

## Feminist Epistemology as Mainstream

### 0. Introduction

Mainstream epistemologists don't tend to discuss feminist epistemologies. They often don't mention them in introductory courses or textbooks, and they almost invariably don't take themselves to work on them. This is probably due to a suspicion that 'feminist' epistemologies are clouded by political motivations. In this paper I will argue that this suspicion is misguided - a number of 'mainstream' epistemologists (specifically, hinge epistemologists), are in fact doing work which is entirely compatible with feminist epistemologies, and the 'extra ingredient' required to turn a hinge epistemology into a feminist epistemology needn't involve political motivations.

To do this, I'll first introduce feminist epistemologies in section 1, along with some key features common to most contemporary kinds. I'll then introduce hinge epistemologies in section 2. In section 3 I'll explain how all of the features discussed in the first section are already a part of, or can be incorporated into, hinge epistemologies, and without any political motivations. In section 4 I'll show how the benefits of mainstreaming feminist epistemologies extend to hinge epistemologies as well as just feminist ones. In sections 5 and 6 I'll argue that a particular kind of hinge epistemology - one which I call *stratified epistemic relativism* - is particularly well suited to the job of incorporating the features of feminist epistemology. In the last section I'll conclude, and suggest a consequence that my argument could have for the discipline of philosophy more generally.

## I. Feminist Epistemologies

Much feminist epistemology is so far found within the philosophy of science, where a distinction is standardly made between Feminist Empiricism (FE) and Standpoint Feminism (SF).<sup>1</sup> Recently though, Kristen Intemann has argued that these two views have more commonalities than they do differences. According to her, both FE and SF are:

1. *Normative*: they reject the view of science as ‘value-free’, because it’s implausible to deny that “the idiosyncratic [and often implicit] values of individual scientists” can always be successfully excluded from scientific reasoning. As such these values will often inevitably affect, or even act as, background assumptions in science;
2. *Contextualist*: they “deny that there is one set of criteria for theory choice, or cognitive values, that apply in every research context”, instead recognising that justification takes place within a particular context of background assumptions, and that these contexts can have different aims;
3. *Social*: they see communities, rather than individuals, as the ‘locus’ of justification, because communities are better able to recognise and question the implicit assumptions that individuals make, and thus have the potential to “achieve a higher degree of objectivity”, than individuals.

(Intemann 2010: 780-2)

Intemann also includes a more politically-loaded component of feminist epistemologies in her description of 3. Although the two are related, it will be useful to categorise this second social component independently:

4. *Pro-diversity*: they think objectivity can be promoted by “structuring scientific communities in ways that minimize the negative influence of individual biases”. Specifically, they advocate for greater diversity in scientific

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<sup>1</sup> See Sandra Harding (1986), Kristen Intemann (2010), and Sharon Crasnow (2013). Harding also discusses feminist post-modernism, though this seems to be discussed less often in contemporary writing, and I won’t be mentioning it again here.

communities.

(Intemann 2010: 782)

The differences Intemann points out between FE and SF are in their understanding of ‘diversity’. She says that FE tends to characterise diversity in terms of the opinions and values one might hold, whilst SF theorists<sup>2</sup> specify that *social position* (as determined by race, class, gender, etc) is the important feature whose diversity should be promoted. Intemann argues that SF’s characterisation is superior, and as we will see, hinge epistemologies lend themselves to Intemann’s preferred understanding of diversity.

In the next section I’m going to demonstrate that there are already mainstream accounts of justification - hinge epistemologies - which contain the first 2 components of feminist epistemologies, and that there are purely epistemic reasons for these to incorporate the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> components (and on the understanding that Intemann prefers). If I am right, then feminist epistemologies will be shown to be much closer to the mainstream than they are generally thought to be, and not to require any potentially-objectionable political motivations. It is therefore difficult to defend the mainstream tendency to ignore them.

## 2. Hinge Epistemologies

Hinge epistemologies are a family of views which are growing in popularity in mainstream epistemology. Variants are endorsed by Michael Williams (1991), Duncan Pritchard (*forthcoming*), and Annalisa Coliva (2015). Each of the key components of feminist epistemologies I’ve discussed are either already part of this family of views, or could very easily be adopted by them on purely epistemological grounds.

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<sup>2</sup> E.g. Hartsock (1987)

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I'll start by explaining the view's Wittgensteinian roots. In *On Certainty* (1969) Wittgenstein uses some innocuous observations about rational support to make two noteworthy claims about justification. The first observation is that any basis offered in rational support of a proposition must be more certain than the proposition it supports. Call this O1:

O1: For a proposition P1 to offer rational grounds for support for another proposition P2, P1 must be more certain than P2.

When a subject attempts to support her belief that she has two hands with the 'evidence' that she sees them before her this seems strange, because it's not clear which of the two propositions the subject believes are more certain; she could just as reasonably test her eyes by looking too see whether she sees her two hands (1969: §125; §250). O1 explains this oddness in a plausible way.

Once we acknowledge O1 however, something surprising follows; our most certain beliefs have no rational support. This is because, as we have acknowledged, (1) rational support for a particular proposition must be more certain than the proposition is, but (2) by definition there are no propositions which are more certain than our most certain beliefs, and so it follows that (3) there are no propositions which could rationally support our most certain beliefs.

The second observation can be seen to be at work in Wittgenstein's writing,<sup>3</sup> but he doesn't make it explicit. This observation is that any basis offered as rational grounds for doubting a proposition must be more certain than the proposition it calls into doubt. We can call this O2:

O2: For a proposition P1 to offer rational grounds for doubt of another proposition P2, P1 must be more certain than P2.

In other words, if a proposition P<sub>i</sub> is certain for you, and I propose a contradictory proposition

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<sup>3</sup> Pritchard (*forthcominga* and *forthcomingb*) gives a helpful explanation of this part of Wittgenstein's thought.

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$P_2$  which is less-than-certain for you, then it doesn't seem rational for you to doubt  $P_1$ . If this is right,<sup>4</sup> then we can construct a similar argument using this observation. As (1) rational grounds for doubting a particular proposition must be more certain than the proposition is, and (2) by definition there are no propositions which are more certain than our most certain propositions, it follows that (3) there are no propositions which could rationally ground doubt in our most certain beliefs.

The message which hinge epistemologists take from this conclusion is that the practice of rational evaluation is necessarily limited. Not everything can be justified and not everything can be questioned, but it isn't due to psychological discomfort or the limits of human cognition. Rather, it's just a fact about rational justification (according to Pritchard and Williams), or it's a constitutive element of rationality (for Coliva) that some propositions are beyond support or doubt.

As Wittgenstein puts it; “[I]t isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption”, rather it is part of the very logic of justification (or rationality) that some, optimally-certain propositions (now often referred to as ‘hinge propositions’, or, less controversially, ‘hinge commitments’) must remain fixed; “[i]f I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put” (Wittgenstein 1969: §343).

The picture we get on this account of justification is of a few optimally certain hinge commitments which act as rational support for a host of non-hinge beliefs. The hinge commitments are epistemically appropriate in such a way that they can confer epistemic standing to the non-hinges, and thus justify them. However, they aren't themselves justified (because what it means to be justified is to stand in the right relation to a hinge commitment, and hinge commitments don't do this).

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<sup>4</sup> For defences of this point see Brandom (1998) on the “default and challenge structure of entitlement”, and Williams' discussion of the “claimant-challenger asymmetry” (2011; 2013).

### 3. Moving into the Mainstream

The first component of feminist epistemologies follows quite naturally from this view. If an essential component of things like ‘justification’ and ‘rationality’ are the hinge commitments that happen to be optimally-certain for a subject, then to whatever extent a subject might hope to attain justified beliefs, this justification will not be value-free. Any justification will depend, at base, on commitments whose epistemic status is contingent on the subject, and so some inclusion of individuals’ values, or other contingent considerations, are inevitable. Thus, hinge epistemologies are *normative* in the way that feminist epistemologies are.

The second component of feminist epistemologies is already an integral part of (most) hinge epistemologies. The defining feature of a hinge epistemology is the idea that justification is dependent on some propositions which aren’t independently justified, but which we are nevertheless entitled, in some sense, to hold. Although some hinge epistemologists (e.g. Coliva) take there to be one set of hinges which all subjects are entitled to – namely those which constitute epistemic rationality – other hinge epistemologists (e.g. Williams and Pritchard) embrace the idea that which hinges a subject is entitled to will depend on some contextually-sensitive feature. Thus most hinge epistemologies are *contextualist* in the way that feminist epistemologies are.

The third component of feminist epistemologies is not something endorsed by the majority of hinge epistemologists; however it could be usefully adopted by them, and on purely epistemic grounds. Sarah Wright (2010) has argued that contexts should be grounded in ‘social roles’ – in other words, subjects should be understood not just as individuals, but as members of communities who play specific roles (such as being a doctor or a parent), which come with associated responsibilities and rewards. This, she says, would stabilise epistemic contexts,

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preventing them from shifting at the whim of the subject (as might be a concern which it comes to Williams's view), and would also offer a way to explain the value of context-dependent knowledge. These are purely epistemic reasons to embrace social roles and communities as essential to justification, and so no extra political motivations are required. Thus, hinge epistemologies can be *social* in the way that feminist epistemologies are, and without any additional political considerations.

So far I've shown that the first three components of feminist epistemologies dovetail nicely with views in the more mainstream family of hinge epistemologies. I'll now argue that adopting this third component in the way suggested by Sarah Wright, even for purely epistemic reasons, should make hinge epistemologists take interest in the fourth, more politically-charged, component of feminist epistemologies.

One question we might ask ourselves when endorsing an account of justification is what it reveals about how we can improve our epistemic standing. With hinge epistemologies there are two things we can do; one is to make sure that our beliefs are appropriately related to our hinge commitments, and the other is to make sure that our hinge commitments are plausible. Ensuring that one's hinge commitments are plausible is tricky, as within their own context they are unquestionable. However, individuals within an epistemic community won't all share exactly the same commitments, and thus on a social hinge epistemology some people will be in a position to evaluate those hinge commitments which aren't universally shared by all members of the community.

The next question to ask ourselves is, therefore, how to ensure that the individuals within an epistemic community are in this position. Alison Wylie (2003), in her discussion of standpoint theory, points out that members of oppressed groups – who were historically excluded from certain enquiries – have often learned to understand the commitments of the dominant group,

whilst simultaneously operating within the framework of commitments supplied by the oppressed group. This gives them an ‘insider-outsider’ perspective of the epistemic communities from which they’ve been excluded, which enables them to evaluate some of the commitments of these communities whilst relying on the commitments of another. Thus, hinge epistemologies should be *pro-diversity*, and specifically *pro-diversity of social position*, – at least if they are to offer enquirers a way to improve their epistemic standing.

#### 4. Mutual benefits

I take it that the benefits that feminist epistemology could reap from being brought into the mainstream are fairly clear.<sup>5</sup> In this section I’ll illuminate one of the benefits that this move could have for hinge epistemology, and so show that bringing feminist epistemology into the mainstream is a mutually beneficial enterprise.

The problem that hinge epistemologies have generally been employed to avoid is radical scepticism. They seek to explain how we can have knowledge in the face of sceptical hypotheses to the effect that we may be deceived about the majority of our beliefs (e.g. about the external world). The hinge epistemologists’ answer is something like: we have entitlements to accept our hinge commitments regardless of whether we can prove them to be true, and so these can confer justification to other non-hinge beliefs *even if* they are false.

However, a second ‘meta-sceptical’ problem then presents itself. The hinge epistemologists seem merely to have offered an account of justification on which it doesn’t guarantee truth. Since truth (or truth-conduciveness) is often taken to be the reason that we’re interested in

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<sup>5</sup> Here I have in mind roughly two types of benefits: those which are benefits to feminist epistemologists themselves, in the form of more just recognition and citations, and those which are benefits to the work, in the form of the improvement that often comes from wider discussion and engagement.



justification – at least when we’re aiming to avoid scepticism – this may look like a hollow victory.

Different hinge epistemologists handle this problem in different ways, but all of the strategies are controversial. Coliva endorses a minimal conception of truth, on which the role that propositions play in our epistemic practices is more important than any ‘metaphysically robust’ notions about connection to the world. This minimal conception of truth is much easier to tie to justification (which, remember, hinge epistemologists already think is closely related to something like our epistemic practices), and so the meta-sceptical problem can be avoided.

Similarly, Williams takes a deflationist line, arguing – in line with his response to the first-level sceptical problem – that the sceptic’s request depends on an objectionably ‘realist’ understanding of epistemology, and is therefore theoretically-loaded and illegitimate. He thinks that part of acknowledging justification to be heavily dependent on context means recognising that other aspects of epistemology, including truth, should be deflated too.

Pritchard, on the other hand, takes a more ambitious route. He attempts to incorporate truth into his account of justification without significantly deflating or minimising it. Instead, he embraces an epistemic disjunctivist view, on which the rational support we have in veridical cases is factive (one quite literally *sees that p* if *p* is true), and so truth in fact is guaranteed.

There are serious concerns to be raised about disjunctivism,<sup>6</sup> and although I find the deflationist line less objectionable, it is still far from appealing. It essentially involves conceding to the sceptic that hinge epistemologies *can’t* guarantee the truth of our beliefs in the sense which the sceptic demands. This seems like a victory for the sceptic.

Of course Coliva and Williams don’t see it this way. They see their hinge epistemologies as

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<sup>6</sup> For a thorough consideration of these (and a defence) see Pritchard 2012a.

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uncovering what is really interesting and useful about our justificatory practices – it just turns out that truth-conduciveness isn't it. What hinge epistemologies need, then, is a way to spin their deflationary views of epistemology as a positive thing – to persuade mainstream epistemologists to abandon the metaphysically robust notion of truth which is sometimes seen as the Holy Grail in mainstream epistemology, and instead embrace a more humble response to the sceptical problem, which is focused on the benefits of justification. This is where employing some of the strategies from the literature on feminist epistemologies can be beneficial to hinge epistemologies.

Crasnow (2013) follows Hugh Lacey (1999) in distinguishing between different ways in which science (or, presumably, epistemology) can be 'value-free'. Although one might think that *neutrality* (not presupposing any values) is a requirement for *impartiality* (making judgements only on the basis of cognitive values), she argues that in fact the two can come apart. As long as scientific enquiry is carried out by diverse communities, rather than by homogenous ones, or by individuals, then it can fail to be neutral (by presupposing some values) and yet counter this in a way which leaves room for impartiality.

We can extend this idea to enquiry more generally and thus make an interesting point about the aims of epistemology. Mainstream epistemology has historically attempted to reach objective truths through neutrality – just think of Descartes carefully checking each of his basic principles like apples suspected of rot (Cottingham 1996: 63) – and so when the sceptic points out the difficulties with this project, responses have been preoccupied with trying to regain neutrality. The hinge epistemologists' revelation that neutrality is impossible therefore looks troubling. Feminist epistemologies, on the other hand, have been exploring how to increase objectivity through impartiality, and so have no reason to fear a lack of neutrality. Instead, they can offer a way to embrace the hinge epistemologists' non-neutral account of justification without giving up

objectivity, and thus help motivate the move towards deflationary truth. Feminist epistemologies therefore have resources to offer hinge epistemology too – bringing feminist epistemology into the mainstream could be a mutually beneficial exercise.

## 5. Stratified Epistemic Relativism

In the next two sections I will show that one view in particular, a view that I call stratified epistemic relativism, is capable of incorporating the features common to contemporary feminist epistemologies. This view is a type of Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology and so, as discussed above, it is based on the general picture of optimally certain hinge commitments which act as rational support for other non-hinge beliefs, without themselves being rationally supportable. As such, it can incorporate the first, ‘normative’ component of feminist epistemologies.

This view has two important features which make it, above other hinge epistemologies, particularly well-suited for incorporating the remaining features of feminist epistemologies. The first difference is that, where other hinge epistemologists talk about there being only one set of hinge propositions, or frameworks, (e.g. Coliva), or one set which a subject has access to at a single time (e.g. Williams), on my view subjects can access multiple frameworks at one time. This ensures that it captures the contextualist component of feminist epistemologies.<sup>7</sup>

The second respect in which the view is unusual is that it understands many of these frameworks as being dependent on social practices. This is because I identify four different ‘strata’ of justification, which I think give rise to four different types of epistemic framework:

**PURSUIT FRAMEWORKS:** The sets of propositions required for the various

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, I think that my view goes slightly further than contextualism and is (as the name suggests) a type of relativism. I’ll talk more about how this affects its suitability as a feminist epistemology in the next section.

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epistemic, or scientific, inquiries and interests that an agent adopts, such as the study of history or philosophy.

**COMMUNITY FRAMEWORKS:** The sets of propositions required to play different roles within various communities, such as the role of a doctor or that of a parent.

**IDENTITY FRAMEWORKS:** The sets of propositions required to participate in different identities, such as ethnic or gender identities.

**RATIONAL FRAMEWORK:** The broad framework which we all share in virtue of being epistemic agents.

Frameworks within the community, pursuit and identity strata will all be dependent on social practices to some extent (the rational framework might be argued to as well, though this is more controversial). This allows the view to incorporate the ‘social’ component of feminist epistemologies.

The final component of feminist epistemologies is the ‘pro-diversity’ component. In section 3 I showed that hinge epistemologists can draw on standpoint theory and the idea of epistemic privilege to explain how it is possible to improve one’s epistemic standing, and also to incorporate this ‘pro-diversity’. I think that stratified epistemic relativism is able to incorporate pro-diversity in the same way, but I will need to respond to an objection to make this clear. I will do this in the next section.

## 6. Relativism and Privilege

I have argued that hinge epistemology in general can incorporate all of the common features of contemporary feminist epistemologies, and suggested that stratified epistemic relativism in particular is a good way to do this. An objection which could be raised against my argument is

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that standpoint theory, which I draw on in order to show how hinge epistemologies can incorporate the ‘pro-diversity’ component of feminist epistemologies, appears to be incompatible with epistemic relativism (which, of course, is a key feature of the stratified view). Where epistemic relativists emphasise that the multiple frameworks which their view discusses are all equally valid, standpoint theorists claim that some standpoints are epistemically privileged.<sup>8</sup> If this apparent tension cannot be resolved, then stratified epistemic relativism will turn out not to be a good way to incorporate the common features of feminist epistemologies after all.

Fortunately, standpoint theory and relativism are compatible. I will demonstrate in this section that it is possible, and indeed desirable<sup>9</sup>, to explain epistemic privilege on a relativist view. In fact, I think that the relativist account of this phenomenon is better able to explain privilege in a way commensurate with the goals of feminist epistemology than non-relativist accounts are.

On a relativist view, one framework can still be privileged in comparison to another framework, but of course only *relative to some framework*. In order for the privilege that one framework (call it A) has in comparison to some other framework (call it B) to be interesting or useful, the privilege cannot only hold relative to framework A. Rather, this privilege needs to hold relative to some *third* framework (call it C), which users of frameworks A and B share.

To locate such a framework we can look to the Identity stratum. This contains the frameworks that subjects occupy in virtue of identity categories they fall into through little to no choice of their own. In addition to frameworks relevant to gender, ethnicity, and so on, this stratum

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<sup>8</sup> One example of this is Wylie (2003), whose work I draw on above, but standpoint theorists have been concerned with privilege from the beginning (see, for example, Hartsock 1987). An exception is Sandra Harding (1993), who defended a version of standpoint theory on which oppressed groups can inform the problems which researchers should explore, but don’t necessarily have epistemic privilege to resolve those problems.

<sup>9</sup> For epistemic reasons, as discussed in section 3, rather than political ones.

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contains frameworks relevant to much broader social categories<sup>10</sup>, for example the framework relevant to ‘inhabitants of the Western world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’.

As long as inhabitants of A and B both share this framework (or the equivalent one relative to the broad societal group they are both a member of) then they will share commitments about which groups are less powerful, and which ones are dominant. Once the commitments of this shared framework are brought to the attention of users of both A and B (e.g. through consciousness raising and education about non-epistemic privilege) then users of both frameworks will be able to recognize the epistemic privilege that users of A have. The privileging of frameworks can be accommodated on a relativist picture then.

I have shown how the idea of privileged frameworks can be accommodated on a relativist picture. I now want to make clear that this way of accommodating privilege is true to the standpoint theorists’ goals and motivations. This should head off any objections to the effect that the relativist notion of epistemic privilege is weaker than the standpoint theorists’.

The way I have described it, a relativist notion of epistemic privilege allows for certain frameworks to be privileged over others relative to an identity framework that users of both frameworks share. On a non-relativistic notion, which standpoint theorists might be claimed to be using, presumably those frameworks are absolutely or objectively privileged over the relevant others. In this case, my account may seem to take something away from the marginalized groups. Their privilege is contingent on some socially-relevant framework and so perhaps seems less important than privilege does when understood objectively.

I think that this is the wrong way to think of the account, for two reasons. First, I think that feminist epistemologists, of all people, should be sympathetic to the idea that phenomena dependent on social constructions can be just as important as so-called objective phenomena (if

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<sup>10</sup> Similar to what Harding (2008) calls ‘modernities’.

not more so). Once this is recognized, my account of epistemic privilege can be seen to be picking out something which is just as important as a more objective notion. Second, standpoint feminists have already acknowledged that emphasising the contingency of epistemic privilege can help with an important goal of feminist epistemology: highlighting the intersectional aspects of epistemic privilege.

In her influential book *Black Feminist Thought*, (2002) Patricia Hill Collins guards against the mistake of thinking that any single standpoint can be taken as the one, objectively most-privileged one. Instead she describes a ‘matrix of domination’ on which there are multiple axes including those related to race, class and gender, and on which, “ [d]epending on the context, an individual may be an oppressor, a member of an oppressed group, or simultaneously oppressor and oppressed” (Collins 2002: 274). She goes on to point out that when this picture is endorsed, groups with distinctive standpoints become “better able to consider other groups’ standpoints without relinquishing the uniqueness of [their] own standpoint or suppressing other groups’ partial perspectives” (2002: 274). A relativist notion of privilege is even more compatible with this understanding than an objective one is, and so should be preferred. The apparent tension between standpoint theory and relativism are thus considerably overstated, and stratified epistemic relativism can incorporate the common features of contemporary feminist epistemologies after all.

## 7. Conclusion

I have argued, first, that the family of hinge epistemologies currently emerging in mainstream epistemology share many of the important features of feminist epistemology, and that the remaining features can be incorporated into hinge epistemologies without the addition of any troubling political motivations. Second, I have argued that this move is mutually beneficial – as

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well as feminist epistemologies gaining more recognition, hinge epistemologies gain an important motivation for the response to the meta-sceptical problem, which they are otherwise missing. I then outlined a type of hinge epistemology which is a good candidate for incorporating the common features of contemporary feminist epistemologies, and defended it from an apparent objection.

I'll finish with a suggestion about the benefits that the move I suggest might have for philosophy more generally. According to feminist epistemologies, the mark of the quality of the epistemic standing that an epistemic community provides is the diversity of the social roles within it. This suggests that the worst epistemic standing will be supplied by communities made up of people whose social roles almost entirely overlap. Epistemic communities which foster a diverse range of social roles, however, will be able to engage in interesting meta-debate, question their hinge commitments, and improve their epistemic standing. Adapting a mainstream epistemology to reach this conclusion thus provides philosophers outside of feminist philosophy with (purely epistemic) reasons to be pro-diversity of social roles *in philosophy*, too.



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