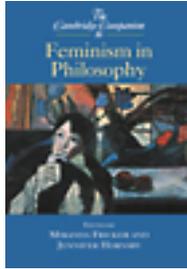


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# 8

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## Feminism in epistemology Pluralism without postmodernism

Those Greeks were superficial – *out of profundity*.  
Nietzsche<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Someone might wonder how there can be feminist epistemology – ‘knowledge is simply *knowledge*, regardless of gender, and that’s all there is to it’. There are philosophers of a relativistic mindset, some feminists among them, who would challenge the idea that knowledge is ‘simply’ knowledge, believing it to be both less and more than it seems. Those, for instance, who regard ‘true’ as an ‘empty compliment’<sup>2</sup> that we pay to propositions we want to endorse, or as part of a philosophical ‘discourse of legitimation’,<sup>3</sup> will regard ‘knowledge’ too as a metaphysically empty stamp of approval. Metaphysically speaking, then, they believe knowledge to be less than it seems. But politically speaking, they believe it to be more than it seems; for once their view of knowledge is in place, it is only a small step to the suggestion that propositions approved as knowledge are likely to reflect the perspectives and even serve the interests of those whose social power shapes the practices of approval. Since being female has placed one historically at the less powerful end of gender relations, it would be easy then to see how there could be a role for feminism in the theory of knowledge. Feminism would have a ready-made task in counter-acting and protecting against gender bias in the processes and institutions of approval.

There are also, of course, philosophers of a more realist mindset, some feminists among them, who find the relativistic conception of knowledge quite unconvincing. But they need not agree with the person who says that knowledge is ‘simply knowledge, regardless of gender’. They may have their own reasons for considering gender to be relevant to the epistemologist’s task. Although a good deal of feminist work is aligned with anti-

epistemological strains of thought, there is also a growing corpus of feminist work which makes a critical contribution to epistemology, radicalizing it from the inside, as opposed to engaging in a critique of it as if from the outside.

A central example is feminist standpoint theory, which originates in Marx's historical materialism.<sup>4</sup> The key Marxian idea is that different social groups have different epistemic 'standpoints', where the material positioning (the relation to production) of one of the groups is said to bestow an epistemic privilege. In Marxism we find the idea that the position of the proletariat makes available the correct view of material relations (though it was Lukács who emphasized and developed the significance of the Marxist notion of standpoint<sup>5</sup>). Feminists have taken from Marxism the intuitive idea that a life led at the sharp end of any given set of power relations provides for critical understanding (of the social world, in the first instance) where a life cushioned by the possession of power does not. Here, then, is a first way in which social identity and power relations (e.g. gender and gender ideology) may be relevant in epistemology: they may influence epistemic access to the world.

A second way is that social identity may constrain participation in epistemic practices – practices of asserting, denying, telling, asking, giving reasons etc. Such practices are in large measure interactive, so that a person's full participation in them depends upon certain reciprocating background attitudes on the part of fellow participants – attitudes which, for instance, provide for the appropriate distributions of trust and of credibility. If relations of gender, class, or race cause distortion in these background attitudes, then social identity and power have intervened in a manner that can be the concern not merely of the sociologist of knowledge but of the epistemologist.

The picture I have just presented is, I hope, useful; but it is somewhat artificial. In it, feminism's engagement with epistemology takes one of two different forms: either it is aligned with postmodernism, in which case the order of the day is 'endist'<sup>6</sup> and anti-epistemological, or it is aligned with epistemology, in which case it works for a more fully socialized and thus<sup>7</sup> a more politically aware epistemology. The label 'feminist epistemology' naturally attaches to the latter sort of work. But, as the label would suggest, feminist epistemology has something important in common with feminist anti-epistemological lines of thought – a commitment to theorizing social difference, at the very least – so that there is an ongoing, vitalizing tension within feminist epistemology in virtue of which it considers itself answerable to its more philosophically radical<sup>8</sup> sister. This chapter attempts to answer and be answerable to the anti-epistemological strains of feminist

postmodernism, by engaging in a critical, but I hope not merely antipathetic, diagnosis of the postmodern impulse.

### A postmodern approach

Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson say that a feminist postmodernism would

replace unitary notions of woman and feminine gender identity with plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation.<sup>9</sup>

Feminist postmodernism is to be credited with making important intellectual currency of the insight that social identity is multiply fragmented. The insight certainly fits with ‘postmodernism’s big-bang logic of expansion’,<sup>10</sup> but a conception of social identity as fragmented is not indissolubly linked with the postmodernist outlook. Postmodernism does not have a monopoly on the idea that social identity is complex. Indeed, that which commends the idea to us is really something of an anathema to postmodernism – the aspiration to represent the world truly, to capture the facts. One has a reason to adopt a social ontology of fragmentation if one thinks that it makes for an accurate representation of how things are – more accurate, for instance, than a social ontology which mentions only class.

Postmodernists typically advocate a social ontology of fragmentation not on grounds of sociological accuracy, but on the political ground that any other ontology would be exclusionary. The suspicion is that any general categories of identity will not be fit to capture the indefinitely many and shifting combinations of social positionings which real people occupy: ‘Consciousness of exclusion through naming is acute. Identities seem contradictory, partial and strategic.’<sup>11</sup> In feminist postmodernism, then, to recognize difference is to meet an obligation to political inclusiveness rather than to empirical accuracy.

There is reason, however, to doubt the political adequacy of a postmodernist formulation. When the call for a sensitivity to difference is given in terms of ‘exclusion’, it is implied that the objection to general social categories of class, gender and race is that they leave some people out. But the notion of exclusion on its own cannot possibly capture all that is wrong with over-generalizations employing these categories. The point has often been made, and remains true, that an adequate feminist politics will represent more than a demand to be included; it will represent a demand

for change. Thus the feminist postmodernist formulation of the problem of difference, with its anaemic political lexicon of exclusion, risks falling short of a genuinely political stance. Susan Strickland puts the point well:

[D]ominant theories and categories were wrong not simply in universalizing beyond their scope, i.e., that they were partial in the sense of being limited, not universally applicable, but that they were also partial in the sense of being ideological, interested and distorted; in short to a greater or lesser extent false . . . The assertion of feminist ‘difference’ was and is, basically a challenge and critique.<sup>12</sup>

Feminism’s concern with difference is driven by a political commitment to robust critical thought and indeed to political action; whereas the distinctively postmodernist concern with the fragmentation of social identity primarily speaks to the quite general theoretical commitment to the ‘big-bang logic of expansion’. This is how the familiar yet unresolved question is raised as to whether postmodernism possesses the epistemological resources to fuel genuinely critical thought. If not, it courts conservatism.

An appropriate touchstone for a working conception of postmodernism is Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* – the original, and very influential, postmodernist philosophical text. Here we find it is a definitive commitment of the anti-epistemological strand of postmodernist thought that the rules of ‘language games’ are strictly ‘local’. There are no trans-local norms of rationality and justification; any attempt to impose constraints on thought by way of an appeal to reason as such is judged to be an act of ‘terror’:

We must . . . arrive at an idea and practice of justice that is not linked to that of consensus.

A recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games is a first step in that direction. This obviously implies a renunciation of terror, which assumes that they are isomorphic and tries to make them so. The second step is the principle that any consensus on the rules defining a game and the ‘moves’ playable within it *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation.<sup>13</sup>

Lyotard’s idea of locality is not a locality to culture, or even to social group. The authority of the rules of a given ‘language game’, we are told, resides only in a fleeting agreement by ‘present players’. Thus the postmodernist ‘war on totality’<sup>14</sup> brings a bizarrely voluntaristic brand of relativism. Here ‘language game’ signifies something fleeting and voluntaristically conceived – something closer to a single conversation than to an entrenched and historically stable discursive practice. Of course not all forms of postmodernism need imitate Lyotard’s rhetorical extremes, but his

text can serve here as a model for the trenchantly anti-epistemological current in postmodernism which more moderate positions will resist.

Any political inadequacy we may suspect of postmodernism is likely to flow from an epistemological source. That source is now in view. The insistence on the localness of all norms of judgement renders postmodernism incapable of sustaining ordinary critical judgements, such as the judgement that some forms of social organization are plain unjust, or that some beliefs are plain false. The question whether any particular critical judgement is reasonable cannot depend on the 'agreement' of those who happen to be one's interlocutors – their interests may be served very nicely by the discursive *status quo*. Yet if we try to change the *status quo* by appeal to any general standards of reason, apparently it is we who are guilty of discursive terrorism. At an aesthetic level, postmodernism may be a champion of creativity, playfulness and perpetual movement, but this should not conceal the fact that at the level of critical thought, it replaces the progressive dynamic of reason with a lugubrious critical stasis.

Feminist postmodernists who are aligned with the anti-epistemological strand of postmodernism under attack here may, ever-resourceful, adopt a strategy of insisting, against the charge of conservatism, that genuinely critical and evaluative thought *can* be purely local. Perhaps they will exploit Lyotard's idea of a language game fleetingly played, or some related idea of 'situated criticism', or of epistemic 'nomadism',<sup>15</sup> or some other idea designed to ensure both that the boundaries of the local are respected and that genuine critical judgements are seen to issue from positionings that are transient, strategic, or pragmatic. But would such judgements be genuine critical judgements? Suppose someone protests 'Equal pay for equal work!', or 'Slavery is wrong!'. And suppose the protest is met with a shrug of cynical insouciance from the powers that be. Postmodernism is unfit to characterize that response as unreasonable, or unjustified, or even inappropriate, for who is to say which 'language game' the authorities may provisionally have 'agreed' to play? Of course, no other epistemological view can guarantee that dissenting voices are given their due: the practical prospect of discursive injustice spans the gamut of theoretical positions. What is at issue is the authority of the critical thoughts we may voice and of others' responses to them. (The question of authority is crucial, and I confront it in the next section.)

If the postmodernist should try to defend the radical credentials of local/situated/nomadic criticism by pointing to our ordinary discursive resources and proposing that they already provide all we need for critical thought, then she surely looks naive. As Seyla Benhabib has said, it is a 'defect of "situated criticism" . . . to assume that the constitutive norms of a given

culture, society, and tradition will be sufficient to enable one to exercise criticism in the name of a desirable future'.<sup>16</sup>

On a more sinister note, our worry about conservatism must be seen to go beyond a concern that postmodernism brings an inadvertent conservatism of critical inertia. We have to be suspicious that it is motivated, in some quarters at least, by a more energetic type of conservatism. As Sabina Lovibond asks:

What . . . are we to make of suggestions that the [modernist] project has run out of steam and that the moment has passed for remaking society on rational, egalitarian lines? It would be only natural for anyone placed at the sharp end of one or more of the existing power structures . . . to feel a pang of disappointment at this news. But wouldn't it also be in order to feel *suspicion*? How can any one ask me to say goodbye to 'emancipatory metanarratives' when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-and-miss affair?<sup>17</sup>

In response to a 'suspicious' reading of this kind, the postmodernist might say that her insistence on seeing trans-local critical judgement as terroristic is motivated only by a desire to castigate attempts on the part of the powerful to lay down the law about how the world is. But even if this were the driving motivation, the insistence would retain its sinister aspect. For it equally has the effect of robbing the powerless of the right to regard their own counter-claims as grounded in something which is of itself authoritative, something whose authority is not diminished by the cynical insouciance of others. If the powerful are merely *expressing* themselves when they tell others how the world is, then so too are the powerless – only in the case of the powerless nobody is listening. The problem with the postmodernist charge of terrorism (or imperialism, or authoritarianism) against a practice of reason is that it is hopelessly indiscriminate.

A different, familiar criticism of postmodernism, but one from which I shall suggest the postmodernist is ultimately immune, is the charge of self-refutation.<sup>18</sup> Isn't a position that vilifies all 'grand narratives' itself a grand narrative? Isn't anti-epistemology yet another species of epistemological position (even if it refuses to be pinned down to any stable determinate thesis)? On the face of it, the answer is Yes. But postmodernism can achieve an artful dodge away from this charge, by exploiting the idea of irony. The historical self-consciousness of the postmodern era is understood to impose on the subject an ironical attitude of detachment, so that she is semi-disengaged from even her most keenly held beliefs and values.<sup>19</sup> Richard Rorty affectionately describes 'ironists' as never being 'quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency

and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves'.<sup>20</sup> Rorty's ironism invites us to live with a tension, even a conflict, between our attitude towards the things we take seriously and our ironist's lack of seriousness. The will to tolerate this sort of dissonance is also explicit in Donna Haraway's characterization of postmodernist irony: 'Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true.'<sup>21</sup> Provided that the ironical attitude can be said to extend to the theoretical pronouncements that are expressive of the postmodernist outlook itself, then the postmodernist does not contradict herself in stating her position. The 'statement' is itself provisional, not ultimately taken seriously, not understood as having any sway beyond the discursive locality of this conversation, this 'language game'.

Or so the vigilant ironist will *say*. But even if she wins a technical victory for postmodernism in the face of accusations of self-refutation, there is still a case to be answered in respect of the practical psychological viability of ironism. We may well doubt our prospects for psychological health in a life where we cannot quite take 'seriously' even our most deeply held beliefs and values. We are entitled to doubt the livability (not to mention the desirability) of a life in which the historical achievement of self-consciousness has degenerated into a knowing disingenuousness.

We can see, then, that postmodernism is dogged by problems of conservatism and of psychological viability. But there remains a powerful and profound philosophical motivation for it which we have not yet reckoned with: the problem of the authority of reason. We all know that postmodernism is a response to a 'crisis' of reason (the crisis produced by modernity<sup>22</sup>). But perhaps we can come to a better understanding of the postmodern rational malaise by venturing a more specific diagnostic interpretation. I now turn to that heuristic exercise. I shall propose a speculative reconstruction which is designed to explain the malaise, by making plain both its intelligibility and its needlessness.

### A genealogy of postmodernism

The idea that there could be a problem surrounding the question of reason's authority has arisen in various forms at different points in the history of philosophy.<sup>23</sup> The problem can be seen in its modern form, perhaps most relevantly and most vividly, at the heart of Kant's philosophy. One quick – too quick – way of generating an apparent crisis of reason would be achieved in four steps. First, accept the fundamental Kantian distinction between a wholly unconditioned reason on the one hand, and merely

heteronomous forces on the other. Second, accept that the authority of reason derives from the fact that reason is empirically unconditioned. Third, reflect that the idea of a wholly unconditioned reason is dubious. Fourth, conclude that reason is just force by another name.

This would be too quick on several scores, not least that of Kantian exegesis. But more careful and more subtle routes to rational crisis may nonetheless take roughly this form. I shall suggest – in postmodernism’s favour – that even on a constructivist reading of Kant, the question of reason’s vindication remains problematical; but I shall also suggest – against postmodernism – that the above crisis-producing argument contains a false move which is preserved in sublimated form in the intellectual background to the postmodernist rational malaise. The false move is made when the acceptance of (something like) the Kantian standard for reason’s vindication is held on to, even while the outlook that produced it is disowned. Once we make the move explicit we are better placed to find a philosophical means of staying off the malaise. Many philosophers of an analytic persuasion meet postmodernism with bafflement, or doubt that it has any genuine philosophical motivations. I aim to present a philosophical motivation for postmodernism which can lead us to understand precisely how the postmodernist view of reason goes awry, and also to appreciate that it is an interestingly (and not merely influentially) mistaken response to a deep philosophical problem.

The postmodernist acquiescence in rational crisis can be generated not only in the quick four-step manner rehearsed above, in which Kant figures as embarked on a doomed foundationalism. It can also be generated, or so I will suggest, from an interpretation of Kant which takes his vindicatory project as a piece of constructivism. This is important, because if the postmodernist acquiescence in crisis were dependent on an acceptance of foundationalism, then postmodernism would surely be far easier to dispense with than it is. A constructivist interpretation of Kant’s vindication of reason is given by Onora O’Neill. She has argued that we should understand Kant as pitched against the foundationalism of his rationalist predecessors, and as offering a constructivist vindication that depends upon (a historical progression towards) an ideal discursive practice which is governed entirely by principles of reason that anyone could accept – an ideal of perfect Enlightenment.<sup>24</sup> In O’Neill’s reading, the dependence of reason upon freedom which we find in Kant takes on a political aspect. The freedom on which reason relies for its authority is conceived in the politically demanding sense of communication with (rather than mere toleration of) dissent. This demanding conception is required to provide the conditions for historical progress towards the ideal of perfect inclusiveness.

O'Neill's interpretation is borne out by the emphasis Kant places in 'What is Enlightenment?' on the distinction between 'private' and 'public' uses of reason. She explains:

A 'public' use of reason is not defined by its large audience, and cannot take place in the public service, where relations of command and obedience permit only 'private' uses of reason. The reason Kant attaches importance to 'public' uses of reason is rather that these alone are not premised on accepting some rationally ungrounded [authorities] – 'alien' authorities (e.g. Frederick II, or the teachings of a church). Hence they alone are full uses of reason, and 'private' uses of reason are to be understood as defective, deprived or *privatus* . . .<sup>25</sup>

What makes private uses of reason 'private', then, is that they have a delimited jurisdiction: their audience is confined to and defined by some external authority. They issue from an imperfectly inclusive discursive situation so that, as one might put it, there are points of view which are neglected by that use of reason – points of view which have in one way or another been excluded or suppressed.

O'Neill's appealing constructivist reading distances Kant from his rationalist predecessors, so that he is seen to occupy a position somewhere between their foundationalism and the reductivism of the postmodernists. The reductivist position is captured in the view that reason is just another form of social power – or alternatively, in Foucauldian terms, the view that reason is a fundamentally 'disciplinary' authority in the service of a 'régime of truth'.<sup>26</sup> O'Neill herself suggests that a virtue of Kant's position is that it avoids both rationalist Scylla and postmodernist Charybdis. But while the constructivist interpretation clearly pre-empts the quick four-step argument to crisis, I would suggest – without detriment to O'Neill's exegetical strategy – that there is a route to postmodernism which such a constructivism cannot block. For it remains reasonable that someone should come to doubt the appropriateness of the ideal of a perfectly free and inclusive discursive situation in which no "alien" authorities' are present to impugn the spontaneity of critical thought. One might come to doubt its appropriateness on the basis of Foucauldian considerations about the place of power in discursive relations:

Relations of power are not in a position of exteriority with respect to other types of relationships (economic processes, knowledge relationships, sexual relations), but are immanent in the latter; they are the immediate effects of the divisions, inequalities, and disequilibriums which occur in the latter, and conversely they are the internal conditions of these differentiations; relations of power are not in superstructural positions, with merely a role of prohibi-

tion or accompaniment; they have a directly productive role, wherever they come into play.<sup>27</sup>

If power is a ‘productive’ force that helps to constitute discursive relations, rather than an alien force that threatens to interfere with them from the outside, then the Kantian conception – ideal or not – of discursive relations looks to be a false one. Power is certainly a heteronomous force. So the Kantian ideal must be of a discursive situation from which the operation of power is entirely absent. Yet this is impossible if power is partially constitutive of discursive relations. Given the Foucauldian insight, we cannot make sense of the idea of a discursive situation in which the non-suppression of any critical thought is secured by an *absence* of power. Confronted with any discursive situation, there will have been many an undetectable suppression in advance of the point at which we could ask the question: is every thought out in the open?

Someone who is justly influenced by this Foucauldian line of thought is entitled to a certain pessimism as to reason’s susceptibility to the Kantian vindication. The pessimism seems appropriate even on the constructivist reading, because the idealization on which the vindication relies is an idealization of a false conception of discursive relations. The Kantian conception characterizes the workings of power as external to discursive relations, as if we could extrude the dynamics of power – the influence of “alien” authorities’ – from discursive relations *per se*.

In light of the Foucauldian conception of power’s constitutive role in discursive relations, someone with a commitment to the Kantian standard for reason’s vindication is likely to seek a counsel of despair. Disillusionment leads her to reject reason’s authority – where she might instead have rejected the Kantian standard – and she comes to regard all uses of reason as on all fours with the operations of obviously heteronomous, worldly species of power. She may not go so far as to declare that reason’s operation is morally equivalent to ‘terrorizing’ someone into believing that *p*, but she may come to the conclusion that the use of reason is no different from the exercise of social power – as Frederick II, or as the head of a church – to bring someone to believe that *p*. So far as she is concerned, all uses of reason are, in the Kantian terminology, private uses. She despairs of the possibility of the genuinely public uses on which the vindication of reason proper was seen to depend.

I do not deny that there may yet be room to show that something like a Kantian vindication of reason remains available. Perhaps it could be shown that a Kantian has no need to rely on a conception of discursive freedom that requires the complete absence of power’s influence. A Kantian might

adjust her conception of the conditions under which we can say that no critical thought is suppressed, so that only the absence of certain, corrupting operations of power is required. (This possibility surely provides a promising strategy for the Kantian impressed by the Foucauldian thought, and it is close to the strategy I shall eventually be recommending.) My purpose is simply to offer a reconstruction of a genuine philosophical motivation for even the most extreme postmodernist rational scepticism – scepticism whose object is the special authority that is supposed to attach to the force of reason.<sup>28</sup> Inasmuch as the Kantian conception of reason's authority is dependent on an ideal of political freedom, disillusionment with the possibility of vindicating it in the Kantian manner can be expected to find expression in specifically political terms. If the postmodernist anti-epistemological stance is motivated in the manner I have suggested, then its rhetoric of 'terror', 'authoritarianism' and 'imperialism' is, hyperbole notwithstanding, perfectly apt.

This is not to say that the postmodernist rational malaise is, all things considered, well-motivated. On the contrary, I have characterized it as a counsel of despair, and as an expression of disillusion. And I have suggested that the disillusionment might be blamed not on reason itself but on an unacknowledged continued commitment to a peculiarly unreachable (Kantian) standard for reason's vindication.<sup>29</sup> The little genealogy I have presented allows us to identify the crux of the postmodernist rational malaise: postmodernism despairs of the possibility of distinguishing authoritative from authoritarian uses of reason.

I think that this is not always appreciated. It is clear from Thomas Nagel's Introduction to *The Last Word* that he was prompted to write it partly by the prevalence of postmodernist thought. He never uses that term, and his book is not a *response* to postmodernism, but he says that the climate of subjectivist and relativist habits of thought is 'there as a source of irritation in the background', and it is manifestly an aim of the book to erect defences for reason fit to protect it against onslaughts from postmodernists. But Nagel does not appreciate the distinctively political character of postmodernists' rational scepticism. Their scepticism is not a response to familiar problems in metaphysics or philosophy of mind about the place of reason in nature or the relation of mentality to the physical realm. It is a response first and foremost to a problem which cuts across epistemology, metaphysics and ethics:<sup>30</sup> the problem of discursive authority. Nagel's neglect of the ethical-political impetus behind the irritating subjectivist climate is a disappointment. It ensures that his book's (surely correct) message – that reason, and not something else to which it is reduced, must have the last word – is not put in terms that could impact on the debates

which have created the climate. It is not that Nagel hopes to persuade any relativist of reason's dominion – on the contrary, he says 'I don't seriously hope that work on the question of how reason is possible will make relativism any less fashionable'.<sup>31</sup> My point is simply that it is a pity, when reacting to an enormously influential *Zeitgeist*, not to diagnose it exactly right.

The diagnosis I have offered brings two points into view. First, it allows us to see that a policy of ironism, localness, or nomadism can provide no solution at all to the problem of how to refrain from discursive terrorism. If the source of the problem resides in the idea that rational persuasion is *au fond* just another form of coercion, then it changes nothing to reason – or, more neutrally perhaps, to communicate thoughts – fleetingly, ironically, locally, changeably. No matter how the postmodern subject is personified – in the figure of the cyborg, the nomad, the private ironist – we now see that it can provide no solace. If the reasoner is a discursive authoritarian who trades in a kind of terror, then the ironic and nomadic strategies merely add cynicism and capriciousness to the list of her vices.

Secondly, our diagnosis points to a suitable therapy for the despair. Something we may see as *the Kantian problem* – a foundational problem – may be insoluble. But perhaps we can show that the foundational problem arises only on a historically specific, and so non-compulsory, understanding of what is required for a proper distinction between authoritative and authoritarian uses of reason. In short, we may be able to prescribe a means of staving off disillusionment by posing the problem more superficially – at ground level, so to speak. If so, a broadly epistemological question will find its answer through being posed as a first-order question in the ethics of discursive practice. (The question relieved of its foundational aspect remains an epistemological one, because the practices whose ethics we are concerned with are epistemic practices.)

What the feminist, or otherwise politicized, epistemologist should be concerned to bring to light are cases of discursive authoritarianism. It is a condition of our being able to do this that our conception of rational authoritarianism permits a contrast with other discursive behaviours that we can regard as all right, as non-authoritarian. It is politically futile – indeed it is ultimately senseless – to say that all reasoned discourse is authoritarian or terrorist. If we say that, then we deprive ourselves of the required point of contrast. (We have just seen that the freeform ironic discursive attitude can provide no adequate contrast.) Meanwhile, the everyday ethical and meta-physical question of what constitutes an authoritarian use of reason has been obscured by the foundational, grand-metaphysical one – a consequence which is, once again, congenial to conservatism.

The question of reason's authority is one of the problems of freedom, where another such problem is that of free will. The two problems have a similar structure. The debate surrounding the former invokes a contrast with authoritarianism – mere social power; and the debate surrounding the latter invokes a contrast with causal determinism – mere causal power. My strategy here, then, can be seen as a Humean one. Where Hume argues that the relevant contrast with free will is not causal determination as such but only constraint, I am arguing that the relevant contrast with the authority we want for reason is not social power as such but only certain operations of power – authoritarian ones.<sup>32</sup>

If we succeed in transforming the question of rational authority from the excessively deep foundational one to the ground-level ethical one, then we shall perhaps have succeeded in being 'superficial out of profundity'.<sup>33</sup> Being suitably superficial here will require us to take the everyday ethical distinction between authoritative and authoritarian uses of reason at face value. We do not put the distinction in these terms every day, but we make such judgements nonetheless. It is surely one of the achievements of feminism that we have grown more attuned to the ethical and political aspects of discursive practice – though I do not deny that we need to get better at recognizing rational authoritarianism when we are confronted with it. Indeed, equipping ourselves with the right philosophical conception is meant to help. Feminism calls upon us to be concerned above all with the politics of lived experience. And this should lead us to focus on the practical, so that we aim to do philosophy in a way that is informed by and informs our best everyday judgements about the character of discursive transactions.

Our theoretical energies ought, then, to be directed to the important and novel task of using the distinction between 'authoritative' and 'authoritarian' in order to bring to light the first-order ethical and political aspects of epistemic practice. In bringing them into view we shall be exploring some ways in which ethical and political concepts can be literally, not merely metaphorically, applicable to epistemic practice.<sup>34</sup> When it is contrasted with this straightforward theoretical engagement with the ethics and politics of reason, postmodernism may seem to offer us little besides an opportunity to be profound out of superficiality.

This is a little unfair of course. In the postmodernist rhetoric of terror – and certainly in the feminist postmodernist rhetoric of exclusion – one should doubtless recognize the expression of a genuinely radical aspiration. Most relevantly here, postmodernists are impelled by a concern to build into epistemology the space for an epistemic pluralism. (Recall the earlier suggestion that the feminist postmodernist's concern with difference is

driven by a political commitment to inclusiveness – an inclusiveness which she might once have hoped Kant could guarantee.) Insisting on ‘permanent partiality’ and on the multiplicity of epistemic perspectives is part of an attempt to secure a kind of expressive freedom which the discourse of traditional epistemology can seem designed to suppress. Sandra Harding captures the pluralist spirit in feminist postmodernism thus: ‘Contrary to the assumption of “a” world out there . . . there are as many interrelated and smoothly connected realities as there are kinds of oppositional consciousness. By giving up the goal of telling “one true story”, we embrace instead the permanent partiality of feminist inquiry.’<sup>35</sup> Postmodernism’s credentials as the defender of plurality against epistemology’s will to unification is one of its attractions for feminists, who are rightly concerned to honour the reality of epistemic difference at the level of theory. That is why postmodernism can appear as an ally. But I have been arguing that the apparent alliance is an illusion – and a treacherous one.

First, we found postmodernism to be troubled by conservatism and by psychological unviability. Then we saw that it presents us with a view about *the very idea* of rational authority (a view diagnosed as an expression of disillusionment) when what we need is a view about how we should conduct ourselves as reasoners – as participants in discursive or epistemic practice. Now we are reminded that postmodernism can seem attractive to feminists in virtue of its being a champion of pluralism. And I shall finish by arguing that, so far as feminism’s commitment to theorizing epistemic difference is concerned, the ways in which postmodernism champions pluralism are the wrong ways.

### Pluralism within reason – a perspectival realism

If the right level for pluralism is ground level, the level of practice, then what epistemology needs to be brought to accommodate is a first-order epistemic pluralism. It is that sort of pluralism which acknowledges the existence of many different perspectives on a shared world. And, assuming we are speaking literally, there must be a shared world. If there are ethical-political aspects of epistemic practice that arise as a result of the participants having different epistemic perspectives, then the participants stand to each other in ethical-political relations of one or another kind. This presupposes that they inhabit the same world – a world in which there may be authoritarian practices to be brought to light. The pluralism we need, then, is the ordinary first-order kind, a pluralism in practice: ‘To acquiesce in a diversity of opinions – to tolerate dissensus – is to accept pluralism.’<sup>36</sup>

Inasmuch as postmodernists’ urge to pluralism is explained by reference

to a commitment to making epistemology reflect the reality of epistemic difference and epistemic authoritarianism, postmodernism imposes pluralism at every level except the right one. Pluralism gets expressed as an ontological thesis about multiple realities, as a metaphysical thesis about multiple truths, and as an epistemological thesis about the ‘permanent partiality of perspectives’.<sup>37</sup> Meanwhile, the prospect of theorizing any first-order epistemic pluralism has been obliterated in the big-bang-style expansion.

The pluralism for which there is a genuine motivation is one that is capable of honouring the everyday insight (whose feminist theoretical expression originates in standpoint theory) that social differences give rise to differences in the perspectives in which the world is viewed, and that power can be an influence in whose perspectives seem rational. The aspiration to secure the legitimacy of a pluralism of perspectives is closely related both to the discursive practice which Kant idealized, and to the kind which feminists attracted by postmodernism might be hoping for. But our pluralism arises from a conception of discursive relations which, unlike Kant’s, is informed by the idea of power’s immanence in those relations. And our pluralism, unlike postmodernism’s, promotes a practice of reason that permits different perspectives to come to the fore not merely in order that they should gain expression, but in order that they should contribute to an ongoing critical discursive practice.<sup>38</sup>

We have seen, then, that a critical awareness of the phenomenon of discursive authoritarianism should motivate us to make explicit provision for a first-order epistemic pluralism. This is not the place to attempt to do that, but a gesture at least can be made towards the possibility of what I have called a ‘perspectival realism’.<sup>39</sup> According to perspectival realism, the right conception of social reality is such that, at any given historical moment, many of the facts that constitute it permit of being viewed rationally in more than one perspective. I think this is a thoroughly commonplace idea, but one that has not found much expression in epistemology. When informed by the Foucauldian insight about power’s constitutive role in discursive relations, perspectival realism furnishes a rationale for a truly radicalized ethics of discursive practice. It is radicalized because our conception of authoritarianism is now informed by an awareness of how discursive transactions are permeated by operations of power. And also because it is informed by an awareness that the perspectives in which the powerless may view the world can appear less rational than they are, owing to an uneven discursive terrain. When this happens, there *is* a kind of epistemic tyranny – a tyranny which we are unable to identify if we take the postmodernist view that all uses of reason are tyrannical.

## Conclusion

I have argued that the right way to set about answering the question of reason's authority is by posing it at ground level in the form of an ethical question about epistemic practice: which uses of reason are authoritarian, as opposed to simply authoritative? The Foucauldian insight – and indeed feminism's own insight into power's permeation of social and personal relationships, as captured in the slogan 'the personal is political' – must inform our first-order judgements so that our ethics of discursive practice emerges in a state of political awareness. We may refine our appreciation of what is at stake in the distinction between 'authoritarian' and 'authoritative' by way of comparisons with other, similarly subtle distinctions which are nonetheless thoroughly familiar to us. We exploit such distinctions when, for instance, we judge someone's outlook to be moral but not moralistic, or their words to be full of sentiment but not sentimental.<sup>40</sup> I have also argued that epistemology should be made accountable to difference by incorporating an epistemic pluralism into it, not an ontological or a metaphysical or an epistemological one. As in the case of reason's authority, the right level to accommodate difference is ground level.

Nagel gives the last word to reason. If the ethics and politics of reason are to be made visible, then we must understand reason in practical terms. Such an emphasis on the practical character of rationality inevitably summons the image of Wittgenstein, and we are reminded that it is a philosophical skill to know *at what point* simply to say 'This is where my spade is turned. This is what I do, this is what I say.'<sup>41</sup> The shadow of conservatism hovers over us in the risk of saying it too soon. But there is an equal risk – and one which has turned out to be equally hospitable to conservatism – in saying it too late. I have tried to show that, over the question of reason, postmodernists draw the discussion to a close too late. They want to give the last word not to our practice of reason but to the operations of social power, the defiant antidote to which is an excessively radical brand of expressive freedom. What makes the question of reason's authority important to the politically conscious epistemologist is its implications for the ethics of epistemic practice. It is for good reason, then, that the last word here shall be practical.<sup>42</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Preface to the second edition; trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 38.
- 2 Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 10.

- 3 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiii.
- 4 See the work cited in Further Reading under 'Feminist Standpoint Theory', p. 269.
- 5 'The self-understanding of the proletariat is . . . simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society' (Georgy Lukács, 'The Standpoint of the Proletariat', in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971; first published 1923), pp. 149–209 (p. 149)).
- 6 I borrow this term from Sabina Lovibond, who attributes it to Paul Hirst. See Lovibond, 'The End of Morality', in Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford, eds., *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 63.
- 7 To conceive epistemic subjects as social subjects *is* – for the socially non-myopic – to conceive them as placed in relations of power.
- 8 The question whether a given piece of philosophical radicalism is aligned with political radicalism is entirely contingent. Any use of the word 'radicalism' however carries a Leftist political association, and I believe that in some quarters this has led to an undue confidence in the political credentials of philosophical extremism.
- 9 'Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism', in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 34–5.
- 10 Andreas Huyssen, 'Mapping the Postmodern', in Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 234–77 (p. 237).
- 11 Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s', in Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, pp. 196–7.
- 12 Susan Strickland, 'Feminism, Postmodernism and Difference', in Lennon and Whitford, eds., *Knowing the Difference*, p. 267.
- 13 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington and B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. 66.
- 14 In his concluding rhetorical flourish, Lyotard writes: 'Let us wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable; let us activate the differences and save the honor of the name' (*ibid.*, p. 82).
- 15 Rosi Braidotti uses Gilles Deleuze's idea of the nomadic subject in her conception of feminist philosophy as a 'new nomadism'; see her *Patterns of Dissonance: A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), e.g. pp. 277–8.
- 16 Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance', in Seyla Benhabib et al., *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 27.
- 17 Sabina Lovibond, 'Feminism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review* 178 (1989), 5–28 (p. 12).
- 18 See Hilary Putnam, 'Why Reason Can't Be Naturalized', in Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman and Thomas McCarthy, eds., *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

- 19 The brand of irony distinctive of the postmodern is essentially sceptical, hence the psychological disengagement. This contrasts with the irony of modernism which is essentially the irony of the avant-garde – that of tireless self-conscious self-creation. For an undatingly illuminating discussion of modernism as a diversified cultural movement see Marshall Berman's *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1982). For a critical discussion of modernism from a feminist point of view (including a discussion of Berman) see Rita Selski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1995).
- 20 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 73–4.
- 21 Donna Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', in Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism*, p. 190.
- 22 'Modernity can and will no longer borrow the criteria by which it takes its orientation from the models supplied by another epoch; *it has to create its normativity out of itself*' (Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1985), p. 7, original italics. The quotation is from Lecture 1, whose title is also germane: 'Modernity's Consciousness of Time and Its Need for Self-Reassurance').
- 23 'I often used to hear from Gorgias that the art of persuasion is very different from other arts, since everything is enslaved by it willingly and not by force', Protarchus says in Plato's *Philebus*, quoted in Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p. 154. On the origins of our many ideas of rhetoric and persuasion (including 'the terrifying, exhilarating possibility that persuasion is just power'), see Robert Wardy, *The Birth of Rhetoric: Gorgias, Plato and Their Successors* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 2.
- 24 Note that O'Neill's Kant 'offers an account of what it is to vindicate reason quite different from the foundationalist account that critics of "the Enlightenment project" target, and usually attribute to Kant' ('Vindicating Reason', in Paul Guyer, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 280–308 (p. 281). See also, her *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), chs. 1 and 2.
- 25 O'Neill, 'Vindicating Reason', p. 298.
- 26 'Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its régime of truth, its "general politics" of truth' (*Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972–77*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon, Leo Marshall, John Mepham and Kate Soper (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1980), p. 131).
- 27 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction* (London: Pelican Books, 1981), p. 94.
- 28 For a historical (as opposed to merely reconstructive) account of motivations for poststructuralist and postmodernist philosophy, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987). For a feminist account of the crisis of reason, see Elizabeth Grosz's 'Bodies and Knowledges: Feminism and the Crisis of Reason', in Linda

- Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 187–215.
- 29 There is a parallel between the present view of the Kantian legacy for rational authority and a view of the Kantian legacy in moral (sic) philosophy. At the end of the last chapter of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Bernard Williams writes: ‘morality makes people think that, without its very special obligation, there is only inclination; without its utter voluntariness, there is only force; without its ultimately pure justice, there is no justice. Its philosophical errors are only the most abstract expressions of a deeply rooted and still powerful misconception of life’ (London: Fontana/Collins, 1985), p. 196.
- 30 It goes without saying that the ethics of discursive practice will cover the influence of power in discursive transactions, and will in that sense be simultaneously a discursive politics.
- 31 Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 6.
- 32 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), section VIII. It is interesting to reflect that more recent empiricists have gone in for a reductive naturalism that reduces norms to causes in a manner which parallels the reductive programme of the postmodernists. The former reduce norms to causal operations in nature; the latter reduce them to operations of power in the social realm. Each has a problem fitting the normative into the world as they find it. (For a critical account of reductive or ‘bald’ naturalism, see John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), lecture IV; for a classic statement of a reductive naturalism in epistemology, see W. V. O. Quine, ‘Epistemology Naturalized’, *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), pp. 69–90.)
- 33 Reading Bernard Williams’s discussion of responsibility and intentional action in *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), and also Sabina Lovibond’s ‘Meaning What We Say: Feminist Ethics and the Critique of Humanism’, *New Left Review* 220 (1996), 98–115, prompted me to put the issue this way. Williams alludes to Nietzsche’s idea of being superficial out of profundity in the question of the Greeks’ attitude to the voluntary in the sense of authorship of one’s actions (pp. 66–70); and Lovibond refers (pp. 108–10) to Williams in order to suggest that the same idea may be applied to the question of authorship of one’s thoughts. In effect, my own suggestion is that the same point can again be made in respect of authorship of one’s reasons. Being the author of one’s reasons requires standing by them – ‘owning’ them – beyond the fleeting context of the here and now. This attitude contrasts with the attitude of semi-disownment which ironism imposes.
- 34 See ‘Incredulity, Experientialism, and the Politics of Knowledge’, in Lorraine Code’s *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays On Gendered Locations* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 58–82. For arguments developing the idea of ‘epistemic injustice’, see my ‘Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 98, part 2 (1998), 159–77.
- 35 Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), p. 194.

- 36 Nicholas Rescher, *Pluralism: Against the Demand for Consensus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 64.
- 37 I say more about what is wrong with the idea of permanent partiality in 'Knowledge as Construct: Theorizing the Role of Gender in Knowledge', in Lennon and Whitford, eds., *Knowing the Difference*, pp. 95–109 (pp. 100–3).
- 38 In this particular, the proposed view is allied with the view of communicative practice found in Habermas. Although the original idea of an 'ideal speech situation' is surely subject to the Foucauldian objection raised here against Kant, Habermas's idea of a 'constraint-free understanding among individuals' might permit of a suitably superficial reading which would free it from that objection (Jürgen Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), p. 145).
- 39 In my 'Perspectival Realism: Towards a Pluralist Theory of Knowledge', D.Phil thesis, Oxford 1996.
- 40 I borrow this comparison from Sabina Lovibond's inspiring paper 'The End of Morality?' in which she conceives a philosophical task 'of distinguishing – though not necessarily in an abstract, criteriological way – between rationality and "ratiofascism"' and compares this task 'to that of distinguishing between morality and moralism' (p. 71).
- 41 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), §217.
- 42 My thanks to Sebastian Gardner, Melissa Lane, Sabina Lovibond and (especially) to my co-editor Jennifer Hornsby, for commenting on an earlier draft.