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## Barbara Herrnstein Smith: Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth, and the Human

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**Barbara Herrnstein Smith. *Scandalous Knowledge: Science, Truth, and the Human*.** Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 2005. 198 pp. ISBN 0-8223-3810-6 (cloth)

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“Knowledge ... is the scandal of philosophy” (1), writes Barbara Herrnstein Smith, Craven Professor of Comparative Literature at Duke University and Distinguished Professor of English at Brown University: no one, it would seem, knows quite what to do with the concept of knowing something or how to account for it. Can we be sure that we know what we believe we know? Is there really a correspondence between what formulates itself in our minds and what pre-exists us, outside of ourselves? Can we be certain that anything at all has being in the world beyond our perceptions? Beyond our idea of things?

Herrnstein Smith’s book claims we cannot. It presents an unapologetic, unrepentant defense of postmodern constructivist thought in a storm of attacks and denunciations by its traditionalist enemies. The book is highly articulate, copiously documented, and superbly researched. It is also surprisingly readable, despite the occasional passage or chapter title (“Chapter 4 – Cutting-Edge Equivocation: Conceptual Moves and Rhetorical Strategies in Contemporary Anti-Epistemology”). Herrnstein Smith introduces her work with a meticulous and challenging explanation, geared toward philosophers as well as educated laypersons, of the controversy and antagonisms rising from polarized views about epistemologies: what she terms the classical realist (or traditional) view versus the postmodern constructivist or pragmatist view. The former endorses a formalist approach, stemming from enlightenment positivism. Such a view embraces empirical and rational proofs, professing faith in an objective truth that is knowable. The latter argues the unknowability of “facts,” or at least a more fluid multiplicity of contingent events that interact in a dynamic, thus creating what we think we “know.” Herrnstein Smith refers to these two opposing views as mutually exclusive cultures, each of which pits itself mercilessly against the other in a struggle that is not always above board, polite, or moderate, on either side. This makes for good reading.

In order to understand any phenomenon, Herrnstein Smith argues, one must make the effort to study the histories of its making. This means looking into the social or political circumstances of its beginnings. An entire chapter of her book (Chapter 2) is devoted to combating one of the most scathing critiques of postmodernism by its adversaries: the epithet of relativism is thoroughly examined, and its straw roots are exposed. Herrnstein Smith paraphrases this attack: if historical data are relative and truth subjective, then one “narrative” is as good as any other. The consequences of this would be that we may never label any action as right or wrong, leading obviously to a reluctance to take any moral action in the world. Herrnstein Smith shows this non sequitur up for its falsity, both logically and in content, since none of the accusations in it (nor in a myriad of other such anti-constructivist slogans) is consistent with postmodern or constructivist claims. She points out that such misinterpretations and exaggerations are often made but seldom documented.

As early as the 1920s and 1930s, Herrnstein Smith informs us, postmodern ideas were already being proposed in academic circles. She cites the work of Ludwik Fleck, a microbiologist with a penchant for philosophy. She refers to his book, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1935), to illustrate just how profoundly unstable

science, empirical facts, objective observations, and indeed, the very foundations of our reality are. Reality is a part of us. She writes, “The specific features of what we interact with as reality are not prior and independent of those interactions but merge and acquire their specificity through them” (51). In Chapter 3 she employs Fleck’s astute interpretation of the “Wasserman Reaction” to demonstrate how very random the scientific method really is, exposing what most of us have always taken for a relatively “objective” and single-minded pursuit, goal-oriented and pure (the traditional, empirical notion of reality) to be actually a series of good or bad luck events, lacking distinct focus, in which social, political, economic, and other contingent influences play as much of a defining role as scientific curiosity. She shows the results of this experimentation to be nothing more than a convenient fitting of the “evidence” into prevailing social schemata of the times, the dominant *Zeitgeist*. Is nothing pure any more? Was it ever?

It sounds extreme. Moderation has been suggested. To those voices who offer steering the mid-way between Scylla and Charybdis (extreme and outdated Formalism on the one hand and radical questioning of the possibility of knowing any “facts” on the other), Herrnstein Smith offers very little hope, since as she points out, there can be no middle path between mutually exclusive attributes. Moderation is an illusion and worse, she warns us, since it constitutes no moderation at all, but rather a rephrasing of the already established, politically advantaged traditionalist extreme that there is an objective reality and we can know it with some certainty. Reality is not so cooperative, she assures us. She brings up feminist thought in this context, pointing out the necessarily careful steering between extremes requisite for any political or legal success. To achieve desired ends, feminists have had to adopt some degree of the traditionalist/realist stand. For example, if a rape victim’s narrative is to be accepted as equally credible with that of her assailant – if, that is to say, the victim’s story can be taken as secure and knowable truth (concession to tradition), then who is to say, when there is a conflict, which narrative will take precedence? Most likely, it will be the story of the established legal system and common wisdom. Moderation is a double-edged sword, she cautions. Perhaps, she advises, problems are to be avoided not by treading a compromising “middle” path, but rather by examining the underlying structure of the legal system and socially conventional attitudes toward rape instead.

Her writing on feminist epistemology is quite fine: clear and strong. Feminist thinkers should take her defense of constructivist theory seriously, considering how important postmodern constructivist ideas have become lately in the field of study. Herrnstein Smith points out, for example, the weakness of conflating socially constructed gender roles with “hard-wired” sexual characteristics (which, incidentally, she also holds to be products of discourse); she heartily endorses “denaturalizing” accepted social and gender norms, showing the “facts” on which they are founded to be nothing more than widely accepted, unexamined belief systems, despite the use of questionable “scientific” research to back them up. Hers is a forceful voice in defense of multiplicity and a courageous challenge to traditionalist approaches. One could only wish she had devoted more of this book to feminist epistemologies and proposals, and not limited herself to a few paragraphs as illustration in a chapter on why one should not compromise. She herself suggests that more is needed, so perhaps there is hope.

The destructive split between the two cultures, Herrnstein Smith insists, is perpetuated by misunderstanding, the wish to protect what one has invested intellectual capital in, and also academic laziness, in that the defenders of either side do not expend the good will or energy requisite in understanding the position of the other side. Hence

the reductionist battle cries: dangerous relativism, trendy constructivism, obsolete formalism, and so on. She also accuses the press and media of generating and perpetuating suspicion through exaggerations, distortions, and misrepresentations. She complains that the politically established realist/traditionalist camp has the upper hand in this war of words and funding, as would be expected.

The author spends the entire sixth chapter of her book in a scorching critique of the new discipline of evolutionary psychology, which advertises itself as melding the two opposed cultures to offer new hope. She accuses the proponents of this discipline of a false foundation of faith in rationalist and empiricist principles and methodology: for her, evolutionary psychology is nothing more than traditionalist empirical science re-clothed. She views this entire discipline as an example of what can go wrong when we attempt to unify the two incompatible cultures: the natural sciences (based in the trust in a unity of perception and ability to assess the outside world objectively) and the postmodern outer-reaches of the humanities (which believe that we are unable to judge with any certainty “facts” that pre-exist us, outside of our subjectivity). She points to gross misunderstandings and misrepresentations in this new field and cites several authors who, she claims, represent it. Steven Pinker (for his book *How the Mind Works*), and John Tooby and Leda Cosmides (for their *The Adapted Mind*) come in for her particular disdain. The thinking processes employed by the practitioners of this discipline are dismissed by Herrnstein Smith as “rhetorical-alchemic transmutation of sequences of linked might-be’s and would-be’s into confidently asserted must-be’s” (145) Is her attack justified? I believe it is; she presents her case coherently and convincingly, although one might be moved to detect a whiff of overkill here.

The final chapter of Herrnstein Smith’s book seems tacked on. It differs stylistically and thematically from the rest and disturbs the logical flow of her otherwise clear thought process. There are unneeded repetitions (for example, yet another attack on John Pinker’s book), and leaps. In this chapter, she investigates our human relationships with animals and various approaches to environmental and animal rights movements. It seems gratuitous and misplaced. However, she sums all up beautifully with a resounding call for the “radical uncertainty and dynamic of the many” – in defense of postmodern constructivism. There are, she writes, many truths, many stories, many interpretations of reality, changing with the times, and that is just the way it is. In case we can know.