulums that repeat their motion again and again. In one, solutions are compounds, in the other mixtures. One is embedded in a flat, the other*



*in a curved matrix of space. Practising in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction.*"<sup>45</sup>

Despite his insistence on the different ways of seeing the world, Kuhn claimed that scientists could not see whatever they wanted, there are constraints about what they can see. Different theories simply stress different aspects of the world. Still, Kuhn is not considered a proper realist<sup>46</sup> because he does not think that the changes of paradigms provide us with theories closer to the truth *"Perhaps there is another way of salvaging the notion of truth for application to whole theories, but this one will not do. There is, I think, no theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like 'really there'; the notion of match between the ontology of a theory and its 'real' counterpart in nature now seems to me illusory in principle."*<sup>47</sup>

I think this also applies to Longino's theory, it is difficult to classify her as a realist following the normal criteria. On the one hand, she does not embrace the traditional definition of knowledge as the seeking of truth, and also, she underlines the fact that knowers engage in different ways with the world. She would have to agree with the idea that scientists are embedded in different worlds. On the other hand, she claims that *"there is a world independent of our senses with which those senses interact to produce our sensation and the regularities of our experience. There is something out there that imposes limits on what we can say about it."*<sup>48</sup>

As I have already said, I want to support the case that Longino is a realist. Her reading of the use of metaphors in science suggests that Longino attributes a central role to the constraints that the world imposes on our creation of models.

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<sup>45</sup> That quotation is reproduced by N. W. Newton-Smith (1994), who writes the following before he includes it: *"I return to the suggestion to be found in Kuhn that such a shift in paradigms not only brings about changes in how we describe the world and how and where we look at the world, but also brings about changes in the world itself. Kuhn writes as if he subscribed to this non-objectivist idealist doctrine: (...)"*, p 219.

<sup>46</sup> Following N. W. Newton-Smith (1994), from a traditional perspective is not possible to say that Kuhn is a realist but he will be classified as an embryonic rationalist because he *"takes it that the five ways can be justified as the criteria to be used in achieving progress in science, that is, in increasing puzzle-solving capacity."* p 125.

<sup>47</sup> Kuhn in N. W. Newton-Smith (1994), p 120.

<sup>48</sup> H. Longino (1990), p 223.



There are several theories to explain the way in which metaphor works. The substitution model claims that the two subjects compared by the metaphor have something in common that is indirectly described by the metaphor. In contrast, the model that Longino seems to support is the interaction model, which can be characterise in the following way: *"When we use a metaphor, we have two thoughts of differing things active together and supported by a single word or phrase, whose meaning is the result of their interaction."*<sup>49</sup> The substitution theory makes us more inclined to mistake the model in science for the thing modelled, for instance to think that nature is mechanical instead of being seen as mechanical. The interaction theory, allows for a change of meaning in the two parts of the metaphor, so our concept of nature might change if we see it as mechanical, but at the same time, our concept of mechanism will also change if we think of it as an organic mechanism. What makes this model of metaphor so useful in our understanding of science is that *"instead of commonplace associations, a metaphor may evoke more specially constructed systems of implications (...) what makes an analogy suitable for scientific purposes is its ability to be suggestive of new systems of implications, new hypotheses, and therefore, new observations."*<sup>50</sup> Longino defended the view that scientific models, as analogy or metaphor do not describe the world isomorphically. The model, the metaphor, contains elements that are not in the world and vice-versa. Both clarify each other but do not substitute each other. A model does not picture reality in all its detail and forever, it does not make the world completely transparent, it is necessarily partial. That is why there can be many models of the same event, each underlying different aspects of it, and in a sense, all adequate for describing reality. Longino is a realist because she insists on the empirical adequacy of our theories. Therefore, it is obvious that she accepts that the world constrains the possible models that we construe, even if at the same time, she allows for a picture of the world that shows different aspects of itself to different agents, allowing the possibility of developing different theories. I favour an ontological model that allows for this type of pluralism while still supporting realism. A model that it is exemplified in the work of Haraway.

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<sup>49</sup> A. I. Richards quoted by N. Leys Stepan, (1996), p 126.

<sup>50</sup> N. Leys Stepan (1996), p127.



## 11. Haraway: The world as agent.

There are two ideas in the work of Haraway that I find particularly congenial. In the first place, she claims that all theories are laden, while at the same time admitting that not all of them are valid, because there are limits to be set to theories about the world, and they are set by the internal logic of these discourses and also by the world.<sup>51</sup> In the second place, she claims that the world is not passive, it is not there to be "*the ground for the construction of the agent*"<sup>52</sup> but rather it is viewed as an agent.

Theories are laden because the stories that we tell about the world are influenced by the histories that each of us carries. She argues for a position that is very close to the one that Harding and Longino promoted: all theories include values and background assumptions that reflect the ideological, cultural, historical make up of the knower. To illustrate her claims Haraway says that if we practice science as biologist, we have to accept that it is a discourse which has been used to naturalize and construct race and gender, for instance, so we cannot pretend to be doing Pure science, uncontaminated by the tradition of the subject, and we cannot pretend, either, that that discourse has not influenced our sense of self: "*we have to engage in those terms of practice, and resist the temptation to remain pure. You do that as a finite person, who can't practice biology without assuming responsibility for encrusted barnacles, such as the centrality of biology to the construction of the raced and sexed bodies. You've got to contest the discourse from within, building connections to other constituencies. This is a collective process, and we can't do it solely as critics from the outside.*"<sup>53</sup>

Diverse theories are produced because different subjects relate differently to the world. Haraway is aware of the fact that we do not relate to the world in an unmediated manner,

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<sup>51</sup> D. Haraway in an interview by C. Penley and A. Ross (1991) claims that "*the practices of the sciences (...) force one to accept two simultaneous, apparently incompatible truths. One is the historical contingency of what counts as nature for us. (...) And simultaneously, scientific discourses, without even ceasing to be radically and historically specific, do still make claims on you, ethically, physically. The objects of these discourses, the discourses themselves, have a kind of materiality; they have a sort of reality to them that is inescapable. No scientific account escapes being theory laden, but is equally true that stories are not equal here.*" p 2.

<sup>52</sup> C. Penley and A. Ross (1991), p 3.

<sup>53</sup> C. Penley and A. Ross (1991), p 5.



but she also acknowledges the limits that the world imposes on our discourses. In my view, she tries to keep an equilibrium between accepting a certain constructionism in relation to nature, and the importance of accepting the materiality of the world. In this sense, she agrees with C. Penley and A. Ross' analysis of her theory: *"A.R: It seems that you are increasingly , in your work, sympathetic to the textualist or constructionists positions, but it is clear also that you reject the very easy path of radical constructionism, which sees all scientific claims about the object world as merely persuasive rhetoric, either weak or strong depending on their institutional success in claiming legitimacy for themselves. Your view seem to be: that way lies madness..."*

*D.H : Or that way lies cynicism, or that way lies the impossibility of politics. That's what worries me."*<sup>54</sup>

This reading of Haraway's theory is accentuated when we examine her claim that the world is an agent. She is aware of the fact that this is an odd suggestion, so she draws a difference between agents and subjects: subjects are organised by language. Therefore, the world cannot be considered to be a subject, but still, can be an agent. Haraway tries to change further the traditional view of the world as passive when she claims that *"Nature emerges from this exercise as 'coyote' this potent trickster can show us that historically specific human relations with 'nature' must somehow- linguistically, scientifically, ethically, politically, technologically, and epistemologically- be imagined as genuinely social and actively relational. And yet, the partners of this lively social relation remain inhomogeneous."*<sup>55</sup>

Haraway underlines the homogeneity of all the actors involved in knowledge when she claims that *"nothing, no sets of actors in the world are preconstituted with their skin boundaries already clearly pre-established. There are not pre-established actors in the world. Be those actors human, machine, other organisms, various kinds of machines, various kinds of humans. There are no pre-constituted identities. All the actors in the world aren't 'us', whoever you think of as like yourself. It is in relational encounters that worlds emerge, they emerge in plots of materialised stories. And the actors are the result*

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<sup>54</sup> C. Penley and A. Ross (1991), p 4.

<sup>55</sup> D. Haraway, in Penley and Ross (1991), p 21.



*of encounter, of engagement. (...) One of the problems with using the word discourse is that the metaphor of language can end up carrying too much weight. I'm willing to let it carry a lot of weight, but I'm not willing to let it then finally really be everything. There are non-language like processes of encounter.*"<sup>56</sup>

Conceiving the world as an agent, a trickster with whom we have to engage in dialogue, an entity that resists conceptualization, allows us to favour an epistemology that allows for pluralism, and that resists the idea that we can represent the world as a whole. The world changes as it changes our relation to it, which also changes us in the process. Realism is only possible if we embrace pluralism, the only way of reflecting the multiple aspects of the world.

## **12. Towards Situated Objective Knowledge.**

I have been arguing that we can change our traditional picture of objectivity, in order to accommodate the fact that all knowledge bears the marks of its makers. Acknowledging the situatedness of knowledge is a prerequisite for obtaining objective knowledge. Keeping this in mind, I have explored two different theories in relation to objectivity: Harding's strong objectivity and Longino's theory. In this section I will offer a conclusion regarding them.

I have claimed that Harding's strong objectivity has important elements, which I would like to keep, but I also criticise some other aspects of it. I agreed that the context of discovery should be scrutinised in order to disclose the values at play, that all knowledge should be critically examined, and that certain knowers are more likely to produce objective knowledge. I disagreed with the strong interpretation of her claim that we should begin our search for knowledge from the lives of marginalized groups. I agreed that we can learn from others by reading or talking, in an exchange of knowledge transmitted in a propositional form, and we also can acquire further knowledge by engaging in their ways

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<sup>56</sup> D. Haraway (1991), p 32.



of life, but I argued against Harding because this does not amount to begin our research from their perspective. I believe that we cannot produce knowledge from the lives of others, the most we can do is change our own perspective via the interaction with them, obtaining a kind of knowledge that does not consist on merely in understanding propositions.

My analysis of practical and experiential knowledge supports my point of view. I argued that the acquisition of all knowledge is linked to practices. By being trained in particular traditions we acquire skills (some of which we are unaware) that mediate all our knowledge claims. Knowledge is necessarily embodied, and in an important sense personal, but at the same time also deeply social because it is acquired and sanctioned socially. These remarks link with my above claim that a mere propositional transmission of knowledge is not enough for capturing all types of knowledge, and that even if we can share part of our knowledge with others, other aspects of it are not acquired unless we adopt a different way of life. This made me aware of the importance of challenging our current concept of expertise: we should be able to recognise as reliable agents those who have acquired their knowledge throughout other means than the ones most valued in our current epistemological paradigm. In this sense, the work of Longino becomes central to the obtention of objective knowledge, given that she supports a concept of objectivity in which *“objectivity is analysed as a function of community practices rather than as an attitude of individual researchers towards their material or a relation between representation and represented.”*<sup>57</sup> The appropriate constitution of epistemic communities is central in the process of justification, and also necessary to obtain objective knowledge.

Longino argues for local epistemologies, the claims of which are justified partly by the way in which those communities are constituted, and also by the empirical adequacy of the claims and by the adherence to epistemic virtues that have been negotiated within each community.

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<sup>57</sup> H. Longino (1990), p 216.



I agree with Longino's claims on the justification of theories, but I would like to include a second mechanism within it. I have argued that there are epistemic virtues that are not necessarily known by the subjects who possess them, therefore it is not possible to enter into negotiations about these. Nevertheless, by favouring pluralism, we will be including in our communities knowers who possess those virtues. Longino's theory focuses on epistemic virtues as implemented by theories. My point is that the negotiation of personal epistemic virtues should also be taken into account in theory choice and in the process of justification. Often, these virtues cannot be explicit, and therefore in any set of criteria for theory choice they will not be included. Together with the negotiation of particular virtues in theories, it is also important to develop the idea of expertise, and of personal epistemic virtues. This will mean that in certain situations the judgement of particular individuals in the context of theory choice could be more valuable than that of others, the decision making will not be made on the basis of a "traditional" rational choice, i.e., not as the conclusion of an argument made up of propositions. The decision making will be the product of having certain epistemic virtues, and the epistemic community will trust their judgement on the basis of their socially sanctioned training. This implies that we will be able to accept as privileged epistemic agents those who belong to communities that have been traditionally marginalized for not following the mainstream methods of knowledge acquisition.

Apart from playing an important role in the justification of theories, diverse epistemic communities should be promoted because they allow us to approach knowledge claims critically, making visible their biases and the background assumptions included in them. I would like to remark that apart from the critical advantages that encouraging different perspectives offers, pluralism plays a second important role, and that is that by engaging with the world in diverse ways, different communities apprehend different aspects of the world. Therefore, the process of understanding across difference becomes central in providing us with the possibility of disclosing the values and background assumptions that underlie all theories, and also, in allowing us to account for different aspects of the world that would be hidden otherwise. Again, the role of marginalized communities becomes central, they will be able to point out biases in the mainstream theories and also, they will be able to produce original alternatives. Both elements are central in our aim to obtain



bjective knowledge.

Therefore, I agree with the picture that Longino gives of objective knowledge as a plurality of metaphors that capture different aspects of the world. I have underlined how, in Longino's work, there is a definite commitment to realism in the sense that the world shows in our theories, but at the same time, she make us aware that our theories are constructions upon the world and their validity is agreed on the terms dictated by our different epistemic practices. The tension is captured by Haraway who claims that the world is an agent and that somehow it resists all our efforts of conceptualisation. I am sympathetic to this theory because it allows me to emphasise the role of practical and experiential knowledge, which allows us to establish relations with the world and capture some of those aspects of the world that are not captured because they resist conceptualisation. This does not mean that, by including this aspect in our epistemology, we will be able to apprehend the world completely, but rather, that we will be able to obtain a more appropriate image of it than we would obtain if we do not acknowledge the importance of those other types of knowledge.



## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have defended the possibility of gendered knowledge and argued for a shift in our conception of epistemology. Given our epistemological tradition, the concept of gendered knowledge seems almost an impossibility, because it precludes the possibility of developing objective ways of apprehending the world. Here objective ways of apprehending the world are conceived of as ways available in principle to anyone, anywhere. A project supporting gendered knowledge also has to overcome criticisms levelled by postmodern and postcolonial thinkers. These believe that gendered knowledge, as it has been depicted by some feminist thinkers, is a universalist and essentialist project that does not account for the diversity present in the women's community.

I have argued that the traditional concepts of objectivity obscure the fact that acknowledging that all knowledge is situated is the first step to obtaining objective knowledge, though in the process of recognising that, our concept of objectivity becomes refigured. Regarding the postmodern and postcolonial arguments, I have suggested that it is possible to talk about collective identities without excluding diversity. Consequently I have defended the view that the experiences of marginalized epistemic agents, concretely embodied in specific environments, grounded in **practices** and **sanctioned by communities**, can form the basis for privileged epistemic positions.

If this type of experience is going to be taken as valuable for grounding knowledge, we have to change our concept of knowledge. The experiences that I am referring to cannot be captured propositionally. The epistemic subjects do not need to be able to express their knowledge propositionally in order to be able to show that they know. Therefore, knowledge cannot be defined as justified true belief, because this will not account for these types of knowledge that cannot be expressed as beliefs. I have analysed different reductive moves that try to reduce practical and experiential knowledge to propositional or knowing-that knowledge. I concluded that a reduction is not possible and that these non-propositional knowledges count as such because they are constituted by normative engagement with the world. By participating in various practices, women are able to apprehend aspects of the world that remain opaque otherwise. Such apprehension is



warranted and justified, consequently deserving the title “knowledge”. These types of knowledge can form the basis for gendered knowledge. Furthermore, my arguments can be used to suggest that these types of knowledge also ground the knowledge of other marginalized epistemic groups. More radically ( and tentatively) I suggest that all knowledge is anchored in practices.

To rely on the idea that all knowledge can be expressed propositionally implies that all knowledge can be expressed in words. I have challenged the idea that knowledge with non propositional content cannot be justified. I claimed that non-conceptual content belongs to the realm of reasons when it is apprehended by subjects who are already in that realm. Subjects who apprehend aspects of the world that are not included in our conceptual systems can justify critiques of such systems based on these apprehensions. I suggested that those that are not at the centre of our epistemic practices are able to become aware of how our conceptual system does not account for all their interactions with the world. Therefore they can point at the gaps in our conceptual systems and suggest ways of enlarging them. Awareness of the inadequacy of conceptual systems to account for different ways of experiencing the world can warrant the modification of such schemes, even while the awareness concerned may not be conceptually articulable.

The enlargement of what counts as knowledge allows me to enlarge the concept of rationality. I argue that intuition is a form of tacit knowledge based on experience. We acquire tacit knowledge by participating in practices. Our tacit knowledge remains generally unacknowledged to us, but it can be made evident in the form of intuitions. Our intuitions allow us to have glimpses of aspects of the world that are not captured by our current ways of theorising the world. I conclude that intuition is part of reason, instead of its opposite. Characterising intuition in this way, I am challenging our current concept of reason and including elements in it that belong to the realm of the feminine.

The consequences of attributing a privileged epistemic perspective to marginalized groups is a recognition that there are types of knowledge that can only be produced by those belonging to these groups, therefore if their knowledges are epistemically desirable, it is necessary to develop ways of engaging with them. Furthermore, there are many



marginalized groups whose knowledge may not be obviously compatible. The epistemic privilege of marginalized groups has two aspects: a critical aspect and a creative one. Marginalized epistemic agents can make visible the values included in mainstream theories which may not be recognisable to those within the mainstream. They can also access distinctive aspects of the world. Therefore we need to develop ways for including the inputs of different epistemic communities in order to obtain objective knowledge, and I suggest some protocols to ease the process. Regarding the questions arising from the acceptance of a multiplicity of theories, I have argued for a pluralist realism that allows us to embrace different theories without falling into contradiction. I believe that this is the most appropriate way of apprehending a world that is able to present different aspects to different epistemic agents.

My thesis therefore consists in a critical analysis of elements present in mainstream epistemology that symbolically, and actually, exclude gendered knowledge. It also presents a positive proposal that revises our concepts of knowledge and reason, allowing us to consider women and other marginalized epistemic agents as reliable knowers; reassessing practical and experiential knowledge, and situating them at the centre of our epistemology.



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