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Beyond epistemology: A pragmatist approach to feminist science studies

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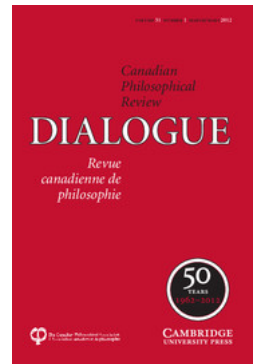
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Beyond Epistemology: A Pragmatist Approach to Feminist Science Studies **Sharyn Clough Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, viii + 166 pp.,** **\$65.00, \$24.95 paper**

Catherine Hundleby

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rights cannot count as natural rights (the reader is left with the assumption that they are as empirical as theoretic).

The book is weakened by two other, comparatively minor, complaints. First, Gould's discussion of social networks (and the role played by the Internet) is particularly weak. While it is undoubtedly true that recent communication revolutions will change our relationships (or even the potential to have relationships) with other people in distant parts of the world, Gould does not go into enough detail. Second, Gould includes as the last chapter of the book a perfunctory discussion of terrorism and 9/11. Gould, a former New York intellectual, seems to have included the discussion more out of a sense of duty than out of a desire to say something truly original.

Ultimately, Gould cannot shake the reader's concern that she has constructed an elaborate textbook of arguments whose theories could never stand on abstract arguments alone. She recognizes this, but only partially: she does claim that some details of the functioning of supra-national institutions must rest on empirical concerns, but she is unwilling to extend her empiricism to the fundamental ontology that makes up her description of society. In the end, Gould's book is to be read as a detailed reflection on the possible, but not the categorical.

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Beyond Epistemology: A Pragmatist Approach to Feminist Science Studies

SHARYN CLOUGH

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Sharyn Clough's *Beyond Epistemology* is directed toward improving feminist science studies by eliminating the epistemological bugbear of scepticism, thus making room for more particular and constructive and less hopelessly defensive work. For Clough, moving beyond vain efforts to defeat scepticism nonetheless does not entail abandoning truth and having only politics as a basis for criticism. Such relativism follows only if we accept the metaphysics that motivates scepticism, which Clough would replace with a pragmatic attention to specific scientific truths. Her engagement with the pragmatism of Donald Davidson, Richard Rorty, and Nelson Goodman is fruitful, and suggests important revisions to classics of feminist epistemology. However, whether this actually entails abandoning the project of epistemology altogether, as Clough argues, is quite another question.

The sort of focused empirical questions that Clough recommends can be asked about epistemology as well as about science—or, we might say, asked about epistemology in scientific terms. Embracing such a naturalist attitude, as part of Davidson's legacy from W. V. O. Quine, in addition to the legacy from feminist epistemologists, including feminist naturalists, is clearly part of Clough's project. Yet, she avoids making these alliances substantial on the basis of a lingering dualism between scheme and content. More generally, her critique of feminist science studies rejects the frequent adoption of the naturalist thesis that theories are underdetermined by data, and mediated by non-cognitive moral and political values. Underdetermination invokes the representationalist metaphysical split between

subjective/ethical/political conceptual schemes and the objective world. Still, the possibility remains that naturalist projects would survive reconstrual in Clough's terms, and indeed benefit from it.

Clough's negative thesis occupies the bulk of the book, and takes the reader through a sample of central and historically various feminist critiques of science, with a particular focus on biology. Beginning with Darwin's contemporaries, Clough moves chronologically through to landmark works by Evelyn Fox Keller, Sandra Harding, and Helen Longino, ending in the early 1990s. In each case Clough finds a dependence on representationalist metaphysics, typically a problem for objectivist epistemology that seeks universal standards against which beliefs are to be assessed. Traditional epistemology tends to posit these standards as filters that eliminate social and political values. For feminist theorists who reject such objectivism, the danger is that the problematic underlying representationalism remains in the form of relativism. Rejecting objectivism because no set of cognitive values can successfully filter out non-cognitive values, which is often articulated in terms of the underdetermination of theory by data, leaves feminists with the view that all understandings are necessarily laden with ethics and politics and without independent criteria for assessing value.

Clough's criticism is somewhat suspiciously directed at fleeting periods of thought. Her focus on early Quine, early Harding, and early Longino especially suggests there is more to be said about the implications of Clough's project for these philosophers. What about the later, naturalist Quine? Moreover, what about more recent Quineans, including feminist Quineans? Quine has been turned to feminist purposes not only through the underdetermination thesis, but also because of the holism and naturalism that Clough admires. Indeed Clough's Davidsonian assertion that values are empirical beliefs seems akin to Lynn Hankinson Nelson's revision of Quine by dissolving the fact-value distinction. Nelson's work, and the feminist naturalism of Richmond Campbell, receive some criticism but not much care for what might be salvaged from their work.

In addition, the occasional representationalist language used by Keller, Harding, and Longino may easily be understood in the context of their time, writing to an audience familiar with that manner of speaking, namely, the language of the positivists. They have not shared Clough's metaphysical worries, and the question remains how her pragmatism might affect their actual concerns. Language that will address evidential issues but not fall back into representationalist habits would be quite constructive, and Clough's pressure to take up resources from Davidson, Rorty, and Goodman is by turns instructive, although her positive program remains somewhat unclear.

Given the Davidsonian view that we assess falsity against a background of truth, Clough argues that we have reason to consider most of our ontological categories adequate bases for truth. This is because most of our categories are projectable, in the sense developed by Nelson Goodman, so that "women" and "men" fare as well as "blue" and "green." Such pragmatically successful categories—a.k.a. "entrenched" or "salient"—while guided by "human interest," are sufficient starting points for empirical confirmation. These specific and local empirical issues remain once we give up attempts to answer the sceptic. Instead of trying to defeat the sceptic, we should spend time scrutinizing specific scientific theories and practices. Rules for this come from the time-honoured laboratory traditions of

repeating experiments a few different times and at a few different hands. Add to these the epistemological criteria developed by Helen Longino: creating recognized avenues for criticism; employing shared standards; being responsive to criticism; and equally sharing intellectual authority among qualified practitioners. These further criteria may help us explore the contextual values at work in science, as Longino argues, but Clough maintains they should not be viewed as means for revealing the underdetermination of theory by data. The values that according to the underdetermination thesis mediate between data and theory must be understood themselves as empirical beliefs, part of the web of belief comprising a theory against which scientists interpret data.

If we can substitute for the underdetermination theory in this way, and save the bulk of Longino's prescription, why can we not do likewise for Keller and Harding? Clough allows that normative critique is possible, if difficult, for instance by confronting the alteration of truth-conditions and fighting the semantic laziness that allows ideology to obscure truth conditions. However, what exactly this fight would look like is demonstrated only for particular cases, not for broader epistemological projects. Where and why does she draw the line? It seems she would need to argue that epistemological terms are not well entrenched to justify rejecting them, yet the history of epistemology seems to disallow that.

If Clough wishes to take up the pragmatist view that there are no intrinsic epistemic values, though she seems to want to avoid this, then she might well align herself with Stephen Stich, who likewise declared epistemology dead. Otherwise, Clough might be better off admitting her kinship with contemporary naturalist epistemologists, who draw on Quine only for inspiration and reject substantial portions of his thought, beginning but not ending with his behaviourism. They might likewise be pressed into abandoning the language of the underdetermination thesis that, Clough argues, drags them into representationalist metaphysics. After all, rejecting scepticism is central to the naturalist project and so naturalists seem to be a perfect audience. Quine himself maintained that scepticism only made sense within the context of science (understood to include the range of human empirical practices), which seems exactly like Clough's view that only local doubt is meaningful. Global doubt is summarily rejected.

Moreover, Clough has much to add to the project of naturalizing epistemology. The naturalist reliance on entrenched categories is challenged by Clough's pragmatism, because entrenchment itself can be a political process. Just as patriarchal values may discourage exploration of the possibility that menstruation has an evolutionary function—the case study Clough explores—so may they discourage exploration of gendered aspects of cognitive evaluation. The conservative nature of naturalism has long been acknowledged, and Clough's analysis provides a basis for remedy, for making naturalism progressive in the way that many feminists would embrace.