

CONTEXTUAL REALISM

Feminist Epistemology 'Out of the Fly Bottle'?

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Abstract: Feminist epistemology, like other epistemologies that are built on the debris of modern epistemology, is strong in its critique of the infirmities of modern epistemology but weak in delivering objective knowledge. Since the heart of feminist epistemology is the situatedness of the knower, it needs to attain objectivity or universality of truth without compromising on diversity and subjectivity. Although the problem is not unique to the feminists, it is more pressing for them because unlike some shades of postmodernism that do away with all universal norms, feminists are committed to the Enlightenment ideals of justice, freedom, and emancipation, all of which call for objectivity and universality beyond one's preferred group. Faced with this situation, the present paper outlines an epistemological position dubbed as contextual realism. As a form of realism, it makes room for objectivity and its contextualism for subjectivity and diversity.

Keywords: Evidence, Feminist Epistemology, Objectivity, Situatedness, Quine, Wittgenstein.

1. Introduction

The subtitle of my paper shows the Wittgensteinian leanings of my understanding of philosophy and epistemology. For Wittgenstein, philosophical problems have the form "I don't know my way about"¹ and the task of philosophy is to resolve

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¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, rev. 4th ed., Chichester, West Sussex; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 123.

this predicament: “to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle”.² The use of “feminist epistemology” in the singular might be more problematic because there is a plethora of epistemologies that are feminine/feminist.³ Feminists are said to make common cause with a number of epistemological rebels ranging from Marxism to naturalism to postmodernism.⁴ In spite of such diversity, if I still dare to use the word “feminist epistemology” in the singular it is because there is a recognition, at least in some feminist circles, that an epistemology that is too closely tied to gender can be self-defeating. In the words of Marnia Lazreg,

A feminist epistemology might be an answer to a ‘masculinist epistemology’. But it does not seem to be an answer to the current crisis of ‘western’ knowledge. Knowledge conceived of as a corrective to a one-sided knowledge of women (or, for that matter, of men of different classes, races or cultures) cannot be gender- (or class- or race-) based without defeating its purpose.⁵

Agreeing with Lazreg’s observation and recognizing that the proliferation of epistemologies in the contemporary world places a truth seeker in a position similar to Wittgenstein’s fly in the

²Wittgenstein, *Investigations*, 309. Although the fly-bottle in Wittgenstein is the result of linguistic confusions, I take it more broadly as a puzzlement on how to meet the challenges of the times.

³‘Feminine epistemology’ refers to specifically women’s ways of knowing whereas ‘feminist epistemology’ explores the power relations between gender and knowledge. See, Heidi Elizabeth Grasswick, *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, Feminist Philosophy Collection, Dordrecht, New York: Springer, 2011, xix. It is to be noted that feminists distinguish sex and gender, the former is a biological category whereas the latter is a cultural one of what a given society or culture makes out of the biological difference.

⁴Helen Longino, “Feminist Epistemology,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, eds., John Greco and Ernest Sosa, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1999, 327-28.

⁵Marnia Lazreg, “Women’s Experience and Feminist Epistemology: A Critical Neo-Rationalist Approach,” in *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, eds., Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, New York: Routledge, 1994, 58.

bottle, this paper proposes a way out of it. There is a need to keep contextualism and realism together but the alleged incommensurability of contexts poses a problem for realism. This is overcome by drawing a key distinction between hermeneutic access and evidential or rational access. Then a strategy is outlined for providing evidential access to a sceptic who questions a cognitive claim.

2. The Shape of the Fly Bottle

Once we leave out the different waves and kinds of feminism, the central claim of feminist epistemology is the situatedness of the knower, and therefore, of knowledge.⁶ The obvious example of a modern thinker who offers a clear contrast to situated thinking is Descartes. Situatedness, however, is not an exclusively feminist claim; it is a claim shared by most critics of modern epistemology. Moreover, it has been fleshed out differently with varying nuances. The major nuances are the following:

First of all, situatedness of knowledge is the repudiation of the Cartesian legacy of the disembodied knower, defined as a 'thinking thing' that is independent of body, which is an extended thing. "Embodiment" says Helen Longino, "means location. Bodies are in particular places, in particular times, oriented in particular ways to their environments."⁷ Embodied cognition claims that knowing involves "aspects of the agent's body other than the brain. Without the involvement of the body in both sensing and acting, thoughts would be empty, and mental affairs would not exhibit the characteristics and properties they do."⁸ For the feminists, it would mean that

⁶Anderson Elizabeth, "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall_2015/entries/feminism-epistemology/> (15.8.2016).

⁷Longino, "Feminist Epistemology," 333.

⁸Wilson, Robert A. and Foglia, Lucia, "Embodied Cognition", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2016), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2016/entries/embodied-cognition/>> (15.8.2016). The distinction between embodied,

knowledge is gendered; women's way of knowing is different from that of men, as their bodies are different.

Second, situatedness implies the historicity. Since knowers exist in specific time and space it is impossible for them to have a view the world from nowhere. This point has been eloquently made by Heidegger, and detailed by Gadamer. As a result, "Gone is the Enlightenment idea of an Archimedean point where a universal knower can stand and see the world without a perspective. All knowers are situated (spatio/temporally, historically/ culturally/ socially), and these dimensions of situation all become part of the epistemological context."⁹

Third, an embodied knower who lives the concrete particularities of human existence is a person with certain subjectivity, and this subjectivity (arising from personal upbringing, emotional attachments, cultural influences, and so on) enters into the process of knowing. Pre-moderns like Thomas Aquinas were very much aware of it when he said that the "thing known is in the knower according to the mode of the knower".¹⁰ But modern epistemologists saw subjectivity as a hindrance to objective knowledge and tried to eliminate it. Richard Bernstein called this feature of modern epistemology "objectivism".¹¹

Foundationalism was the strategy employed for obtaining objectivist knowledge. It sought to get rid of all acquired beliefs (history, tradition, education, etc.) until we reach that which is purely 'given' in experience. This pure 'given' functions as foundation or the basis on which the rest of our belief system was to be built. Thus, foundationalism divided all knowledge into basic and non-basic beliefs, and privileged the former over

embedded, and extended cognition that is drawn by the authors is ignored here.

⁹Lennon and Whitford, *Knowing the Difference*, 3.

¹⁰*Summa Theologica*, I, Q.12. art.4

¹¹Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983, 8.

the latter.¹² The foundations of knowledge were taken to be full-fledged beliefs and not the processes that precede beliefs.

A fourth dimension of being situated is the shift of focus away from beliefs as the starting point to the rumble and tumble of everyday life and the processes that precede beliefs. Longino said it best when, putting the matter in terms of gender, she said, ... men encountered a world already processed whether in the form of meals prepared and clothes laundered, or data tabulated and statistics summarized, while the work of women was the processing of the raw material of the world, food, dirty clothes, the testimony of interview subjects, into a form suitable for consumption and use.¹³

Although said in terms of men and women, the issue is not of sex but gender. We find similar insistence on process in Heidegger's prioritizing of 'ready-to-hand' over 'present-at-hand, Wittgenstein's emphasis on the 'forms of life', Goldman's reliabilism and Alston's 'doxastic practices'.

Fifth, to be situated also means being in a specific community, and not an epistemological monad. Attempts to reach the unmistakably 'given' in experience made modern epistemology into a solitary undertaking where each knower is expected to build her own edifice of knowledge relying only on what is indubitably found in one's consciousness. Thus arose the most intractable problems of modern epistemology, such as the existence of the external world, existence of other minds, the need to prove that one is not a brain-in-the-vat, and so on. As against such monadic view that Descartes inaugurated, critics like John Caputo point out that when Descartes engaged in his meditations, he was using language, including the very word "meditations" that he "inherited from the Jesuits, and from the scholastic philosophers before them, and from his mother and father, and from the books he had read in school, and so on."¹⁴

¹²Timm Triplett, "Recent Work on Foundationalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1990), 93-116.

¹³Longino, "Feminist Epistemology," 329.

¹⁴John D. Caputo, *Philosophy and Theology: Horizons in Theology*, Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006, 65.

Some feminists take the rootedness of knowledge in community a step further to claim that there is no universal gender identity: there is the black woman, the white woman, the lesbian woman, the heterosexual woman, and so on. They say that such universal narratives of women's experience are in reality the narrative of white, middle class, heterosexual women.

All these nuances of being a situated knower bring with it certain limitations, such as having to forgo the pretences of being a universal knower with no subjectivity. This kind of limitation, however, is not without its blessings. It helps to explain the diversity of our contemporary world. It is undeniable that we live in a world of diverse cultures, languages, religions, and ideologies (materialism, humanism, feminism, atheism, theism, etc.). Situated character of knowledge provides an easy explanation for such diversity: diversity is the result of our interpretative activity. People situated in their different socio-cultural locations interpret the world differently. And apparently there is no way to get beyond different interpretations to the world itself. This prompts Richard Rorty to argue not only for abandoning foundationalism but also replacing epistemology with hermeneutics;¹⁵ Merold Westphal argues that hermeneutics is epistemology.¹⁶ Others go even further and say that there is no world that is just given to us; rather we construct our different worlds and live in them. According to Foucault even what we take to be the naturally given, such as the classification of animals is not natural but the result of power and politics.¹⁷ It follows then, that "we know only what we in some sense construct, make, produce, or otherwise bring into being ..."¹⁸

¹⁵Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979, 315.

¹⁶Merold Westphal, "Hermeneutics as Epistemology," in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, eds., Greco and Sosa, 415-35.

¹⁷Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Routledge Classics, London: Routledge, 2002, xvi.

¹⁸Tom Rockmore, *On Constructivist Epistemology*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2005, 24.

There is a flip side to this manner of thinking about knowledge. It leaves the problematic of modern epistemology untouched. Since modern epistemology was a response to the pervasive scepticism of the times,¹⁹ the central piece of that epistemology was justification. It is true that the notion of justification is not as clear as one would have wished.²⁰ But there is a notion of justification that emerges as essential to the sceptical context: that of adjudicating divergent claims to truth. Kant compared epistemology to a “court of justice” in the battlefield of controversies regarding truth.²¹ The metaphor of adjudication of cognitive disputes is an excellent way of conceiving justification. As long as there are divergent claims to truth, and truth-seeking remains the goal of epistemology,²² justification cannot be dispensed with. The possibility of diverse interpretations, then, rather than becoming a substitute for justification, makes it all the more necessary to engage in justification. Underlying the very idea of truth-seeking is the realist intuition that truth and reality are discovered rather than made. Adjudication of cognitive disputes, then, is possible only if the world or reality that is independent of the rival claimants to truth plays a decisive role in the adjudication process.

The postmodern contention is that it is impossible to get beyond the many versions of the world to the world itself. Rorty tells us that the world does not tell us which of the many

¹⁹Richard H. Popkin, *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, 329-336.

²⁰Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001, 2; Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*, 3rd ed., Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy, New York: Routledge, 2011, 3 ff.

²¹Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, A viii, xii.

²²William P. Alston, *Beyond "Justification": Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, 36, 43; Jarrett Leplin, *A Theory of Epistemic Justification*, Philosophical Studies Series, Dordrecht: Springer, 2009, 19.

versions of the world we must adopt.²³ With no extra-human reality to guide our choice of the different constructions, the best that can be achieved in place of objectivity is social solidarity (Rorty) or fusion of horizons (Gadamer).

The shape of the fly bottle – the bottle from which the fly needs to be shown the way out – now begins to emerge with clarity. On the one hand there is the realization that the modern approach to knowledge with its foundationalism and objectivism is impossible. Add to it the inescapable diversity of the contemporary world. The postmoderns do provide an account of diversity by saying that all of them are of human making. On the other hand, if we are to resolve cognitive disputes we must get beyond the rival versions of the world and allow the mind-independent world to speak to us. In short, we must not replace mind-independent reality with human construction, 'nature' with 'culture', justification with edification, and truth with solidarity, as postmoderns are prone to do. This is the challenge of an epistemology that seeks to go beyond modern objectivism on the one hand and postmodern constructivism on the other. These contours of the fly bottle also apply to feminist epistemology, except that they face it more acutely because they share the Enlightenment ideals of justice and freedom.²⁴ Pursuit of these ideals calls for some objective basis beyond the fragmented relativistic parochial constructions. While Longino rightly calls for critical interactions from multiple perspectives for attaining objectivity,²⁵ the role of mind-independent reality in these interactions remains unclear. In the absence of such a role, the bringing together of perspectives sounds very much like Gadamer's fusion of horizons. Given this shape of the fly bottle, there has been a growing demand to re-

²³Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 6

²⁴Lennon and Whitford, *Knowing the Difference*, 1.

²⁵Helen Longino, *The Fate of Knowledge*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001, 129.

instate realism.²⁶ Moreover, it must be reinstated without sacrificing the insights of the valid critiques of modern epistemology, especially the impossibility of foundationalism. Once the impossibility of giving up all prior beliefs and beginning on a zero point is recognized, it immediately leads us to some kind of contextualism. The way out of the fly bottle, then, must be simultaneously contextual and realist. Call it contextual realism (Henceforth, CR).

3. Contextual Realism

Let us begin with contextual part of contextual realism. Given the variety of theories that go under the name of contextualism, it is neither possible nor needed to go into the details.²⁷ Instead, I shall identify the kind of contextualisms that follows from giving up the foundationalist aspirations of modern epistemology.

There are two kinds of contextualisms that are warranted by the decision to forgo foundationalism. The first is hermeneutic contextualism.²⁸ It is common place in hermeneutics that all understanding is based on some pre-understanding.²⁹ The starting point of understanding is not a mind that is *tabula rasa*, but something that is already understood. Even a simple statement like “This is a cat” is understood only when we have some pre-understanding of what a cat is (that it is an animal of a certain size, shape, fluffy looking, etc.). This kind of contextualism is also involved in Wittgenstein’s move away

²⁶See, Maurizio Ferraris, *Manifesto of New Realism*, Suny Series in Contemporary Italian Philosophy, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2014.

²⁷See, Elke Brendel and Christoph Jäger, *Contextualisms in Epistemology*, Dordrecht; Norwell, MA: Springer, 2005.

²⁸Analytic philosophers are more prone to talk about semantics and meaning than hermeneutics. But this kind of contextualism is best considered as hermeneutic (in terms of understanding). For a good contrast between semantics and hermeneutics, see, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. David E. Linge, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, 82.

²⁹Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London: Sheed & Ward, 1975.

from the picture theory of meaning to language games where we are prompted to think about linguistic behaviour “*in situ*, embedded in the lives of those who speak it”.³⁰

A second kind of contextualism concerns justification of beliefs. Wittgenstein is very clear that “All testing, all confirmation and disconfirmation of a hypothesis takes place already within a system. ... The system is not so much the point of departure [starting point], as the element in which arguments have their life.”³¹ Again,

If I make an experiment, I do not doubt the existence of the apparatus before my eyes. I have plenty of doubts, but not *that*. If I do a calculation I believe, without any doubts, that the figures on the paper will not change places on their own; and I also trust my memory the whole time, and trust it without any reservation.³²

The fact that both understanding and justification are contextual raises the problem of relativism. But distinguishing understanding and justification enables clarity. On the one hand, we have no choice but to accept hermeneutic contextualism; on the other hand, relativism of truth seems seriously problematic. How are we, then, to avoid the one and accept the other? Hans-Johann Glock, relying on Wittgenstein, points in the right direction by clearly distinguishing conceptual relativism from alethic or truth relativism. The former tells us that “the conceptual framework we use is not simply dictated to us by reality or experience...”³³ We have a great deal of choice in this

³⁰Marie McGinn, *Philosophical Investigations*, Routledge Philosophy Guidebooks, London; New York: Routledge, 1997, 44; for similarities between Wittgenstein and Heidegger see, Charles Guignon, “Philosophy after Wittgenstein and Heidegger,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 50, no. 4 (1990), 649-72,

³¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe, New York: Harper, 1969, no. 105.

³²Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 337.

³³Hans-Johann Glock, “Relativism, Commensurability and Translatability,” in *Wittgenstein and Reason*, ed., John Preston, *Ratio Book Series*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, 25.

matter. Then he goes on to say that "Our conceptual net does not determine whether we actually catch a fact, but it determines what kind of fact we can catch."³⁴ In other words, while conceptual relativism is inescapable in the contemporary world, truth relativism is not. Therefore, the postmodern identification of hermeneutics and epistemology must be rejected; we must accept hermeneutic relativism but not alethic relativism. The challenge is to find an approach to epistemology that is capable achieving this. It is here that the realist component of contextual realism comes into play.

Given that presently there are "as many versions of realism as there are antirealists"³⁵ we must be clear as to the kind of realism that is required for withstanding alethic relativism. Michael Devitt defines realism in terms of two tenets that he calls the existence thesis and the independence thesis.³⁶ Independence thesis tells us that reality "is not *constituted* by our knowledge, by our epistemic [or ethical] values, by our capacity to refer to it, by the synthesizing powers of our mind, by our imposition of concepts or theories or languages."³⁷ Existence thesis tells us about the different kinds of entities that are said to exist. These may be perceptual,³⁸ scientific,³⁹ religious,⁴⁰ or moral.⁴¹

³⁴Glock, "Relativism, Commensurability and Translatability," 25.

³⁵Philip Kitcher, "Real Realism: The Galilean Strategy," *The Philosophical Review* 110, no. 2 (2001), 151. This view is echoed by others. See, Anjan Chakravartty, *A Metaphysics for Scientific Realism: Knowing the Unobservable*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, xii.

³⁶Michael Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, 2nd ed., Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997, 5, 14-22.

³⁷Devitt, *Realism and Truth*, 15.

³⁸It makes claim to the existence of perceptual objects such as apples and oranges, fields and frogs.

³⁹It says that unobservable entities posited by science (such as electrons and neutrons, galaxies and black holes) have as much claim to existence as the observable entities.

⁴⁰Religious entities such as God and Brahman, soul and spirit exist.

⁴¹It makes claim to the existence of moral entities such as good and bad.

What gives epistemological traction to these ontological claims are two further theses: the access thesis and the truth thesis. The access thesis says that the mind-independent reality can be known⁴² such that we “form representations of the things around us... [to] guide our behaviour.”⁴³ One can be an ontological realist and still be an epistemological sceptic who denies the access thesis. The truth thesis of realism says that “Truth has to do with the relation of a potential truth bearer to a reality beyond itself”.⁴⁴ In other words, a truth bearer (sentence, proposition, theory, etc.) is made true/false by the way world is and not by our cognitive abilities or social consensus. This relation is commonly taken as some form of correspondence.⁴⁵ For example, the sentence “Snow is white” is true if and only if snow is white; otherwise it is false. Truth is discovered, not made.

While these four theses of realism apply to all forms of realism, there are some features that are specific to contextual realism. The first is a special twist given to the existence thesis. In this respect, contextual realism contrasts with metaphysical realism. Metaphysical realism tells us that entities of the different domains (perceptual, scientific, religious, or moral) come readymade or pre-fabricated, so to say. Plato gave us the metaphor of carving nature at its joints, thereby implying that reality has its own natural joints or that it is readymade.⁴⁶ Hilary

⁴²See, J. J. C. Smart and John Haldane, *Atheism and Theism*, 2nd ed., Great Debates in Philosophy, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003, 4. Their formulation of access in terms of ‘observation, hypothesis, and reflection’ may have to be broadened to include other means of access such as religious experience if we are to accommodate religious realism.

⁴³Kitcher, “Real Realism: The Galilean Strategy,” 153.

⁴⁴William P. Alston, “Realism and the Tasks of Epistemology,” in *Realism, Antirealism, and Epistemology*, ed. Christopher B. Kulp, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1997, 54.

⁴⁵For two different ways of conceiving correspondence, see, Alvin I. Goldman, *Epistemology and Cognition*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, 151-53.

⁴⁶For an extensive treatment of the matter, see, Joseph Keim Campbell, Michael O’Rourke, and Matthew H. Slater, eds., *Carving*

Putnam spelt out metaphysical realism clearly for our times when he said that "the world consists of some fixed totality of mind-independent objects. There is exactly one true and complete description of 'the way the world is'."⁴⁷ Given the diverse ways of conceiving the world (conceptual relativism) metaphysical realism is no longer a viable option, leading to the realization that "there is more than one 'true' theory or description of the world."⁴⁸ These different descriptions or conceptual schemes, then, are like different maps of the same terrain, each built to meet a different need (an industrial map, an agricultural map, a political map, etc.)

An early statement of the realization that there could be more than one true map is found in the 'two tables' of Arthur Eddington. One is the common sense table that all of us see, a solid, substantial entity; the other is the 'scientific table' made up of mostly empty space where numerous sparsely scattered electric charges rush about at great speed.⁴⁹ Wittgenstein's claim about different language games and Thomas Kuhn's teaching about different paradigms are other famous statements that repudiate metaphysical realism. Contextual realism demands that such conceptual diversity be accepted without giving way to alethic relativism. Mind-independent reality may not tell us which of the diverse conceptual schemes to adopt, but it must have the decisive say in helping us decide correct maps from misleading ones. The willingness to take on this challenge is the USP of contextual realism.

The greatest stumbling block in giving a decisive role to reality in resolving cognitive disputes is the argument from incommensurability. The idea of incommensurability as

Nature at Its Joints: Natural Kinds in Metaphysics and Science, Topics in Contemporary Philosophy, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2011.

⁴⁷Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 49.

⁴⁸Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History*, 49.

⁴⁹Arthur Eddington, *Gifford Lectures*, Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1927 <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Extras/Eddington_Gifford.html> (12.3.2016).

popularized by Thomas Kuhn, literally means ‘having no common measure’. This is closely linked to the access thesis of realism. If we lack common or shared access to reality, then, obviously, reality cannot be brought in to adjudicate disputed claims to truth. Seen against the backdrop of the two kinds of contextualism specified earlier, lack of shared access to reality can be either hermeneutic or justificatory. Inasmuch as understanding is always in terms of some pre-understanding, and the pre-understanding of the rival claimants to truth could differ considerably, the possibility of misunderstanding remains a stumbling block to resolving the dispute. This is hermeneutic incommensurability. Kuhn’s original statement of incommensurability is of this kind. It is based on his finding that even when rival paradigms in science use the same words, their meanings differ. Therefore, he rightly concluded that communication across paradigms is “inevitably partial.”⁵⁰

Kuhn’s measured statement about the lack of hermeneutic access is transformed by Rorty into a sweeping inability to “find a way of agreeing on what would settle the issue” of truth.⁵¹ We should be clear about what is at stake here. Both Kuhn and Rorty claim that the choice of rival paradigms in science is not simply a matter of observable evidence, as the evidence supports more than one theory. We have already granted this in accepting that there could be more than one true picture of the world. Again, the issue is not the inter-personal character of justification as against the intra-personal, cogitative procedure of the moderns. On the contrary, CR sees the focus on the conversational character of hermeneutics as an opportunity for overcoming the privatization of epistemology perpetuated by the moderns. The real issue, then, is how to give full play to hermeneutics without making truth merely a matter of inter-personal or social agreement. In other words, CR resists the tendency to jump from the lack of hermeneutic access to conclusion about justification and truth. Justification calls for evidence. And the required

⁵⁰Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 3rd ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, 149.

⁵¹Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 316, f.n.1.

evidence must fulfil two conditions: (1) it must come from reality that independent of the disputants, and (2) it must remain accessible to the rival claimants. In the absence of shared evidential access, the rivals cannot reach a rational agreement.⁵²

Let us consider the distinction between hermeneutic and evidential access further. The possibility of communication across different horizons and paradigms calls for at least a minimal overlap of the horizons or some commonality that they share.⁵³ Kuhn does not deny the possibility of communication across paradigms; he only says that such communication is partial. Likewise, hermeneutics of Gadamer is inherently conversational and conversing across different horizons requires that some understanding is possible.⁵⁴ Understanding remains partial in both cases. This hermeneutic gap is bridged by means of an exchange between the conversation partners that Paul Ricoeur calls the "inter-locutionary act."⁵⁵ Beginning with the shared minimal core the partners seek to expand what they share, as a result of which a fusion of horizons can take place (Gadamer). Bridging the hermeneutic gap, however, remains basically a matter between the conversation partners (the believer and the sceptic).

Justification requires a third pole, namely, evidence that emanates from reality that is independent of the conversation partners and is accessible to both. It is not that people like Gadamer or Ricoeur would deny mind-independent reality; not even Rorty denies it. But their tendency to conflate hermeneutic access with evidential access gives no identifiable role to mind-independent reality. CR insists that understanding a rival claim

⁵²See, George Karuvelil, "Epistemic Justification and the Possibility of Empirical Evidence," *Journal of Indian Council of Philosophical Research* 12, no. 1 (1994), 29-48.

⁵³George Karuvelil, "To Whom Am I Speaking? Communication, Culture, and Fundamental Theology," *Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2015), 681.

⁵⁴Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 180-81.

⁵⁵Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976, 15.

(hermeneutic access) must be distinguished from evidence that is accessible to the contending sides of a cognitive dispute. Only evidential access can prevent epistemic justification from becoming merely a matter of social conventions. Some of Rorty's statements seem to imply that justification is merely a matter of social agreement.⁵⁶ It is this turning of epistemic justification into a matter of social conventions that is unacceptable to CR. Since CR accepts the juridical notion of justification, it cannot but emphasize the accessibility of shared evidence.

How are we to obtain mutually accessible evidence from mind-independent reality? Since it is analytic philosophy that is more or less steadfast in its commitment to realism, CR seeks to bring together some of the scattered insights from analytic philosophy in a systematic fashion to spell out how such evidence could be obtained.

4. The Epistemological Strategy of CR

A first step in the direction of obtaining evidential access is taken when we recognize, with Wittgenstein, the autonomy of different language games. This would mean that we do not seek to justify knowledge about the different ontological realms of reality by the same yardstick. CR can accept, in principle, a variety of cognitive encounters with reality. But having recognized the autonomy of different language games, CR still insists that it is not language but the world that makes our propositions true or false. In this CR differs not only from those who identify epistemology with hermeneutics but also from the scientism of the moderns who apply the rules of one language game (science) across the board to all language games.

⁵⁶Consider, for example, the manner in which he contrasts justification as a social transaction and transaction with reality, as if the one excludes the other. He asks: "Shall we take "S knows that p"... as a remark about the status of S's reports among his peers, or shall we take it as a remark about the relation between subject and object, between nature and its mirror?" Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 175. See also, p.9.

Having recognized different language games, CR takes the next step by identifying the particular language game within which a *given* cognitive dispute occurs and stands in need of justification. This implies two things. First, rather than dealing with all kinds of realism in one shot, CR identifies the specific kind of realism within which a given dispute occurs. It agrees with Rockmore that a "commitment to realism only becomes epistemologically interesting when we know what kind of realism is in question."⁵⁷ Since empirical knowledge is the most non-controversial, it seems best to use it as a test case; if we can find some way of restoring realism in this realm it might provide us with a model for other realms. Even within the empirical realm, it is best to begin with perceptual realism than with scientific realism as the former is most familiar to all. Second, CR is oriented to resolving cognitive disputes that occur in real life situations and not just theoretical possibilities. In other words, CR is typically interested in local scepticism and not global scepticism that the moderns took as their starting point. Therefore, concerns about deception by evil demons or whether we are brains in the vats being manipulated by some evil scientists, etc. do not interest CR. As far as CR is concerned, such issues are akin to the alleged medieval discussions about the number of angels who can dance on the head of a pin: interesting theoretical possibilities but hardly relevant to the real life situations where we need to resolve disputed claims to truth.

A third step is to identify experiences that are relatively invariant within the chosen realm (e.g., perception) with a view to recognizing the limits of constructivism. These would be experiences where interpretative variations are minimal. The best example of such limits within the perceptual realm is found in Quine's 'pure' observations like 'It's milk', 'It's cold', etc.⁵⁸ These are universally accessible experiences. It is also noteworthy that in spite of their emphasis on the gendered character of knowledge, feminists like Anderson make exception

⁵⁷Rockmore, *On Constructivist Epistemology*, 12.

⁵⁸See, for example, W. V. Quine, "In Praise of Observation Sentences," *The Journal of Philosophy* 90, no. 3 (1993), 107-16.

to such knowledge as 'grass is green' or 'water quenches thirst'.⁵⁹ That there is a realm of perception that is common to the human species is in keeping with the evolutionary theory, which has named the cognitive niche specific to human beings as mesocosm.⁶⁰ This evolutionary heritage is utilized in the infant's learning process done in the company of its adult caregivers.⁶¹ The idea of an innate core to our perceptual structures forms the basis of an emerging branch of cognitive psychology called 'constraint theory'; and constraint theorists acknowledge their indebtedness to Quine.⁶²

Recognising universally accessible experiences within the perceptual realm is not enough. We must be able to provide justification for beliefs within this realm when they are subjected to doubt. This task is made difficult by the ghosts of modern foundationalism that continue to haunt contemporary epistemologies, especially in matters of justification and evidence. Since space does not permit me to exorcise them here, I shall only point out the position taken by CR. First of all, I shall leave aside the disputed question of whether justification is needed for true belief to be knowledge.⁶³ Second, there is the

⁵⁹Elizabeth Anderson, "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015), ed., Edward N. Zalta, <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/feminism-epistemology/>> (20.8.2016).

⁶⁰Franz M. Wuketits, ed., *Concepts and Approaches in Evolutionary Epistemology*, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1984, 80-84.

⁶¹See, Johan Modée, "Observation Sentences and Joint Attention," *Synthese* 124, no. 2 (2000), 230. This manner of understanding childhood learning differs from Quine's inasmuch as it recognizes that even before the child learns any language it has learned to discriminate objects.

⁶²See, Stuart Shanker, "Wittgenstein and Quine on the Nature of Language and Cognition and Its Implications for Constraint Theory" in Wittgenstein and Quine, eds., Robert L. Arrington and Hans-Johann Glock, London, New York: Routledge, 1996, 212-251.

⁶³Crispin Startwell, "Knowledge is Merely True Belief?" in *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 28. No.2 (April 1991), 157-165.

question of whether justification is to be understood in the active sense of providing evidence for disputed claims or in the passive sense⁶⁴ where every bit of knowledge comes with a certificate of justification attached to it. The passive notion of justification does not require evidence that is accessible to another, say a real world sceptic who doubts a specific truth claim, whereas the active notion does. Having adopted the juridical notion of justification in the face of competing claims to truth, and having recognized the impossibility of the monadic foundationalism of the moderns, it is incumbent on CR to accept the active view of justification where the rivals can reach a rational agreement on the basis of shared evidence.⁶⁵ This goes contrary to the practice of mainline epistemologists today. Moreover, CR considers it the responsibility of the believer to provide the required evidence to her sceptical rival. A third issue concerns the kind of evidence required for justification. Here again, the mainline epistemologists are haunted by the mentalist ghost of foundationalism where the ultimate evidence is to be found in the consciousness of a monadic knower.⁶⁶ This also goes by the name of internalism, matter of a huge debate in contemporary epistemology.⁶⁷ CR refuses to be drawn into this debate for reason that will become clear soon.

The broad direction of the kind of justification adopted by CR comes from the basic insight of naturalized epistemology that epistemic prescriptions (norms) must be based on descriptions of cognition. In the words of Philip Kitcher, epistemic prescriptions

⁶⁴William P. Alston, *Epistemic Justification*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989, 7.

⁶⁵For details of the argument, see, Karuvelil, "Epistemic Justification and the Possibility of Empirical Evidence," 29-48.

⁶⁶Earl B. Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology*, Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 2004, especially chapter 3; see also John Turri, "The Ontology of Epistemic Reasons," *Nous* 43, no. 3 (2009), 490-512.

⁶⁷Laurence Bonjour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification: Internalism Vs. Externalism, Foundations Vs. Virtues*, Great Debates in Philosophy, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003).

“must be grounded in facts about how systems like us could attain our epistemic goals in a world like ours”.⁶⁸ This is epistemological supervenience.⁶⁹ Describing the characteristic features of mesocosmic cognition, therefore, becomes the fourth step. Even in the matter of descriptions one can become a victim of the mentalist ghost but Goldman’s shift of focus from belief tokens (individual beliefs within a class) to belief types (whole class)⁷⁰ can be helpful here. What needs to be described are the characteristic features of the whole class of mesocosmic perception and not of belief tokens (appearing “round, bulgy, blue, jagged etc.”), as Alston does.⁷¹

Once the descriptions of universally accessible class of perceptual experiences are in place, we can draw out the normative implications of those descriptions. This is done by using Wittgenstein’s idea of ‘grammar’. Grammar tells us what kind of thing is being talked about,⁷² its ‘essence’.⁷³ Grammar stands in somewhat the same relation to language as the rules of a game stand to the playing of the game.⁷⁴ Playing of the game is

⁶⁸Philip Kitcher, “The Naturalists Return,” *The Philosophical Review* 101, no. 1 (1992), 63.

⁶⁹See, Jaegwon Kim, *Supervenience and Mind: Selected Philosophical Essays*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy, New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993. See in particular essays 8 “Supervenience as a Philosophical Concept” and 12 “What Is Naturalized Epistemology?”.

⁷⁰Alvin Goldman, “What is Justified Belief?”, in “George Sotiros Pappas, ed. *Justification and Knowledge: New Studies in Epistemology*, Philosophical Studies Series in Philosophy V. 17 Dordrecht; Boston: D. Reidel Pub. Co., 1979, 11.

⁷¹William P. Alston, “Perceptual Knowledge,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*, ed. John Greco and Ernest Sosa, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1999, 232-33. See also, Alston, *Beyond “Justification”: Dimensions of Epistemic Evaluation*, 181.

⁷²Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 373.

⁷³Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 371.

⁷⁴Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1974, I: 23.

an empirical matter whereas rules make the game what it is, distinct from other games.

What is special about this grammatical approach to justification is that the concerned evidence will be available to anyone who knows the grammar of the kind of cognition in question (say, perception). This is contrary to the traditional approach where evidence is a mental item that remains a private possession of the knower, and therefore, lacking in accessibility to others. On the other hand, unlike those critics who deny rationality to these private items in the name of confusing reasons and causes,⁷⁵ CR recognises their rational character. These private experiences do provide the initial reason for the believer to believe what she does, although they cannot have any evidential value for others. CR reconciles the two by distinguishing genetic or antecedent reason for believing from evidential reason for the belief. The former may be private to the individual whereas the latter is inter-subjectively accessible. It is for this reason that the internalism-externalism debate is irrelevant to grammatical justification.

The final step, arising from the realization that the universally accessible perceptual experience is only a part of our empirical knowledge, is to provide a descriptive account of the dynamics of the constructing process by which our universal perceptual schema gets variegated. We have already noted that the universal evolutionary heritage is utilised in the learning process of children and others. What is required is a more detailed account of this process of learning. I suggest that Ulric Neisser’s theory of a perceptual cycle provides a good account of this dynamics.⁷⁶ According to his theory the available information from the surroundings of the perceiver modifies the original schema. This explains for example, how the perception of snow by those brought up in cold countries would be much more ramified than those in the tropics. This would also explain a chemist’s ability to ‘see’ copper in a given liquid or a trained

⁷⁵See, Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 131.

⁷⁶Ulric Neisser, *Cognition and Reality: Principles and Implications of Cognitive Psychology*, New York: W. H. Freeman and Company, 1976.

physician's learned observation of a hyperthyroid (examples from Quine). This also makes room for the gendered character of knowledge that the feminists insist on.

5. Contextual Realism at Work: A Brief Illustration

As far as the description of the universal core of perception is concerned, there are at least four features that can be found in Quine. First, they concern perception of physical objects,⁷⁷ i.e., objects in space and time. Second, they are verbal responses to "concurrent sensory stimulation rather than to stored collateral information."⁷⁸ Third, at this level of observation, there exists a certain "pre-established harmony"⁷⁹ between the perceptual experience and the experienced world. Fourth, they are "the human counterparts of bird calls and ape's cries."⁸⁰ These belong to our evolutionary heritage.

All the four descriptions have normative implications. The second description, for example, can be considered a minimal statement of the causal theory of perception developed by H. P. Grice and others.⁸¹ Similarly the third description ("pre-established harmony") provides an explanation for the reliability theory of perception.⁸² William Child has rightly pointed out that the causal theory does not stand all by itself, but in

⁷⁷W. V. Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, New York; London: Columbia University Press, 1969, 11-13.

⁷⁸Quine, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays*, 85.

⁷⁹W.V. Quine, *From Stimulus to Science*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, p. 21; W. V. Quine, "I, You, and It: An Epistemological Triangle," in *Knowledge, Language and Logic: Questions for Quine*, ed. Alex Orenstein and Petr Kotatko, *Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000, 1, 2, 408.

⁸⁰Quine, *From Stimulus to Science*, 22.

⁸¹H. P. Grice and Alan R. White, "Symposium: The Causal Theory of Perception" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supp. Vol 35* (1961), 121-168.

⁸²William P. Alston, *The Reliability of Sense Perception*, Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993.

conjunction with some of its defeating conditions.⁸³ This suits the grammatical approach well because if we follow Wittgenstein’s analogy between games and rules, it is seldom that a game is played by a single rule. Seen in terms of inter-related rules, one of the defeating conditions of the causal rule is the awareness of an alternative source of physical causation. That no two perceptual objects can be in the same space at the same time is known to every competent user of the concept of perception. This happens to be a grammatical rule that follows from the first description (that we are dealing with perception of physical objects). And both these rules presuppose the reliability of the perceptual process. Taken together, these three rules (causalism, physicality, and reliability) would enable a disputed perceptual claim (“Was it a snake or a rope?”) to be resolved satisfactorily. All that is required is a more careful look to yield evidence that is accessible to both sides of the dispute.

This is only meant to be a very brief illustration of how descriptions yield grammatical rules for finding mutually accessible evidence for settling disputed perceptual claims. I suggest that most philosophical theories of perception are grammatical rules of this kind. Presently these theories tend to be considered as rivals to each other.⁸⁴ But when seen as grammar, they could be put to work in tandem to provide evidential access that can resolve cognitive disputes in a way that is satisfactory to all concerned.

6. Conclusion

Given that contemporary epistemological scene is caught in the waters muddied by the modern and postmodern demons, I have sketched CR as an epistemological theory that navigates the narrow path between the Scylla of modern objectivism and the Charybdis of postmodern fragmentation and relativism. This

⁸³William Child, *Causality, Interpretation, and the Mind*, Oxford Philosophical Monographs, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994, 165.

⁸⁴For various theories, see, William Fish, *Philosophy of Perception: A Contemporary Introduction*, Routledge Contemporary Introductions to Philosophy, London, New York: Routledge, 2010.

Wittgenstein-inspired theory, I have also argued, can incorporate the best insights of feminist epistemology as well as other contemporary epistemologies in a systematic manner. In this sense, CR is not one epistemological theory among others, but rather a theory that brings together scattered insights from various theories in a systematic fashion with a single minded purpose of setting up a law court that can resolve cognitive disputes that occur today. The strategy of CR outlined in the fourth section, it seems to me, can function as the court that Kant wanted epistemology to be. A very brief illustration of how it functions in settling perceptual disputes is provided. But the same grammatical approach to justification, with its emphasis on evidence that is accessible to the contending sides, will be able to resolve religio-mystical as well as moral disputes. But the success of the court will depend on finding and describing the core experiences that are relatively invariant to those realms and drawing out the grammatical implications of those descriptions. As far as justification of the more ramified character of knowledge is concerned, there are two points to be noted. First, the norms that follow from the description of the core experiences of the chosen realm would apply to all knowledge in that realm, including gendered knowledge. Second, if there are descriptions of a particular kind of ramified knowledge that are applicable to the whole of that class, say if gendered knowledge is applicable to all feminine perception, then those descriptions could yield additional rules. In keeping with the distinction between antecedent and evidential reason, it is readily admissible that women may have specific ways of coming to certain intuitions, but the justification of those intuitions would follow more universal procedures that are accessible to others.