

Re-evaluating Rationality, Review of *Engendering Rationalities* by Sharyn Clough

Engendering Rationalities. Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen, editors. SUNY series in Gender Theory. Tina Chanter, general editor. Albany: SUNY Press, 2001. i-viii + 413 pp. \$75.50 h.c. or \$25.95 pbk. 0-7914-5086-4

The essay collection *Engendering Rationalities*, edited by Nancy Tuana and Sandra Morgen, is based on a conference by the same name that was held at the Center for the Study of Women in Society, University of Oregon, in the spring of 1997. As a participant at this conference, I recall a watershed moment. Journalist and social critic Barbara Ehrenreich was giving one of the main addresses. Ehrenreich chided feminist scholars for not taking seriously enough the limits of the natural world and for promoting the view that various truths about the world were in fact “socially constructed,” similarly with the criteria for truth, itself. Ehrenreich’s presentation was not well-received, with many in the audience denying the merits of her accusations. However, I recall noting that the title of the conference “enGendering Rationalities” gave at least prima facie support to Ehrenreich’s concern.

Feminist philosophers have authored numerous criticisms of standard epistemology, suggesting that a) traditional concepts of rationality were socially constructed; that b) the constructions were designed along social axes, such as gender, in order to serve those in positions of power, typically, a number of men; and finally that c) the constructions would be better off for reflecting a wider representation of the social realm, in particular, more women. Of course, for feminist epistemologists, defining “better off” requires normative content no longer available in traditional appeals to truth, and so begins the complex discussions central to feminist philosophical discourse. That feminist articulations of “social construction” are varied and often more sophisticated than is recognized by critics, still leaves feminist scholars in a tight spot, vis-à-vis concerns about relativism. If truth is relative to the social realm in which it was produced, where does that leave the truths espoused by feminists?

To the credit of feminist philosophers, many of whom were in Ehrenreich’s audience, this very question has been the focus of sustained investigation, both at the conference itself and in any number of academic venues before and after. Perhaps her negative reception at the conference was a result of Ehrenreich’s failure to acknowledge that feminist philosophers are aware of, and struggle with, the very concerns she was raising.

Putting the concerns in context, recall that as feminists and other social critics peeled back layer after layer of corruption and oppression in even our most hallowed of institutions (science, the academy, law), it seemed a necessary next step to question whether the conceptual tools developed by those institutions—“truth,” “objectivity,” “rationality”—could be used to criticize the institutions themselves. As Audre Lourde had put it “Could the master’s tools be used to dismantle the master’s house?” The

“enGendering Rationalities” conference and the essay collection it inspired represent the latest attempts by feminists to answer this question. And, as even the most cursory glance at the contents makes clear, there is no easy answer in sight.

Of the 16 essays in the collection, many face the problem head on, including, “On Judging Epistemic Credibility: Is Social Identity Relevant?” by Linda Martín Alcoff, and “Epistemology Resuscitated: Objectivity as Trustworthiness” by Naomi Scheman. The presentations range from the clear analytic mode of Lynn Hankinson Nelson’s “Relativism and Feminist Science Scholarship” and Richmond Campbell’s “The Bias Paradox in Feminist Epistemology” to the impassioned pleas of Sarah Lucia Hoagland’s “Resisting Rationality.” Hoagland’s essay was, for me, the most challenging. In engaging, personal tones she reminds her readers that, underwritten by traditional notions of rationality, people in power have consistently worked to redescribe the powerless as irrational, crazy and insane. And so, she argues, the freedom fighter must resist prevailing standards of rationality. Irrationality as a banner for freedom has never been a compelling image for me, but Hoagland was clearest of all the authors, at least, in articulating the very high stakes involved in this debate. Charlene Haddock Seigfried’s essay “Beyond Epistemology: From a Pragmatist Feminist Experiential Standpoint” is the lone voice in the collection to suggest that, given the high stakes and the questionable utility of the tools, perhaps epistemology is not the best place for feminist philosophers to place their energies—a claim with which I have come to have considerable sympathy.¹

Nancy Tuana opens the collection with a comprehensive introduction to the wide range of epistemic dilemmas revealed by feminist scholarship, and the numerous attempts at solving them. The collection ends with an equally comprehensive bibliography of the feminist epistemology literature, and contains what is becoming an increasingly endangered species in the world of academic essay collections—a thorough index. These features make the book an excellent addition to any philosophy reference library.

As a collection, *Engendering Rationalities* brings into sharp relief the conflicting details often glossed (and necessarily so) in more introductory venues such as Alessandra Tanesini’s *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemology* (1999). The collection provides a look inside the on-going feminist struggle to re-examine the master’s tools; to more carefully describe who counts as “master”; and, at least it is my hope, to reclaim rationality.

WORKS CITED

- Clough, Sharyn. 2003. *Beyond Epistemology: A Pragmatist Prescription for Feminist Science Studies*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tanesini, Alessandra. 1999. *An Introduction to Feminist Epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell.

ⁱ See, for example, my anti-epistemology arguments in *Beyond Epistemology: A Pragmatist Prescription for Feminist Science Studies* (Clough 2003), although there I restrict my claims about the (dis)utility of epistemology to the realm of feminist science studies.

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