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ABSTRACT: Recent work linking feminist epistemology with social epistemology draws attention to the role of status and power in understanding knowledge and reasoning in social context. I argue that considerations of social justice require better understandings of two particular components of reasoning and social context: (i) *abstraction*—who gets to abstract, how, and why? (ii) *the individual-social distinction*—how do particular understandings of this distinction serve to minimize or elucidate the role of status and power?

KEYWORDS: feminist epistemology, reasoning, context, abstraction, individual-social distinction, social status, gender, power

Significant developments in feminist epistemology and social epistemology have drawn attention to the importance of examinations of social and cultural context in the development of enhanced understandings of knowledge, reasoning, and logic. Feminist epistemology is regularly understood as a form of social epistemology, one that places special emphasis on the epistemic workings of gender and other politically-sensitive social divisions. Feminist epistemologists focus particularly on forms of social identity that interact with locally salient forms of power and status that may, in turn, inform conceptions of knowledge, reasoning, and logic. However, the particular focus on understanding the epistemic workings of power and status that feminist theorists develop places their work at odds somewhat (in *dissensus* perhaps) with many projects in social epistemology that encompass *the social* as a relatively apolitical realm. I want to elaborate on this tension and, in particular, examine some of the ways in which feminist work that takes account of power/status uniquely contributes to theoretical understandings of cognition, reasoning, and logic. I will argue, in particular, that this work motivates (among other things) specific reconsiderations of two important concepts--and related distinctions--that inform work on cognition, reasoning, logic, and social context: *abstraction* or *the abstract* (as that is contrasted with the concrete, the particulars of context); and *the social* (as that is distinguished from the individual).

It is important to understand the term *feminist* here as something like an umbrella term that includes a range of projects. While many earlier projects in feminist theorizing took *gender* (as demarcated primarily by sex differences) to be the central concept for analysis, it soon became clear that the concept needed to be refined and extended in various ways. For example, it became evident that gender could not be examined in isolation from race, class, and other salient social and cultural differences that inform social identity and, indeed, inform the ways in which gender impacts individual

experience and identity in a given social context. Social identity can be understood in terms of differences in experiences and behavior. Yet since there are innumerable ways in which any one individual differs from another, differences and identity can be examined along various axes of significance, some of which reveal the workings of power and status and some of which may not.

Earlier psychological analyses also tended to treat gender as an attribute of individuals, with gender differences understood in terms of *differences* in relatively stable intrapsychic psychological and behavioral traits. More recent feminist work in cognitive psychology has drawn attention to the *situational nature of gender* which prompts more refined understandings of "situated cognition." Even in laboratory settings with tests of what I call IISAP-cognition (isolated-individual-solving-a puzzle-cognition), gender differences can appear and disappear depending on the particular social effects, associations, and expectations prompted by changes in test formats and test instructions. (Sharps et al. 1993, Deaux 1984, Rooney 1995) Postmodern and rhetorical analyses of gender have also revealed its workings as a symbolic and discursive formation. For example, in the history of philosophy reason was often *valued* through an implicit, if not explicit, contrast with the lower-status realm of emotion, particulars, and embodiment that was metaphorically, if not literally, cast as the realm of the "feminine." (Rooney 1991) In the following I will draw on these more recent expanded understandings of gender, that is, *gender understood as a social and symbolic formation linked to power and status*. I am especially interested in the ways in which these expanded understandings of gender motivate enhanced understandings of reasoning and social and political context.

The relatively well-know case of gender and moral reasoning provides a helpful illustration of what is at issue here. Carol Gilligan's 1982 work *In a Different Voice* provided the catalyst for significant debate in feminist psychology and feminist philosophy especially. Gilligan herself and many of her commentators regularly framed different moral voices in terms of gender differences in reasoning ("care reasoning" and "justice reasoning") which drew on a particular understanding of the abstract versus context/concrete distinction. Not uncommon is Marilyn Friedman's description of the difference:

> the standard, more typically "male," moral voice...derives moral judgments about particular cases from *abstract, universalized moral rules and principles* that are substantively concerned with justice and rights. ... By contrast, the different, more characteristically "female," moral voice that Gilligan heard in her studies *eschews abstract rules and principles*...[it] derives moral judgments from the contextual detail of situations grasped as specific and unique... the motivating vision of this ethics is "that everyone will be responded to and included, that no one will be left alone or hurt." (Friedman 1993, p. 92, my emphasis)

As I have argued in more detail elsewhere (Rooney 2001) one needs to be careful about reading or "hearing" differences in terms of a distinction (abstract versus contextual) that draws on, rather than challenges, a philosophical history of reason that inspired rather than challenged sexism spelled out in terms of "fundamental" cognitive differences. For instance, Schopenhauer noted: "For it is just because [women's] reasoning power is weak that present circumstances have such a hold over them, and those concrete things which lie directly before their eyes exercise a power which is seldom counteracted to any extent by abstract principles of thought, fixed rules of conduct... or regard of what is absent and

remote." (Mahowald 1994, 138). If there are some differences emerging in the moral voices of women and men (and there has been considerable debate about the existence or significance of such) one could alternatively read them in terms of the application of different kinds of universal and abstract principles. One could well argue that what Friedman calls the "motivating vision" of the care ethic is a universal principle, perhaps even an abstract one. The meaning of the term "abstract" is not as transparent as is often assumed in these discussions. Abstraction is surely something of a relative or contextual notion--as when we abstract from *some* of the *specifics* or *saliencies* of a given *situation*, and not others. Abstracting from a moral situation with respect to the kinds of relationships among individuals in it, and not with respect to specific juridical rights of those individuals as autonomous agents, is one way of abstracting from the situation, as is the way that abstracts with respect to the latter and not the former. It is, unfortunately, the traditional affinity between conceptions or idealizations of "maleness" and rationality (typically fleshed in terms of principles, autonomy, and *abstraction*) that seems to automatically lend voice to certain ways of reading gender differences in these contexts and not alternative ways that, I am suggesting, are just as plausible. What I am arguing for here is a feminist reading that troubles traditional conceptions of abstraction linked to a particular aspect of the symbolic formation of gender-- the traditional "masculine" reach of reason was regularly posited as the superior cognitive mode through a contrast with, and abstraction from, the clearly "lower status" world of particulars and embodiment which was regularly symbolized as "feminine" (Rooney 1991,1994)

The particular interrogation of *abstraction* that I promote here also connects to the debate generated by Andrea Nye's influential work, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic* (1990). Nye's examination of historical developments in logic uncovers aspects of their discursive constructions as "words of power" that legitimate some ways of thinking and speaking as authoritative and others as not. In many cases Nye sees the feminist problem with logic as "the problem of abstraction"—the problem of privileging formal abstraction as the superior mode of thought, thus dismissing or erasing the content and context of real everyday utterances. However, there is a tendency for Nye (among others) to, again, treat the abstract-context distinction (which she connects with the form-content distinction) as a meaningful distinction without giving due attention to the ways in which its meaningfulness draws on its gender-inflected discursive history. She then tends to identify the feminist problem of logic with the problem of abstraction, to the point that she questions whether there even could be a feminist reform of logic.

In her discussion of Nye's work Marjorie Hass (1999) takes issue with Nye's understanding of logic and abstraction and her tendency to hold up natural language(s) as logic's purer other. Addressing patterns of discrimination in particular experience, Hass argues, often requires specific forms of generality and abstraction. For instance, feminist criticism of cultural and social norms often requires abstraction from particular relationships or particular linguistic systems. Hass does not deny that there are problems with abstraction in some contexts—not recognizing individual differences, for instance, but she adds: "In aiming to avoid the recognizable problems with abstractions, we must not imagine that we can retreat into a "purer," fully concrete form of description…natural language itself requires a form of generality that produces anew the problem of abstraction." (1999, 193) Hass presents a more nuanced approach to *abstraction* that is

reflected also in her consideration of alternative logics which may enable "new representation of generality that are respectful of difference." (194) Val Plumwood stresses a similar point in relation to feminist critiques of logic:

> Once the plurality of logical systems has been acknowledged, feminist and other social critique can be more discriminating in its response to logics, and begin an exploration of the way in which different logical systems correspond to different forms of rationality. We can begin to understand systems of logic and their corresponding systems of rationality as *selected*… I shall show that an understanding of the way selection has operated to privilege certain of these forms of rationality has much to contribute to an understanding of the deep roots of phallocentrism and other oppressive conceptual structures in Western thought, and that we can find in the selection of logical systems the same marks of elite perspectives which have been widely demonstrated elsewhere for supposedly neutral and universal forms of knowledge. (2002, 17)

(Plumwood then proceeds to undertake a specific examination of *negation* in classical logic--in particular, its relation to hierarchical dualisms and what she calls the "logic of domination.") Thus, for both Hass and Plumwood the "political" questions are not primarily about the privileging of abstraction or logic over context and particularity, but, instead, are about the privileging of particular forms of abstraction or logic over others. Given that there are numerous ways in which one might abstract from and reason about a given context or situation, questions then arise about who gets to abstract and why, as well as questions about which particular aspects of social contexts individual forms of abstraction reveal and which aspects they render invisible or "illogical." How, in particular, do supposedly neutral and universal forms of logic and knowledge reflect elite perspectives, where these perspectives are understood as particular *social* perspectives informed by status and power?

These recommendations for politically-sensitive attention to contexts and situations and the various ways in which one might abstract from them necessitate, I maintain, a particular feminist examination of *the social* (as that is distinguished from the individual), especially since that has also been a significant distinction in the history of epistemology. Most, arguably all, contexts and situations are social ones which can be experienced and understood quite differently by people whose identities place them in different social locations--even within the same situation. (What may seem to be a harmless joke to one person in a given context may be offensive sexism or racism to another, for instance.) As we have seen, expanded understandings of gender as a social and symbolic formation (that impacts epistemological as well as economic and institutional structures) challenges uncritical feminist rejections of *abstraction* as "masculine." So too must such understandings reject an uncritical endorsement of the social as "feminine." In particular, I will argue that a more critical examination of the individual-social distinction as a gender-inflected one must also inform accounts of what is especially significant about feminist epistemology and feminist perspectives on logic, including what distinguishes this work from many projects in "regular" social epistemology. The *individual versus social* and *abstract versus concrete/context* distinctions are not the same, of course, but there are significant links between them in traditional epistemology. Many forms of epistemic individualism which take individual knowers as the primary epistemic agents construct those agents as generic subjects with generic capacities to abstract and reason about the "core" meaning and epistemic structure of particular, socially-imbued knowledge contexts and situations.

Recognizing that the individual-social distinction has also been a gender-linked one doesn't simply mean noting that women's individuality was often negated or discouraged, that women's nature was thought to be more relational and social than men's, or that women's roles were regularly bound up with familial and social nurturance in ways that men's were less likely to be (though this has often been the case). Quite significantly, it also means that philosophical norms or ideals of "individual" expression and endeavor were regularly mapped out and theorized in terms of male activities and choices in the public realms of work and politics, or in the "private" domain of solitary thought, undistracted by the changing particularities of social involvement. It should be noted here, of course, that philosophical associations and ideals of male-inflected identity and individuality regularly applied *only* to men of more privileged classes. Thus, insofar as gender associations informed traditional understandings of the individual and the social, a critical rethinking of these gender associations must also be part of feminist reflections on the individual and social in thinking about knowledge, reasoning, and epistemology. As is the case with other gender-linked dichotomies, we are cautioned against a general endorsement of the social (as "female" or "feminine") over the individual (which is cast as "male" or masculinist) when that runs the risk of reinforcing those gender associations and any related sexist assumptions.

*Epistemic individualism*, as noted above, usually includes the methodological strategy of taking individuals to be the primary knowers or primary epistemic subjects. Traditionally, ideal knowers are generic and interchangeable, with common generic capacities of reasoning and sense perception. Specifics of social or cultural location—related to gender, socio-economic class, religious background, or else—are not considered pertinent in epistemological investigations. However, feminist and other work that is politically sensitive to specifics of cultural location and difference challenges this division. In a word, such work troubles the notion that "the social" can be assessed as something like an *add on* to "the individual" (a notion not uncommon in social epistemology particularly). Or, to put it another way, this work challenges the notion that, given the numerous factors that can go into cognition, understanding, reasoning, and knowledge, we can readily divide these into "individual" factors and "social" factors. The idea that the social infuses the individual constitutes a recurring them in the examples from feminist philosophical work I now proceed to examine. The first examples are drawn from feminist examinations of the connections between particular understandings of individualism and historically- and culturally-specific understandings of masculinity--this work helps to situate specific conceptions of epistemic individualism within broader cultural understandings of individualism. The later examples pertain to specific conceptions of epistemic individualism at the other end of the spectrum, so to speak. These connect back to the examples above relating to abstraction: they draw attention to accounts of individual reasoning understood in terms of abstraction and completion of specific logical/cognitive tasks.

Feminist work on Descartes provides important insights into the way in which the philosophical understandings of epistemic individualism can reflect broader historical and cultural moments. Both Susan Bordo (1987) and Naomi Scheman (1993) note the relationship between Descartes' individualism and his skepticism, a relationship they both argue lends itself to particular psycho-cultural readings. Profound changes in the world of knowledge at the beginning of the scientific revolution, Bordo argues, provide

something of a backdrop to the psychologically-inflected themes of uncertainty, instability, anxiety, and needs for foundations and certainty that motivate Descartes' work. Though elaborated somewhat differently, Scheman also presents a psycho-cultural readings of Descartes' fears of embodiment and dependence on other people as threats to certain knowledge. These readings provide insight into Descartes' epistemology, certainly, but they also encourage us to reflect on what has motivated the compelling grip that his work has had on so many epistemologists who have taken his stark individualism and skepticism as a kind of starting point in epistemology. They thus challenge many standard analyses of Descartes which take his arguments as "timeless, culturally disembodied events in some history of 'talking heads'." (Bordo 1987, 3) There has been some debate about Bordo's and Scheman's attributions of "masculinity" to Descartes' epistemic individualism—whether, for instance, an endorsement of object-relations theory is required to ground such attributions. But what is perhaps more to the point here is the way in which these interrogations into specifics of historical and cultural background (whether these specifics relate directly or only tangentially to contemporaneous understandings of ideal masculinity) shed light on the way in which larger social understandings situate specific conceptions of individualism and the hold those conceptions have on theorists who adopt them.

One can make similar arguments about a potentially misleading narrow focus on gender and masculinity in discussions about the epistemic individualism of the traditional moral reasoner. Many feminists have argued that this "justice reasoner" also encompassed problematic levels of individualism, in this case fleshed out in terms of autonomous and independent principles reasoning, as we noted above. Linda Nicholson has argued for both historical and cross-cultural analyses in order to better understand the "justice reasoner" as a conceptual product of modern Western capitalist society and the specific forms of public reason it endorses. (1999) In particular, she argues that insufficient critical attention has been given to the ways in which Kohlberg's conceptions of *progress* (in his notion of "moral progress") and *abstraction* incorporate culturally specific meanings. Similarly, many feminist theorists now question the cultural assumptions embedded in traditional understandings of abstraction and reasoning that led previous researchers to conclude, for instance, that non-western children were doing "less well" on some of Piaget's cognitive tests than western children were. As we have noted earlier, greater sensitivity to the socially and culturally varied ways in which people can interpret, understand, abstract from, and reason about situations and problems elicits caution about rank ordering comparisons of intelligence or rationality across different cultural contexts. In addition, feminist work in cognitive psychology which draws attention to the situational nature of gender (linked to understandings of gender as a social formation) also lends support to politically-sensitive analyses of situated cognition.

Cognitive psychologists and argumentation theorists who design studies of specific types of reasoning and logical inference encounter some of the same kinds of concerns about how to more precisely demarcate the steps involved in completing specific reasoning tasks—including those that seem to be well-defined and self-contained. There isn't uniform agreement among these researchers about what distinguishes reasoning from productive thinking, for instance. Reasoning can include problem-solving and decision-making and can be assessed with a variety of specific tasks: verbal analogies, categorical syllogisms, or series completion problems, among

others. (Galotti 1989) In addition, modeling the precise sequence of steps involved with specific reasoning tasks poses something of a challenge, since people can interpret or "encode" the given premises differently, or they can draw differently from assumptions and associations in their background knowledge. Cross-cultural studies and studies comparing "schooled" and "unschooled" adults reveal interesting results. One study, in particular, indicated that unschooled adults "failed to accept the logical task" as given. Kathleen Galotti comments on this study as follows: "These adults alter, omit, or add to the premises supplied, in order to make the problems more consonant with their own knowledge bases and beliefs about the nature of the task… [yet] from their own 'translation' of the premises, they reason elegantly and logically... at least some of the variables that influence reasoning, then, have to do with the context in which the task occurs." (Galotti, 337) These studies thus suggest that schooling often involves training people into a *particular* way of understanding or interpreting problems, premises, and reasoning steps. This may be only one way among many, and, as we saw earlier, some ways of abstracting and carrying out the "core" reasoning task may reflect the background knowledge bases and cultural experiences of specific subgroups over others. The distinction in philosophy between formal and informal logic (very familiar to people at this conference) has, unfortunately, often been used,by formal logicians particularly, to promote the idea that formal logic captures "pure" or "core" reasoning or rationality, which is valued over the "everyday" or "practical" reasoning that informal logicians attend to. Yet, formal logic (particularly in deductive reasoning) at best captures only *one* relatively limited way of abstracting from situations or problems--that is, with respect to preserving truth in logical inferences involving propositions of a particular form.

Cross-cultural studies of a variety of cognitive tasks, as well as studies that are sensitive to the political and social-situational nature of gender, thus challenge particular understandings of both the abstract-context and the individual-social distinctions in logic (philosophy of logic) and in epistemology. Understandings of the cognitive "individual" have traditionally been bound up with assessments of a neutral "rational" core, as when cognition is theorized in terms of specific steps in abstracting and reasoning that any (generic) individual person can perform in completing "the" cognitive task at hand. The "social" (as regularly presented in social epistemology, for instance) is then treated as something like the penumbra surrounding this rational core—the social context may provide data, knowledge gathering tasks may be socially shared, and so on, but the core reasoning structure remains, ideally, neutral and similarly available to the individual reasoners/knowers involved. Clearly more work needs to be done in order to arrive at better understandings of the ways in which politically-inflected aspects of the social and cultural inform specific and individual reasoning activities. The kinds of feminist critical reformulations of the *abstract-context* and *individual-social* distinctions that I have examined must, however, be a necessary part of any epistemological or logical project that aims to take full account of diversity in reasoning and knowing, not to mention a full account of the social and political in all their epistemic manifestations.

link to commentary

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