

Expanding the Discourse on Feminist Epistemologies

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon
University of Tennessee

The issue of indoctrination has troubled philosophy for a long time. For religion, the answer seems simple: we take what we know on faith. Our arguments only have to be warranted by testimony and personal witnessing. However, Euro-western philosophers rely on our ability to reason in order to protect us from indoctrination. The trouble is that, as Immanuel Kant pointed out long ago, children have to be taught to value reasoning in order to get them to prefer it when solving a problem, and not simply settle on the first answer that they come across. Paradoxically, teachers (at home, in our communities, and in schools) have to indoctrinate children to get them to value good reasoning. But then, once students have matured enough and have practiced their reasoning skills enough, teachers have to encourage students to question their lessons as a way of avoiding the charge of indoctrination. This was what Kant, as well as Israel Scheffler and his student, Harvey Siegel, advised in order to save teachers from the paradox.¹

In this essay, I am going to add to Jim Lang's discussion of epistemologies of situated knowledges (ESK) in an effort to extend an argument with which I basically agree. Lang's focus is mainly on Harvey Siegel's and Lorraine Code's work. I want to further open up the conversation, however, and bring the work of more feminist scholars to our attention. Let me recap Lang's argument and, in the process, add more voices to his feminist sampler. I will also do some amending along the way.

Lang claims that the problem, "How can acceptable education be distinguished from unacceptable indoctrination?" is a problem that does not want to go away. After much searching, he tells us that he has found no instances where charges of indoctrination have resulted in changed approaches to educational practices. Lang claims that the dominant discourse on indoctrination (DDI) is based on a reductionist epistemology that is vulnerable to compelling critiques by ESK. Lang's central claim is that the problem of indoctrination is not going to be solved by a new mix of the same ingredients; a more useful approach is to interrogate the core epistemological assumptions that legitimize DDI. He suggests that better ways of understanding the harms associated with indoctrination might be found in the work of feminists who have developed epistemologies (and who have yet to weigh in on this issue). I do not think that Lang is correct here; feminists have weighed in on this issue. For example, Jane Martin has discussed indoctrination in her examination of Johann Pestalozzi's *Gertrude*, and Sara Ruddick considers the issue in her examination of parenting roles in *Maternal Thinking*.²

Lang claims that efforts to produce an applicable normative understanding of indoctrination have stalled. Lang makes the point that propositional rationalism drives the epistemology of the DDI. This argument (that all knowledge claims are reducible to the propositional formulation "S-knows-'that-p'") is based on the following assumptions: evidence is (1) recognizable and accessible to all knowers,

(2) able to be evaluated impartially, and (3) universally true. There is a troubling performance contradiction in Lang's text, for his own style of writing relies on propositional formulation. DDI, ESK, and ME (mainstream epistemology) serve as shorthand language for Lang in the same way that "*S*-knows-*that-p*" statements are used in ME, which he is critiquing.

When Lang moves to feminist epistemologies, he wisely starts by recognizing that it is dangerous and problematic to synthesize a diverse group of scholars into one description, as if all feminists agree. Notice, however, that ME was not given the same consideration. Those who did not fit the norm were labeled "eccentrics." While Code's work serves as Lang's key example of a feminist epistemology, he moves on to claim that all of the contributors to ESK share a critique of mainstream epistemology, which is that it relies on idealized conceptions of objectivity, impartiality, universality, and moral neutrality. In contrast, ESK agree that knowers are multiply situated (socially, historically, sexually, culturally, and so forth) and embodied; knowledge cannot transcend knowers but, rather, is constitutive of knowers; and knowledge is plural — it is better to speak of knowledges (and epistemologies are plural as well). Feminist epistemologies argue that mainstream epistemological claims are advanced from *somewhere*, by *someone*, contrary to their claims of universality.

Lang gives Code's description of knowledge as information *only*. Lang recognizes that Code knows that this is a stark characterization of ME, a point that Harvey Siegel and Sharon Bailin would surely latch on to if they were writing this response, "yet, she maintains that it is this conception of knowledge that most people use every day." For mainstream epistemologists, epistemology is singular and unqualified, and does not need the qualifier "mainstream." Unfortunately, it seems that Code may be guilty here of creating a straw-person argument, and Lang guilty as well for using it.

Lang makes the case that not all knowledge claims are readily quantifiable as information, and that they do not all reduce to propositional formulation. He uses Code's work on the sociopolitical position of the subject to counter the mainstream epistemological description of *S* as rational-autonomous individuals. Whenever I hear "rational-autonomous man" (and let us be honest here, for so long it was *man*), I think of Kate Morgan's reference to "the Marlboro man."³ It is a powerful image of a solitary cowboy, out on the range, having a smoke. The Marlboro man contrasts vividly with the quilting bee image I developed in *Transforming Critical Thinking*, which supports Lang's point here.⁴ This image is that knowledge is largely constructed interactively-interdependently via dialogue between persons (or via conversation, which is a better metaphor to use for feminist epistemologies; Jane Martin discusses this, as does Jill Tarule⁵). In addition to this image, I recommend that Lang consider describing persons as individuals-in-relation-with-others, in order to help him emphasize the point that feminist epistemologies are supported by a relational ontology.⁶

In section five of his essay, Lang shows how feminist epistemologies' critique of MEs exposes weakness in the DDI. Here is where we come back to the topic of

indoctrination, through the use of Harvey Siegel's discussion in *Educating Reason*. Siegel opposes indoctrination on the ground that it compromises rational autonomy. However, Lang shows that standpoint epistemologies challenge the hegemonic assumption of autonomy by arguing that a focus on autonomy denies both the relationality of knowledge construction and the epistemic relevancy of testimony and advocacy. This argument, as Lang presents it, is similar to one that has been made by social epistemologists.

Lang, through Code, points out the irony that "autonomous man in his epistemic robes" leads to the possibility of the indoctrination of Others who are too immature to escape the constraints of heteronomy.⁷ We are indoctrinated to think we are autonomous. ESK argue that rational autonomy is not absolute, but a partial, unachievable, and unacceptable ideal, as it is formulated on ME. Partiality, rather than impartiality, is requisite to settle Siegel's "questions of concern to *me*";⁸ I cannot escape embodiment, and "*me*" cannot refer to anyone and everyone, everywhere. I am always *somewhere*.

Lang reminds us in his conclusion that this essay is only meant as an ESK "sampler" that shows us mere snapshots of some of the critiques that weaken the claims about indoctrination that are based on mainstream epistemology. My response is also meant as a sampler, one which adds more voices to the conversation. Feminist scholars such as Nel Noddings and Allison Jaggar have already critiqued the limits of the moral dimensions of ME.⁹ Other feminist scholars in the sciences, such as Sandra Harding, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Lynn Hankinson Nelson have offered analyses of the weaknesses that they see as inherent in ME's reliance on scientific evidence, and they continue this work.¹⁰ Thank you, Jim, for helping to draw attention to this important feminist scholarship.

1. Immanuel Kant, *Education* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960); Israel Scheffler, *Reason and Teaching* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973); and Harvey Siegel, *Educating Reason* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

2. Jane Roland Martin, *Changing the Educational Landscape* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (Boston: Beacon, 1989).

3. Kate Morgan, "We've Come to See the Wizard! Revelations on the Enlightenment Epistemology," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1996).

4. Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Transforming Critical Thinking* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2000).

5. Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming a Conversation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); and Jill Mattuck Tarule, "Voices in Dialogue: Collaborative Ways of Knowing," in *Knowledge, Difference, and Power*, eds. Nancy Goldberger, Jill Tarule, Blythe Clinchy, and Mary Belenky (New York: Basic, 1996).

6. Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon, *Relational "(e)pistemologies"* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).

7. Lorraine Code, "The Perversion of Autonomy and the Subjection of Women," in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, eds. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 186.

8. Siegel, *Educating Reason*, 88 (emphasis added).

9. Nel Noddings, *Caring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); and Allison Jaggar, "Caring as a Feminist Practice of Moral Reason," in *Justice and Care*, ed. Virginia Held (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1995).

10. Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985); and Lynn Hankinson Nelson, *Who Knows?* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Temple University Press, 1990).