

cumstances, have some difficulty in having good homes found (e.g., if they are of minority races or if the mother carried some genetic disease or was a known substance abuser). Some social circumstances may be so oppressive that the mother can predict only a life of extreme hardship for her offspring, e.g., if she is a black mother in South Africa. If we consider practices which affect embryos early in development, “surplus” embryos produced by *in vitro* fertilization or “embryo flushing” may be in demand from couples with a distorted sense of the fetus as commodity, or whose heterosexists bias reflect parental values the mother finds unacceptable for child-rearing. (For a truly frightening version of a foreseeable *Brave New World* of reproductive control in which one would not want one’s children to be raised, see Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*.)

Hence, it is not only ownership that might lead a woman to want her embryo or fetus destroyed if she was no longer prepared to nurture it, but also her vision of threats facing the developing child. An analysis attentive to the interests of children and women, as Overall insists is necessary, must recognize that protecting the interests of the embryo does not necessarily mean preserving its life. I think embryos are entitled to what philosophers call a “paternalist” approach in which others must decide the best interests of the developing organism; and it is legitimate (and compatible with Overall’s general theme that the interests of fetuses ought not to be viewed as being in conflict with those of their mothers) that the person who has the most intimate relationship with the fetus and who has the most invested in its development—*i.e.*, the mother—should be the one to decide on how its interests may best be served.

Moreover, while her recommendation to allow the mother to expel the fetus if she finds continuing pregnancy unacceptable may be logically consistent with her view that no one has a right to secure the death of that fetus, in practice this separation is dangerous to feminist aims. As Overall acknowledges, surviving abortion may produce further harms to the fetus which, inevitably, put the woman in conflict with the fetus in the case of abortion. Surely, such conflicts will again be considered as adequate grounds for restricting women’s access to abortion. The difficulty here is that Overall has strayed from her vision of seeing reproduction as a process with mother and fetus conceptually and physically connected. For women, reproduction is far more involved than simply housing the fetus, and it makes a mockery of their concerns to imagine a social practice that can bring about the independence of the fetus when the mother determines that the pregnancy can no longer be tolerated but is unwilling to surrender the care of the fetus to the state. I believe

women are in a privileged position with respect to the fetuses developing in their bodies, and that, in most circumstances, they are entitled to decide the future of those fetuses. This is not because they own the fetuses, for they ought not to be free to sell them, but because they are responsible for them and should be trusted to decide if continued life when removed from the womb is in the best interest of the fetus. Any other policy, especially any which insists on trying to save every premature infant no matter how damaged, or which allows the patriarchal state to determine the survival question, would be contrary to the interests of women and children. Only the mother is likely to make such decisions in a loving way (since I believe death can be a loving decision). Without the authority to decide these questions women will not have the reproductive freedom necessary, and, in particular, they will certainly have difficulty in getting abortions.

Despite my disagreement in these important areas, I wish to recommend Overall’s book with enthusiasm. It is well written and very well conceived. It is important to consider these various aspects and practices of reproduction in conjunction with one another. Together they constitute our attitudes about reproductive matters and about those persons most closely involved in reproductive activity, women and children. Hence it is important to discuss the issues in a comprehensive fashion, being sensitive to how our attitudes in one area influence developing practice in another. In particular, her discussion of the dangers of sex preselection and surrogacy help clarify the need to avoid a simple analysis of consumer choice as the foundation for reproductive freedom in matters of childbirth and abortion. The choice feminists are arguing for must be viewed as a comprehensive control over the reproductive aspects of our lives in a manner compatible with the autonomy of other women and children. This book helps us to clarify that goal.

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The Science Question in Feminism. S. Harding. *Ithaca: Cornell University, 1986, Pp. 271.*

In *The Science Question in Feminism* Harding takes on the most thorough analysis of feminist critiques of science to date. Harding does this through a discussion of what she considers to be the five main research problematics of feminism and science. Her most important contribution to these projects comes in her discussion of the future of science. As a standpoint theorist, Harding accepts that

knowledge is socially constructed and, further, that in a global patriarchy it is constructed with class, sex and race biases. These biases range from the obvious pattern of using males as the norm in scientific research to meta-sexist connotations of male sex-role socialization with ontological and metaphysical claims. The latter occurs when, for example, the most abstract and decontextualized science, namely physics, becomes the paradigm for all of the sciences. Such bias is evidenced in the hierarchical ordering of knowledge from the “hard” to the “soft” sciences where hard sciences are given more prestige and priority than are the soft sciences.

Harding’s solution to the problem of the patriarchal biases in science, is to call for a radical reconstruction of science in accordance with feminist values. These values, claims Harding, are entailed by standpoint feminism. Further, such a value orientation or standpoint leads to the feminist project of justifying standpoint feminism as more “objective” than traditional male-biased science.

The seeming paradox of claiming that all knowledge is socially constructed and also that standpoint feminism is more objective is resolved for Harding by virtue of her redefinition of objectivity. Harding does not lay claim to the positivist understanding of objectivity. Rather, Harding argues that feminism is objective, according to a reclaiming of the term objectivity with a significantly different meaning. She argues that feminist values maximize objectivity but defines objectivity as follows,

Objectivity is not maximized through value-neutrality at least not in the way the traditional science discourses have construed these concepts...it is only coercive values—racism, classism, sexism—that deteriorate objectivity; it is participatory values—antiracism, anticlassism, antisexism—that decrease the distortions and mystifications in our culture’s explanations and understandings. (p. 249)

According to Harding’s reconstructed understanding of objectivity, the standpoint feminist perspective which includes liberatory values is more objective because it decreases the misrepresentations of other races and classes as well as women. Hence, the feminist standpoint which argues that the standpoint of feminism offers a privileged position with respect to providing a broader explanation of the social and life sciences, according to Harding, lays down the preconditions for a reconstruction of objectivity. The privileged position of feminism comes from the understanding which a raised consciousness incorporates. The feminist standpoint understands the perspective of both the oppressor and the oppressed. She argues,

the paradigm models of objective science are those studies explicitly directed by morally and politically emancipatory interests—that is, by interests in eliminating sexist, racist, classist, and culturally coercive understandings of nature and social life. From the perspective of this second unity-of-science continuum, the more abstract arenas of human thought simply occupy the other end of the continuum; morals and politics appear there, as well, though in their most abstract and least explicit forms. Physics and chemistry, mathematics and logic, bear the fingerprints of their distinctive cultural creators no less than do anthropology and history. A maximally objective science, natural or social, will be one that includes a self-conscious and critical examination of the relationship between the social experience of its creators and the kinds of cognitive structures favored in its inquiry. (p. 250)

Harding’s approach is interesting for it is one of the more sustained attempts to ground feminist science epistemologically. However, ultimately it is unsatisfactory. To rename relativistic claims “objective” is merely muddying the water. One of the most important projects which feminists have undertaken is to unmask the engendering of knowledge as sex-biased. This project is related to feminist understandings about the relationship between interests, values and the kinds of observations and theories which one postulates and accepts. To move from this position to claim that somehow feminists are more objective is to miss the significance of feminist understandings of the epistemological relativism which is essential to feminist critique. Further, Harding cannot answer the problem of which feminist standpoint to grant maximal objectivity. If, as standpoint theorists believe, standpoint feminism is superior because feminist understanding encompasses both the perspective of being oppressed and the perspective of the oppressor, then the most oppressed person has *ceteris paribus* the most objective understanding. This means that objective knowledge should be constructed by, for example, disabled women of colour living in oppressed and exploited countries. Everyone else will necessarily have a partial and perverse interpretation of knowledge.

Despite the unsatisfactory nature of Harding’s proposal for grounding feminist science, her book is rich both in terms of her analysis of feminist critique and her understanding of the relationship between science and exploitation. This book is worth reading for any feminist interested in theory and scientific knowledge.

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