

Methodological Essentialism: Comments on “Philosophy, Sex and Feminism”

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ABSTRACT

In arguing that sex and gender must be taken seriously as areas of philosophical interest, de Sousa and Morgan assume that, if properly practiced, science and philosophy are essentially emancipatory. Several questions are raised about the efficacy and implication of this assumption.

RESUME

Dans leur discussion de l'importance d'inclure le sexe et le genre dans l'étude de la philosophie, de Sousa et Morgan supposent que, dans leur pratique adéquate, la philosophie et les sciences sont primordialement émancipatoires. Plusieurs questions se posent concernant les implications et l'efficacité de leur postulat.

De Sousa and Morgan establish without doubt that sex and gender are proper objects for philosophical analysis and that feminist analysis has especially important contributions to make in this area. To take each of these central points in turn, they show that it is simply disingenuous to foreclose philosophical analysis of sex and gender on the presumption that it is “just natural” and, therefore, has no theoretical, philosophical content, the primary rationale that they reconstruct for philosophical silence on the subject. This presupposes an essentialist conception of sex and gender which is itself highly theoretical and problematic. Feminist analyses make it clear, moreover, that it is not only a theoretical but also a social, political construct. By naturalizing sex and gender, essentialism not only obscures its own theoretical status but, at the same time, reinforces the existing sex-gender system, portraying it as a function of biological conditions that cannot be altered by political agendas for change. It is this shift in perspective, this insight, afforded specifically by feminist work in the area, that makes sex and gender visible as an object of critical philosophical inquiry.

Rather than pursuing questions about how we might follow up de Sousa and Morgan's initiative in the analysis of gender, I propose to consider some encompassing issues about the emancipatory potential of science and philosophy that their discussion raises. De Sousa and Morgan hold that philosophy is “essentially subversive and demo-

cratic,” that it has “no authorities” (p. 14), given its central commitment to the refinement of argument, specifically, argument that leads to creative insight. A similar theme emerges in their discussion of scientific studies of sex and gender where they insist that the biases and distortions exposed by feminist critics of sex research are examples of “pseudo-science.” The implication seems to be that science, properly conducted (real science?), is subversive and democratic as well, at least in the sense that it provides the tools for showing that sexist assumptions are empirically false. If the analysis holds, then in both cases de Sousa and Morgan endorse enlightenment ideals which more radical critics of science and philosophy reject outright on grounds that they presuppose what amounts to a methodological essentialism. I am generally sympathetic to de Sousa and Morgan's position but it cannot be assumed without argument, specifically, argument to the effect that feminist post-modern critics go too far in their reaction against the failings of enlightenment projects. In the critical, exploratory spirit that de Sousa and Morgan endorse, I will make a start in taking up this challenge by indicating the questions it raises about their own arguments for philosophical analysis of sex and gender.

Consider, first, the view that philosophical discourse is essentially emancipatory. De Sousa and Morgan argue this on the ground that philosophical argument seeks the kind of insight associated with consciousness raising; it is

a matter of “drawing attention to facts which have passed unnoticed” and following through their implications in formulating anew, or reformulating, best explanations for these facts. In the process this may involve revisions of framework assumptions which, in turn, “make [it possible to] see something that was invisible even though it was, in a sense, always in full view” (p. 14). Two metaphors are at work here: the first is that of “raising from our consciousness” in a quasi-psychoanalytic sense of self-directed inquiry, and the second is that of “seeing what there is to see” outside ourselves typical of more traditional externally-directed inquiry. The connection between the two is that the framework assumptions, usually held unconsciously (as unproblematic or unquestionable), make some things seem obvious and unproblematic (readily explicable) while they obscure others absolutely. Switches in framework assumptions (*e.g.* as accomplished by philosophical argument may make new things “visible,” while care in attending to “new facts” may direct critical attention back onto these assumptions; work in either dimension alters the other, and work in both is essential.

It is perhaps significant that a central theme in literature on the role of consciousness raising in the women’s movement is the insistence that it is not a form of therapy, not just inward-directed self-theorizing, as it were, but a method of theorizing (or retheorizing) the reality confronted externally (see MacKinnon, 1981; and the Redstockings, 1970). On my reading, de Sousa and Morgan take the model of consciousness raising to be instructive precisely because it requires that the process of philosophical inquiry incorporate both an external and an internal dimension. It is a raising to consciousness of submerged framework assumptions which both transform and are transformed by what we see of external conditions and objects of inquiry. More specifically, it is this dialectical feature of philosophical practice which assures its “liberating novelty of vision...a central ideal of philosophy” (p. 15).

Against de Sousa and Morgan’s optimistic vision of philosophy there is a growing tradition of criticism that sees philosophical discourse as having played a central role in oppressive cultural projects of intellectual and political authoritarianism (*e.g.*, Rorty, 1979, 1985; and more radically, post-moderns like Lyotard, as discussed by Rorty, 1985). These critics take the articulation and legitimation of dominant ideologies to be at least as essential a feature of philosophy as the generation of emancipatory insights. In some cases they suggest not just that philosophy served such ends at some junctures (contingently), but that, as a discipline committed to telling meta-stories,

it is inevitable that philosophy would play the role of master discipline, reproducing and legitimating authoritarian structures whatever its liberating aspirations. Frequently the culprit cited is philosophical method itself. As Moulton (1980) has shown, in another connection, standard adversarial, analytic practice all too easily takes territory definition and defence as its primary aim, entrenching existing framework assumptions and foreclosing systematic criticism of them. Again, far from seeing this as an aberration, many whom proclaim the death of philosophy, or the need to move beyond philosophy, take such practice to be as essential to philosophy as (indeed, is an outgrowth of) critical argumentation of the sort endorsed by de Sousa and Morgan.

De Sousa and Morgan might well accept the general (often historical) line of criticism developed by Rorty and by various post-modern critics but insist that the illegitimate foundationalism to which they object (one instance of which is essentialist thinking about sex and gender) results from a perversion of philosophical method; it is bad or failed philosophy which is at issue, not philosophy as such. Certainly, it would seem that they must be prepared to argue something along these lines if they are to sustain the thesis that philosophy is essentially emancipatory. As it stands, however, the strategy they adopt here is problematic. They characterize properly subversive and democratic philosophy in terms of ocular metaphors; it is a process of making visible what was invisible in which it is understood that “in the end, insight must come from just seeing what there is to see” (p. 14). Their optimism about the emancipatory potential of philosophy seems to depend on just the sort of foundationalism that initiated the radical critique, an epistemic counterpart to the essentialism they reject in moral, political theory.

If this analysis is correct, a number of questions arise. Is there really a determinate reality—a set of facts—out there, waiting to be seen (or seen better) when, through philosophical analysis, the conceptual scales fall from our eyes? It is intended that real philosophy is an enterprise distinguished by methods that afford special access to such a reality, exposing distortions and gaps in earlier perceptions of it? If so, what assures that contact has been made; what distinguishes genuine from illusory insight? It would seem to be that even the joint requirements of explanatory power and empirical adequacy (both cited by de Sousa and Morgan) under-determine philosophical theories as much as they do scientific theories and, in this case, the question arises, what other virtues govern the evaluation of alternatives? Is subversiveness and/or allegiance to democratic ideals such a virtue in and of itself? Is it a mark of truth or at least the reduction of error, or does it

represent the endorsement of appeal to noncognitive (pragmatic, political) considerations in philosophy?

Similar issues arise in connection with de Sousa and Morgan's discussion of empirical sex and gender research. They show how those who have adopted a feminist perspective have been able to see clearly the anomalies and inconsistencies generated by dogmatic commitment to the assumption that sex is biologically determined and essentially dimorphic. All efforts to substantiate these central assumptions have failed and the tradition of inquiry founded on them has persisted in the form of pseudo-science; it quite transparently seeks out and accepts, or if necessary, makes up only evidence that supports the core assumptions of sexual essentialism. De Sousa and Morgan's criticism of this research is not that researchers were conceptually blinkered by deeply rooted assumptions and that the insight afforded by feminist theory was necessary before certain obvious but invisible facts of the matter could be recognized (although this seems a factor in some cases). Rather, the charge is that these researchers should have recognized the relevant facts as falsifying whatever their conceptual commitments. Indeed, there is some suggestion that they did recognize them as falsifying, given that they deliberately undertook to suppress or revise these facts. In the main the case is not conceptually ambiguous; by their own methodological standards sex researchers should not have supported the dominant thesis through much of the period it has been influential. As in the case of philosophy which refuses to take sex and gender seriously, de Sousa and Morgan's objection is that the science in question is simply bad science, not "science-as-usual" (to use Harding's terms). It lay to feminist critics, who did not have a vested interest in promoting the essentialist dogma, to draw attention to suppressed counter-evidence and internal inconsistencies, and to articulate their falsifying implications. In this it would seem their activities were not so much a matter of achieving new insight but of exposing deliberate obscurantism, even dishonesty, in the treatment of counter-evidence.

In this discussion, de Sousa and Morgan assume at least the possibility of distinguishing between good and bad, or real and pseudo-science. To this end they identify three criteria of demarcation: pseudo-science is said to start with conclusions, it rushes to explanatory conclusions on the basis of imaginary evidence, and it propounds positive-biased statistical illusions. They acknowledge that the first criteria is problematic as a distinguishing mark of pseudo-science; the hypothetico-deductive method, the mainstay of testing practice in science, could fairly be described as starting with conclusions. What seems at issue with the latter two more promising criteria is, first, that pseudo-

science typically suppresses, misrepresents, misanalyzes, and even fabricates data (its treatment of the data is methodologically unacceptable, even deliberately dishonest) and, second, that it fails to make test theories of conclusions properly responsive to the data. It is a well rehearsed point since Lakatos and Kuhn, however, that failure to meet these requirements is a frequent feature of real science where promising theories are protected from premature falsification while their details are being developed. It has proven notoriously difficult to give a general account of the conditions under which such practice is legitimate; typically such judgments can only be made retrospectively, in light of the performance of the mature theory, and even then they are always open to revision as research in the area continues to unfold. It seems likely that no very clear boundaries can be drawn between real and pseudo-science, even if the criteria of success (*e.g.*, empirical adequacy) are uncontentious and certainly the status of these criteria is itself open to question.

It does seem plausible, nonetheless, that really pernicious cases of sexist bias could be identified and rejected as bad science on internally accepted criteria of adequacy. Certainly the sex research discussed by de Sousa and Morgan fits this category; by their own lights, the researchers in question were doing pseudo- (even fraudulent) science. Even if this is accepted, still more general questions arise about the status of these internal criteria and the presumption, which seem to underlie de Sousa and Morgan's discussion, that good science, unlike pseudo-science, would not produce nor tolerate sexist bias of the sort associated with sex research; it is self-cleansing of intrusive bias and, in this sense, democratic and subversive in the way good philosophy is, on de Sousa and Morgan's account. In this they seem to hold what Harding (1986) describes as "feminist empiricism" (p. 24). While I am sympathetic with this position—I want not to lose the possibility of demonstrating that sexist presuppositions are just false in terms accepted by their proponents—it is significant that many feminist critics who begin with criticisms of bad science (much like de Sousa and Morgan's) end up wary of betrayal by respectable science-as-usual. Their analyses make it clear that scientific method is not, on its own, proof against ideologically induced bias; even methodologically sound science can produce sexist results if the assumptions that frame it import sexist bias. Indeed, some critics argue more radically that scientific method is itself a source of such bias (Stanley and Wise, 1983, pp. 22-23). The question arises whether science might not be inherently sexist, either because it is incapable of systematically exposing and eliminating sexist bias and, therefore, cannot but reproduce this bias, or more radically, because it

embodies essentially androcentric preoccupations and may, therefore, generate such bias.

Although the full force and credibility of these worries is still an open question, they are by no means obviously unfounded. One powerful source of support for them, relevant here, derives from the observation that feminist empiricists have a great deal of difficulty explaining the success of feminist critics in exposing what comes to be seen as insupportable bias. This is a criticism developed in detail by Harding (1986, chapter 6); if scientific method does eliminate any marks of individual standpoint and orientation, how are we to explain the greater objectivity that results when researchers adopt a feminist standpoint? Inasmuch as the feminist critique of sex research does amount to more than the exposure of fraud—it turns, at some points, on a reconceptualization of sex as a social construct—it would seem that its success must be explained in terms of the distinctive (political, personal) perspective that the critics brought to bear as feminist, precisely a factor that should not play a role in good (unbiased) science. To the extent that these broader critiques of science-as-usual raise credible worries, they seriously undermine the enlightenment faith that de Sousa and Morgan sustain in the emancipatory potential of science. They suggest that a feminist perspective is more a source of democratic, subversive insight than scientific method as such.

General questions remain about what emancipatory potential science really has, in what it consists, and what forms of inquiry or institutions will best realize it. There are some preliminary lessons to be drawn in this connection from de Sousa and Morgan's account of why feminist philosophy is powerfully insightful. By analogy with their analysis of philosophy, perhaps it could be argued that in many cases feminist critics of science are able to recognize inconsistencies in practice, as well as see new facts and their implications for the development of inquiry, because of a shift in the assumptions they hold constant. Some presuppositions about the nature of the subject phenomena must inevitably be made; not everything can be tested at once, and feminist researchers proceed by revising the accepted priorities, given their political commitments. If scientific method is merely a probative tool and not proof against bias in and of itself (to take a position intermediate between faith in the emancipatory power of science and pessimism about its inherent androcentrism), it is the use feminists make of it given a politically inspired conceptual shift that assures their emancipatory insights. One implication of de Sousa and Morgan's analysis is that if science is to have any emancipatory potential it must incorporate philosophical analysis of the

presuppositions of practice—theoretical and methodological—that is designed to make framework assumptions a more routine object of critical assessment.

This is only a partial answer since the emancipatory potential of philosophical analysis also requires explanation; it is unclear what status accrues to the new facts brought into view in the process of reformulating framework assumptions, and how the framework assumptions themselves are to be assessed when there are alternatives available that make equally good sense of the facts they deem significant. Certainly, it would seem unavoidable that our best, even our most subversive and democratic theories, represent a temporary stopping point, not conclusive (undistorted) access to what there is to see. One enduring lesson from the radical critics of both philosophy and science is that we must resist any form of methodological essentialism about science and philosophy. It is unlikely that any given method could prove essentially emancipatory, and it is probable that our best understanding (philosophical or scientific) will always bear the mark of power-structures and interests whose genesis and limitations are obscure to us. It is to be hoped that, in pursuing empirical and philosophical research on sex and gender, it will become clearer that emancipatory potential science and philosophy retain in face of reactions which conclude either that both are inherently pernicious or, in the case of philosophy, that its only benign option is free-wheeling conversation which remains deliberately marginal to active human enterprises.

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