WHY FEMINIST EPISTEMOLOGY ISN’T (AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINIST JURISPRUDENCE)

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1. THE PROBLEM

Twenty years ago, when feminism was younger and greener, critics who thought the movement was sinking into a quagmire of unscientific irrationality had a relatively easy time in making out their case. In the first place, many feminists were themselves claiming to have rejected both science and reason, along with morality and all other such male devices for the oppression of women. And, furthermore, this position was a relatively easy one for the skeptical outsider to attack. Unless feminists could say such things as that the present treatment of women was morally wrong, or prevailing ideas about their nature false or unfounded, or traditional reasoning about their position confused or fallacious, it was difficult to see on what basis they could rest the feminist case. And, of course, as they did say such things, all the time, it was obvious that any systematic attempt to reject ethics and rationality was systematically undercut by feminists’ own arguments.1

In these more sophisticated times, however, the issue is much more complicated. The language, at least, has changed, and few feminists now can be heard to say that reason or science should be abandoned altogether. What they say instead is that particular, traditional accounts of these things must go, to be replaced by new, feminist conceptions of them, and this makes matters very different.

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The title was borrowed from Larry Alexander’s Fancy Theories of Interpretation Aren’t, 73 WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY LAW QUARTERLY, 1081–1082 (1995), an uncompromising gem of analysis with which I am pleased to have even this tenuous association.

Here, for instance, is Elizabeth Grosz in an essay on feminist epistemology, describing the work of another feminist, Luce Irigaray:

Irigaray’s work thus remains indifferent to such traditional values as “truth” and “falsity” (where these are conceived as correspondence between propositions and reality), Aristotelian logic (the logic of the syllogism), and accounts of reason based upon them. This does not mean her work could be described as “irrational,” “illogical,” or “false.” On the contrary, her work is quite logical, rational, and true in terms of quite different criteria, perspectives, and values than those dominant now. She both combats and constructs, strategically questioning phallocentric knowledges without trying to replace them with more inclusive or more neutral truths. Instead, she attempts to reveal a politics of truth, logic and reason.

Statements of this kind obviously make matters much more difficult for the critic who is concerned about flights from reason and science in general, and suspects contemporary feminism of being at the forefront of the rush. If feminists claim that all they are doing is offering new and improved conceptions of these things, it no longer seems possible to object in principle to the whole project. Investigating the foundations of science, epistemology, logic, ethics, and all the rest is a perfectly respectable philosophical activity, in which feminists seem as entitled to join as anyone else.

Presumably, therefore, any complaint about irrationality must be directed to the particular conceptions of science and epistemology put forward under the name of feminism. But here things become extraordinarily difficult, because anyone of even vaguely familiar epistemological views who has tried to tackle feminist works in these areas will know how quickly there comes the sensation of being adrift in uncharted seas, with no familiar landmarks in sight. There is nothing so simple as particular claims that, by more conventional standards, seem mistaken. In so many ways that they defy representative quotation, much of what is said seems already so laden with revisionary theory that the innocent reader is left with the uncomfortable feeling of having missed the story so far. What are “knowledges”?—which presumably, if the term is not just a perverse neologism, are intended as something other than just different things that are known. What is it for them to have, or for that matter fail to have, such astonishing qualities as phallocentricity? What is the significance of their being said to be “produced,” rather than acquired, or by that produc-


3. See, e.g., in Alcoff and Potter, op. cit., Introduction, at 13: “For feminists, the purpose of epistemology is not only to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but also to contribute to an emancipatory goal: the expansion of democracy in the production of knowledge.”

For convenience, most of the illustrative quotations in this paper will come from the Alcoff and Potter anthology. This seems a pretty comprehensive and representative collection, but it is important to stress that, as will appear, nothing in the argument presented here depends on whether or not this is so.
tion's being "intersected by gender," or by women's asserting "a right to know" independent of and autonomous from the methods and presumptions regulating the prevailing (patriarchal) forms of knowledge? What, even, is "feminist knowledge"? To the uninitiated, it soon begins to look as though it would take whole chapters or books to unpick and contend with the presuppositions of even a single sentence, even if there were any obvious way to set about doing it.

Now in a sense this cannot reasonably be complained about. Feminist epistemology is supposed to seem strange to the traditionalist; if it were not at odds with more familiar ideas, there would presumably be no point in doing it. But on the other hand, if there is no common ground, how can the debate be tackled at all? The first difficulty seems to be to find a way of even approaching the problem.

This is the issue I want to address, and the point from which I propose to start is this. Feminist epistemology may indeed look pretty bizarre, and completely detached from familiar ways of thinking, to anyone who plunges straight in, but its recommenders cannot intend there to be no connection at all with more familiar ground. The term is not supposed to be an arbitrary label adopted by people who go around wrenching words from their accustomed forms and contexts for the fun of it. Feminists who advocate feminist epistemology did, after all—or at least their foremothers did—grow up with the kind of epistemological view they now claim to have overthrown, so they must themselves have had reasons, presumably connected with their feminism, for rejecting it. The idea seems to be that once you have a proper feminist view of things, you begin to see the limitations of the "standard" views you started with, and can take off in new and

4. See, e.g., Elizabeth Potter, Gender and Epistemic Negotiation, Alcoff and Potter, 172: "... claims put forward by feminist scholars that gender strongly intersects the production of much of our knowledge ... ."

5. Grosz, op. cit., at 187: "... if the body is an unacknowledged or an inadequately acknowledged condition of knowledges, and if the body is always sexually specific, concretely 'sexed,' this implies that the hegemony over knowledges that masculinity has thus far accomplished can be subverted, upset, or transformed through women's assertion of a 'right to know' independent of and autonomous from the methods and presumptions regulating the prevailing (patriarchal) forms of knowledge."

This passage is perhaps as a good an illustration as any of the general point about uncharted seas. Readers of P. G. Wodehouse may find themselves reminded of Bertie Wooster's encounter with the improving literature prescribed by one of his passing fiancées: "I opened it [Types of Ethical Theory] and I give you my honest word this was what hit me ......." (From Jeeves Takes Charge in P. G. Wodehouse, JEEVES OMNIBUS (Herbert Jenkins, 1931).)

6. See, e.g., in Lynn Hankinson Nelson, Epistemological Communities, in Alcoff and Potter, at 122: "... for more than a decade feminists have argued that a commitment to epistemological individualism would preclude reasonable explanations of feminist knowledge; such explanations .... would need to incorporate the historically specific social and political relationships and situations, including gender and political advocacy, that have made feminist knowledge possible."

7. I do not want to concede at any point that there really is any such thing as "standard" epistemology, let alone that it has the kinds of characteristic that are sometimes claimed by
enlightened directions. And if so, it should be possible to explain to others
the reasons for doing so.

We can, then, focus the problem by concentrating on the question of
what arguments might persuade someone of such standard epistemologi-
cal and scientific views to abandon them for the unfamiliar world of
feminist epistemology, and, in particular, on the question of why a feminist
should think of making the change, which, the idea seems pretty obviously
to be, she should. This question can be regarded as the landmark to which
it is always possible to turn when there is nothing else recognizable in
sight.

Consider, then, the situation of someone whose epistemological views
are still of a fairly commonsensical sort: someone who holds such unremarkable opinions as that that there are some things we know, some we
do not know, and others of which we are unsure; that different people
know different things; that we often think we know what we turn out not
to have known; and probably also—what Alcoff and Potter call a "philoso-
phical myth"—that philosophical work can be good only "to the extent
that its substantive, technical content is free of political influence." And
think of this standard epistemologist also as a feminist—whom I shall, to
avoid complications irrelevant to the matter in hand, take to be a
woman—on the shores of this somewhat alarming sea, dipping in the
occasional tentative toe, and wondering what reasons the mermaids can
offer for her abandoning the familiar landscape behind, and casting off.

2. THE FOUNDATIONS OF FEMINISM

It looks as though the first problem must be to say what can be meant by
the claim that the feminist on the shore is indeed a feminist, especially
since, ex hypothesi, she has not yet embraced the various ideas and ap-
proaches that go by the name of feminist science and epistemology. It is
well known, and notorious, that there is no generally accepted definition
of feminism, and I certainly do not want to send things awry at the outset
by adopting a prescriptive definition that other feminists would reject.
Fortunately, however, there is no need to. It will be enough to take an
absolutely minimal account, and say that whatever the details of what she
thinks, a feminist is, at the very least, someone who thinks that something
has been seriously wrong with the traditional position and treatment of
women.


feminist epistemologists, but for the limited purposes of this essay, and for the sake of
argument, it will do no harm here to allow the point to pass.
8. Alcoff and Potter, Introduction, at 13. To people who accept this myth, they say, "femi-
nist work in philosophy is scandalous primarily because it is unashamedly a political interven-
tion."
Now of course this could hardly be more minimal, since it allows for
great differences among feminists in their ideas about what is wrong and
how to put it right. Nevertheless it is enough for my purposes here,
because if a feminist is someone who is making a complaint about the
present state of things, there are various things that must be generally true
about her starting position, no matter what the details are.

In the first place, she must obviously have a view about the way things
are, or she could not think there was anything wrong with it; and she must
also have some ideas about what possibilities there are for change, or she
would not be able to say that things should be otherwise. She must, in
other words, have a range of first-order beliefs about the world: the kind
of belief that is supported by empirical, often scientific, investigation.
Beliefs of this kind also imply that she has other beliefs about second-order
questions of epistemology and scientific method, since in reaching conclu-
sions about what to believe about what the world is like and how it works
she has, however unconsciously, depended on assumptions about how
these things can be found out and how to distinguish knowledge from
lesser things. These assumptions will become more explicit if any part of
her feminism involves (as it is pretty well bound to) accusing the tradition-
alist opposition of prejudice or of perpetrating or perpetuating false
beliefs about women.

Similar points apply to questions of value. In order to make any com-
plaint whatever about the way things are, a feminist must at least implicitly
appeal to standards that determine when one state of affairs or kind of
conduct is better or worse than another; and if her complaint takes a
moral form rather than a simply self-interested one—if, like virtually all
feminists, she expresses her complaints in terms of such things as injustice
and oppression and entitlements to equality—she must be appealing to
moral standards of good and bad or right and wrong, of which she thinks
the present state of things falls short. And if she has such normative,
first-order standards, that in turn will imply something about her attitudes
to the higher-order questions of metaethics, whether or not she thinks of
them as such.

To say this is, once again, to say nothing at all about the content of such
beliefs and standards. The claim so far is only that for feminism to get
going at all, in any form, there must already be in place ideas about the
way things are and standards by which they are found wanting. Different
people may have different beliefs and standards, and so reach quite
different conclusions about what is wrong. However, since the specific
problem being addressed here is of how someone could get from familiar
ideas of science and epistemology to the kinds that are claimed as feminist,
it is most useful to start by assuming fairly ordinary kinds of belief about
both facts and values, and consider how anyone starting from that kind of
position can have been led to feminism at all.
This may in itself seem to present a problem; for how, it may be asked, can anyone be both a feminist—of any kind—and a holder of traditional views? If feminism is essentially a challenge to received beliefs and attitudes, as it is, its starting point must be the idea that these views are in some way wrong. There must therefore be some differences between what even the most cautious feminist accepts and what is standardly believed by people who have not yet reached this degree of enlightenment.

And of course this is true; by its very nature, feminism must challenge some received ideas. But feminism began as a movement, as it probably does for most individuals, not with some sudden éclaircissement that led its supporters to reject all familiar standards and to embrace instead new ones according to which prevailing ideas about women appeared as wrong from the foundations. Rather, it began in effect with the recognition that familiar ideas about women were anomalous, in that they could not be justified by the standards that holders of these ideas quite routinely accepted in other contexts. The original point was that traditional standards of evidence and argument in science and ethics themselves did not support traditional conclusions about women.

At the very simplest level, consider the early feminist challenges to received beliefs about the nature of women. Mill, for instance, pointed out that since women and men had since records began been placed in different social situations and given systematically different kinds of education (as everyone knew, since that was the status quo the insisters on women's difference were trying to defend), none of the observed psychological or intellectual differences between the sexes could reliably be attributed to nature.9 This was an objection to established beliefs, but it involved the adoption of no new standards of epistemology or scientific procedure; prevailing beliefs were challenged by appeal to the standards that would be applied in any other scientific context. The feminist claim was essentially that there was what might be called a sex-connected incoherence in the current view of things. On the basis of the most fundamental current views about the nature of knowledge and standards of evidence, some less fundamental beliefs could be shown to be unfounded.

The same kind of thing happened with early feminist challenges to moral values. Of course some traditional moral values—about the propriety of women's remaining subservient to their husbands and away from public life—were challenged by feminists. But the original challenges were made not by reference to completely new standards of moral assessment that transmuted traditionalist right into feminist wrong, but by arguments showing that familiar general ideas of morality, such as most people professed most of the time, were incompatible with traditional ideas about

the treatment of women. Even if it were assumed that most women were congenitally unsuited to the kind of occupation reserved for men (which anyway, from the previous argument, there was no adequate reason to assume), widely held views about open opportunities and letting people rise by their own efforts were incompatible with a wholesale exclusion of women that did not allow them even to try. Or even if it were conceded both that women were systematically inferior to men in strength and intellect, and that the weak needed protection, it still took a pretty remarkable twist of reasoning to reach the accepted conclusion that this provided a justification for making women weaker still by placing them in social and legal subordination to men.\(^\text{10}\)

So the arguments through which traditional feminism reached its first conclusions involved no departure from familiar standards of evidence and argument in ethics, epistemology, and science, but actually presupposed them. It was by appeal to these standards that the position of women was first claimed to be wrong. And notice that all arguments of this kind also depend on absolutely ordinary logic. It is because the traditional conclusions do not follow from the traditional premises, or because traditional beliefs are incompatible with traditional standards of assessment, that the challenge to the received view in its own terms is possible.\(^\text{11}\)

Here, then, are the beginnings. Although feminism, as a critical movement, necessarily challenges parts of the status quo, it typically does so, at the outset, by appealing to other, more fundamental parts that it holds constant. Feminism as a movement started with the broad standards of moral and empirical investigation and argument that most other people accepted at the time, and the recognition that these could not support familiar, supposedly commonsensical, ideas about women and their position. Most individual feminists probably begin in more or less this way as well.

3. FEMINIST PROGRESS

The fact that feminism must start with appeals to existing standards, however, does not imply that it can never escape them. Any aspect of belief can be rethought at any time, and since even in its earliest stages feminism considerably affects the way the world appears to its converts, it is likely


11. There is no space to deal here with feminist challenges to logic, but the broad conclusions of this article will be seen to apply to those as well. There will also be no further discussion of feminism and ethics in the main article, but for everything that is said here about epistemology, arguments about moral and other value judgments run in parallel (see coda).
that once these first changes have been made other adjustments will soon be found necessary. What must now be considered is how, starting with the kind of first- and second-order beliefs most people have, and having reached some kind of feminism on their basis, the new feminist might be led by her feminism to reject them, and eventually adopt radically different ideas about reason and science.

Consider then the situation of the novice feminist who has come to recognize that traditional ideas about women cannot be justified by traditional standards. She will of course immediately recognize the need to work for political change, but that will not be all. An equally important consequence of her new view of the world will be an increasing awareness of new questions that need to be answered. Once what was previously accepted as knowledge has been thrown into doubt, the problem inevitably arises of what should now be put in its place; and, as happens with any new perspective or information, there also comes the recognition of questions that people simply never thought of asking before.

For instance, once feminists realize that positive obstacles have always been placed in the way of women’s achievements, they may start wondering whether the attitudes that brought about this state of affairs could also have led to the overlooking of what women actually did do. They may start searching historical records for evidence that, in spite of the obstacles, women achieved a good deal more than was traditionally thought. Or if, having brought about apparently equal treatment of the sexes in some area, feminists find women still doing less well than men, they may suspect the existence of more subtle obstacles, and set up experiments to investigate that possibility. They may try such things as swapping round the names of men and women on academic articles to see whether this affects readers’ assessment of their merits, or making controlled observations to see whether girls may be deterred from studying science by assumptions made by teachers, or by the active discouragement of boys, or by an image of female scientists at odds with their own self-image.

So feminism can open up a range of inquiries that might otherwise have remained closed, any of which may lead to further changes in beliefs about what the world is like and how it works. And, of course, every new discovery will in turn have its own implications. Some will lead to an expanded political program. If, for instance, it turns out that people are unconsciously biased against women even when they think they are being impartial, feminism will have a new, and much more complex, problem on hand than the one that arises only from awareness of overt discrimination. Most discoveries will also themselves suggest further questions, which, again,

might not have arisen but for the feminist awareness that started the inquiries in the first place.

It is, however, essential to see exactly how feminism connects with changing beliefs of these kinds. The sorts of investigation I have been discussing are of a kind that often arises directly from feminism: without feminism to suggest where to look, nobody might have thought of launching them. And when they are finished, feminists may well find their feminist agenda widened: they may recognize more scope for feminist research and more need for feminist action. But the extent to which this happens depends on how the inquiries turn out, and that has nothing to do with feminism at all. In the kind of investigation considered so far, there is no point at which feminism provides the justification for any change of belief. Feminism does not determine what counts as a proper inquiry, or what counts as a result one way or the other, or what the results should be. In conducting inquiries of this kind, feminists are still using the standards of evidence and argument that brought them to feminism in the first place. If they come to believe that girls are disregarded or discouraged in science classes, or that academic articles thought to be written by women are systematically underrated, that is because the evidence shows this to be so. It is not because feminist principles demand that it must be.

During these early stages of feminist progress, therefore, the situation is still essentially the same as at the beginning. The feminist's background beliefs and standards themselves provide the justification for her expanding feminism, not the other way round. And, for that reason, her conclusions should be demonstrable to any impartial investigator who shares her basic standards and will look. Even if whatever changes in belief that result from these investigations would not have occurred but for feminism, the new beliefs are still not feminist in the sense of there being any reason for a feminist to hold them that a non-feminist—someone who has not yet recognized that women have grounds for complaint—has not.

It is important to stress this, because although the point is simple and obvious once seen, it seems to be widely overlooked. If so, this is probably at least partly a result of the ambiguity of "because" between cause and justification. You may change your views because of feminism in the sense that you would not otherwise have embarked on the inquiries that led to those changes, but that does not mean you change them because of feminism in the sense that feminism provides the justification for the change. Various well-known advances in science were (reputedly) made because their begetters soaked in baths, or reclined in orchards, or dreamt of snakes with their tails in their mouths; but no one thinks these causes of inspiration provided any part of the justification for accepting the resulting theories of displacement or gravitation or benzene rings. Feminism may set investigators on the track of new discoveries, and the feminist program may expand as a result of them, but that provides no more reason to count
the new beliefs themselves as feminist than to count the others as bathist or appleist or snakeist.

So, to relate all this again to the lingerer on the shores of feminist epistemology, we can see that her feminism may well have made considerable progress since it first began, but nevertheless the justification for any changes in her view of things has so far had nothing to do with her being a feminist. The novice has exactly the same kinds of reason for progress within feminism as she had for becoming a feminist in the first place. Her mind has been changed only because of what the evidence has shown, and this has involved an appeal to her old familiar standards of epistemology and scientific method.

4. INTERMEDIATE STANDARDS

One way of expressing all this is that the discussion so far has been of feminism only as an applied subject. Feminism and feminist progress have been shown as emerging from standards of science and rationality that are not themselves feminist. The view of feminists in the thick of feminist epistemology, however, is that this is only the beginning:

Feminism made its first incursions into philosophy in a movement from the margins to the center. Applied fields, most notably applied ethics, were the first areas in which feminist work was published . . . . But from the applied areas we moved into more central ones as we began to see the problems produced by androcentrism in aesthetics, ethics, philosophy of science, and, finally and fairly recently, the “core” areas of epistemology and metaphysics . . . . [T]he work of feminist philosophers is in the process of producing a new configuration of the scope, contours, and problematics of philosophy in its entirety [original emphasis].

And when feminism reaches this new ground quite different questions seem to arise, since presumably nothing that has been said about the progress of feminism as an applied subject, within the traditional framework, can be assumed to apply to feminist challenges to that framework itself.

Nevertheless, it is important to have discussed the less radical kind of change, because it is essential for clarifying the general issue of feminist challenges to accepted standards. Standards come in hierarchies, and a good many changes can be made at superficial or intermediate levels long before the fundamentals of rationality, philosophy of science, and epistemology are even approached. And in particular, it is essential to recognize that changes in first-order beliefs—about what the world is like and how it

works—always in themselves amount to potential changes in standards, because well-entrenched first-order beliefs are automatically and necessarily used as the basis for assessing others regarded as less well established.

This is a fundamental fact about the way we ordinarily reason—and must reason—that is obvious as soon as it is thought about. Consider, for instance, Herodotus's account of the Phoenicians who returned from their voyage to circumnavigate Africa claiming that as they had sailed westward round what we know as the Cape, the sun had lain on their right, to the north. Since this account was incompatible with contemporary views about the relationship of the earth to the sun, Herodotus, not unreasonably, did not believe them; it seemed much more likely that returning travellers should spin fantasies than that the sun should change its course. Now, however, our changed beliefs about astronomy have changed the standards by which we assess the story; and we regard it not only as true, but also as providing the best possible evidence that the Phoenicians actually did circumnavigate Africa.¹⁵ This kind of thing happens in every aspect of life. In forensic medicine we decide guilt by reference to our fundamental beliefs about blood groups or DNA, whereas once we might have decided it by whether the accused sank or floated in water. If some fringe medicine makes claims that are incompatible with well-entrenched scientific theory, that theory will be used as proof that the fringe claims must be wrong, and any anecdotal evidence in their favor will be explained away in other ways. But if some previously unknown causal mechanism is eventually found to exist (as was briefly claimed in the case of homeopathy a few years ago), attitudes may change and the fringe be incorporated, wholly or at least in part, into the mainstream.

How likely such changes are to happen will depend on how well-entrenched, how comprehensive, and how vulnerable any particular range of beliefs is; and this makes it likely that feminism, once begun, will lead eventually to extensive changes of standards at this level. This is essentially Mill's point again. Understanding of the world comes through observation of its constituents under varying circumstances, and since ideas about women and men have developed while women have been seen only in rather limited situations, it is to be expected that proper investigation will dislodge many traditional beliefs connected with them. And when changes do occur—either positively, in the acceptance of new beliefs to replace or supplement the old, or negatively, in the recognition that old beliefs are insecure—standards for the assessment of other beliefs and ideas will necessarily change with them.

This is already familiar from more or less everyday life. If the idea is challenged that women’s nature allows them to find happiness only through making husbands and children the main focus of their attention,

this will result in fundamentally different approaches to the assessment of individual women who are chronically discontented about the course of their lives; or if it is accepted that sexual abuse of girls by their fathers is widespread, allegations that this has happened will become more likely to lead to criminal investigations of fathers than psychological probings of women's oedipal delusions. But the same general point is also potentially relevant to many of the issues discussed in the broad context of feminist epistemology and science.

For instance, suppose feminists are right in claiming that many beliefs typically held by women—passed down the generations, perhaps—have traditionally been dismissed as old wives' tales. If this has happened because of conflict with entrenched scientific theories, then the dislodging of those theories—perhaps as a result of feminist inquiries—would remove the basis on which the women's beliefs had been dismissed; and if enough independent evidence could be accumulated in favor of the women's beliefs, they might even themselves become the basis for rejecting the established theories. Or perhaps—another feminist idea—women may have ways of investigating the world that have been disregarded because they are different from the ones currently regarded as paradigmatic of good scientific procedure. But if feminist-inspired investigation eventually showed not only that such female techniques did exist, but also that they were just as scientifically effective, by ordinary criteria for scientific success, as the ones currently used as the touchstone for the worth of research and the promise of researchers, that would support feminist demands for changes in the structure of the scientific establishment and the standards by which aspiring scientists were assessed. Whether or not such changes turn out to be justified, there is no theoretical problem about possibility that they might be.

Just because of this relevance to matters of science and knowledge, however, it is essential to stress again that when changes in standards of these kinds do occur, they have nothing to do with changing standards of epistemology or scientific method. Changes in first-order beliefs of the kinds just discussed provide the basis for corresponding changes only in superficial or intermediate standards for the assessment of knowledge claims. They still give no reason for changes in epistemology or fundamental attitudes to science. Quite the contrary, in fact, because whether or not the feminist-inspired research actually justifies the relevant changes in

16. Many feminists have taken up (without her full concurrence) Evelyn Fox Keller's work on Barbara McClintock, whose "feel for the organism" they claim as exemplifying women's approach to science, and as having been resisted by the scientific establishment. There are many possible grounds for controversy here, about whether the approach really is specifically female and whether it was really rejected by the establishment (see, e.g., Fox Keller, The Gender/Science System, Hypatia 2 (1987)); but even if the claims were right that would show the need for changes in standards only at an intermediate level, themselves justifiable in terms of more fundamental ideas about the nature of scientific success.
first-order beliefs *depends*, once again, on the acceptance of more fundamental standards of science and epistemology.

This point is of great importance to the traditional feminist on the epistemological shore, because unless she takes great care to distinguish between these different levels, she may well slip into feminist epistemology by accident. Inevitably, in the course of her developing feminism, she will encounter innumerable traditional knowledge claims that she regards with suspicion; and it would be a serious mistake to respond by saying that if these were what traditional epistemology counted as knowledge, there must be something wrong with traditional epistemology. This would not only be much too precipitate; it would also give far too much credit to patriarchal man. It would by implication concede that whatever he had claimed as knowledge must, by traditional standards, really be knowledge, to be dealt with only by complicated revolutionary epistemologies through which it could be shrunk into mere phallocentric knowledge, or otherwise emasculated. It is usually much simpler—and, you would think, much more feminist—to start with the assumption that what has been claimed or accepted as knowledge may not be knowledge of any kind, even phallocentric, but, by patriarchal man’s very own epistemological standards, plain, ordinary (perhaps patriarchal) mistakes.

It is difficult to say how much of the impulse towards feminist involvement in epistemology and other fundamental parts of philosophy and science arises from the blurring of this distinction. My suspicion is that a great deal of it does. Fortunately, however, this is not a matter that...
needs to be investigated here, since it would make no difference to the arguments of this article whether the answer were all or none. All that matters for my purposes is to make the distinction clear. This is why it has been important to discuss feminist progress in first-order knowledge within traditional views of science and epistemology, and to show how this does in itself bring about changes in standards for the assessment of other knowledge claims or abilities to make advances in knowledge. Only when that issue is out of the way is it possible to make an uncluttered assault on the real question, of how the feminist on the shore should approach the problem of genuine epistemological change.

5. EPISTEMOLOGY PROPER

There is of course no problem of principle about the inquiring feminist's taking her feminist awareness into the study of epistemology: in this context as in others she may want to raise new questions, or check that female-connected ideas have not been overlooked or given inadequate consideration. There is also no problem about her considering new epistemological ideas, since that is something anyone can do at any time, and there is no reason, at least in advance of detailed consideration, to rule out the possibility of her deciding to abandon her old views for the kind she sees advocated by feminist epistemologists. The specific question here, however, is not of whether the move to these ideas can be justified at all, but of whether any part of the justification can be provided by feminism.

In the cases so far discussed, feminism has not been involved in the justification of new beliefs. All the changes in our feminist's view of the world have been justified in terms of the same epistemological and scientific standards that she appealed to when becoming a feminist in the first place. Those standards, however, are now themselves at issue. The question therefore arises again of whether her feminism—her commitment to the pursuit of proper treatment for women—gives her reasons to abandon her old ideas and change to new ones that someone not committed to feminism would lack.

Something on these lines does seem to be widely implied, and not only
in the term "feminist epistemology" itself. Alcoff and Potter, for instance, in the introduction to their anthology, say:

The history of feminist epistemology itself is the history of clash between the feminist commitment to the struggles of women to have their understandings of the world legitimated, and the commitment of traditional philosophy to various accounts of knowledge—positivist, postpositivist and others—that have consistently undermined women’s claims to know.18

And later, in a comment on one of the essays in the collection, they refer to “Alcoff and Dalmiya’s concern that traditional epistemology has reduced much of women’s knowledge to the status of ‘old wives tales.’” 19 Both these comments suggest that one purpose of feminist epistemology is to find an account of knowledge that would result in women’s knowledge claims’ being accepted rather than dismissed.

Alcoff and Potter also make broader claims about the aims of feminist epistemology:

For feminists, the purpose of epistemology is not only to satisfy intellectual curiosity, but also to contribute to an emancipatory goal, the expansion of democracy in the production of knowledge. This goal requires that our epistemologies make it possible to see how knowledge is authorized and who is empowered by it.20

They also say that what the essays in their collection have in common is (nothing more than) “their commitment to unearth the politics of epistemology,” 21 and that “feminist work in philosophy is unashamedly a political intervention;” 22 and, referring to the work of one of their contributors, that “feminist epistemologies must be tested by their effects on . . . . practical political struggles.” 23 And another contributor says of one particular (non-feminist) account of epistemology:

Critics must ask for whom this epistemology exists; whose interests it serves; and whose it neglects or suppresses in the process.24

All this suggests that there are feminist, emancipatory, oppression-resisting reasons for taking up these approaches to epistemology, and that the

19. Id. at 11.
20. Id. at 13–14.
21. Id. at 3. Notice that this is one step further on than usual. Many epistemologies concern the idea of a politics of knowledge; the idea that there is a politics of epistemology suggests that there are political reasons for the adopting of one epistemology rather than another.
22. Id. at 13.
23. Id. at 14.
24. Lorraine Code, supra note 17, at 23.
25. Note in passing, though I shall not go into them, the problems inherent in using
The adequacy of any candidate theory must be judged by the extent to which it contributes to that emancipation.

So how should the feminist on the shore respond to this? Should she adopt this new approach to epistemology on the grounds that her present, traditional, theories are themselves part of the apparatus by which women have been oppressed? Consider first the suggestion that traditional epistemology has been responsible for the relegation of women's knowledge to the status of old wives' tales, and should be abandoned for that reason. Could she be led to the conclusions of feminist epistemology by this route?

The first point to notice here is that the claim that familiar ideas of epistemology have "consistently undermined women's claims to know" cannot just be slipped into the argument as if it were obviously true. Since the challenge is to demonstrate to the traditional feminist the inadequacy of her present position, and show why she should adopt instead the ideas of feminist epistemology, this is something of whose truth she needs to be persuaded. She will need to be shown that there really are such substantial and systematic differences in the kinds of knowledge claim made by men and women, that the ones most often ruled out by her present standards are women's, that it is actually her epistemology, rather than her first-order beliefs, that leads to their being ruled out, and that the recommended change in epistemology would lead to their being recognized as knowledge.

These are not small matters, and if the traditional feminist is like most of the uninitiated, she may well present her would-be persuaders with considerable problems even at this stage of the argument. Even if she could be persuaded to accept the highly controversial idea that women's and men's knowledge claims were of systematically different kinds, for instance, and that women's had been traditionally dismissed, she would still be likely to think that this dismissal arose from a conflict between women's claims and traditional first-order beliefs. The quite different claim that it stemmed from a conflict with traditional epistemology is one she would not only be likely to reject, but also probably have difficulty in even understanding.26

empirical evidence based on the assumptions of one epistemology as part of the argument for establishing a quite different one, which may well undermine them. There is no difficulty in accepting that a feminist may gradually change the epistemology she started with, but she cannot do so and keep earlier conclusions that were actually based on the rejected epistemology.

26. There is a real problem about the idea that it is epistemological standards, rather than particular first-order beliefs, that underlie the rejection of women's knowledge claims, which is difficult to explain because any case that fulfills the conditions seems bound to look absurd.

Consider again, for instance, the familiar feminist idea that much traditional knowledge of midwives has been dismissed as nonsense because it conflicts with established scientific views. Suppose that in some such case, careful, feminist-inspired study revealed that a particular group of midwives had more success, in terms of well-being of mothers and their children,
Problems such as these, therefore, might well be enough on their own to put an end to any prospect of converting the traditional feminist to feminist epistemology by arguments about women’s disregarded knowledge. But even if these difficulties could be overcome, and it were conceded that traditional epistemological standards had indeed led to the rejection of women’s traditional knowledge claims, there would still remain a deeper and more intractable problem. True or not, the premise cannot support the required conclusion.

It is significant that in the quotations above, Alcoff and Potter say first that it is women’s claims to know that have been undermined by traditional epistemology, and later that it is women’s knowledge. Now of course if our inquiring feminist’s traditional theory actually ruled out women’s knowledge, her theory would indeed be wrong and should be changed; that is analytically true. But the whole problem is that she does not yet accept that what she is dismissing is knowledge. What she is dismissing are knowledge than some corresponding group of male doctors who based their practice on current scientific theories. Individual doctors or the scientific community might, perhaps, go on insisting that the midwives were simply ignorant and should be disregarded; but no standard epistemology would support such an attitude. Any reasonable scientist would take the midwives’ success as evidence that they were on to something (though they might well be wrong about what it was) and that there must therefore be some inadequacy in the scientific theory. Such a case would therefore show no need for revisionary epistemology, but only for changes in ideas about which first-order claims to use as the standard for judging others.

To find a case that required genuine epistemological change to turn the midwives’ ignorance into knowledge, it would be necessary to move to something much more bizarre, and postulate a situation where their practices were not only at odds with received scientific theory, but also less successful than those of the doctors, resulting in worse statistics of maternal and child welfare (because if they were successful, ordinary epistemology would admit that they were raising problems for the received theory), and where feminists would argue that we must change epistemological standards until these practices were counted as demonstrating knowledge. It is difficult to imagine either what such standards would be, or that any feminist would want to recommend any such thing. And unless the traditional feminist can be brought to understand how a change in epistemology might result in changes in the assessment of women’s knowledge claims, she obviously cannot be persuaded to make the change for that reason.

Similar problems arise with feminist ideas about the need for radical change in fundamental approaches to science, to accommodate women’s ways of setting about understanding the world. There is no problem in principle with the supposition that women might have systematically different ways of doing things, or that these ways might be systematically more successful than men’s (though I know of no serious evidence that either of these is actually true), but to the extent that this is what is claimed by feminists, it does not call for any changes in fundamental conceptions of science. If women were successful in this way, ordinary standards of scientific success (such as reaching successful theories more quickly than men) would show this to be so (see above, p. 376). To show that more fundamental changes were needed in the criteria for scientific success it would be necessary to imagine women’s being unsuccessful by current standards—having theories which tests kept showing were getting nowhere, making predictions that were usually unfulfilled, and so on—and then saying that scientific standards should be changed to count this as good science. It is, again, difficult to imagine either what such standards would be, or that any feminist would recommend them.

All this provides further reason for suspecting that many feminist claims about the need for epistemological change may really be about the need for change in the first-order beliefs that provide intermediate standards for judgment.
claims, which, by her present standards, really do amount to nothing more than old wives' tales. To accept the crucial premise that these claims did represent genuine knowledge, she would already have to accept the new epistemology that the argument is supposed to be justifying. She therefore cannot be persuaded to change by an argument of this kind, because if the premise is taken to be about knowledge claims, it provides no reason at all for any change in epistemology, and if it is taken to be about knowledge, it is flagrantly question-begging.

And, furthermore, until she has seen reason to change her epistemology, the still-traditional feminist must also conclude that it is the advocates of feminist epistemology who are treating women wrongly. Her feminist principles combine with her present epistemological views to suggest that the proper way to treat any women who make these misguided knowledge claims is to give them a proper education and bring them out of their ignorance. To offer them instead an epistemology that passes this ignorance off as knowledge is to delude them into collusion with their own deprivation, and this she must obviously regard as a scandalous perpetuation of the traditional wrongs of women, to be fought with all the feminist energy she can muster.

Of course this particular argument, about getting women's knowledge properly acknowledged, is only one among many possible lines of feminist argument to the conclusion that epistemological change is needed, and to show that this one does not work is still to allow for the possibility that others might. But in fact a version of the same problem arises whenever the emancipation of women is used as part of an argument for change in fundamental standards of epistemology or science, even when the substance is quite different.

Suppose, for instance, the still-traditional feminist were urged by feminist epistemologists to recognize that prevailing epistemological standards had been put in place by men, and that women could never be free from oppression as long as they were judged by male standards, epistemological or otherwise. She would, once again, have to be persuaded that there really were such differences between male and female standards (which would present problems, since she herself accepts the ones said to be male), and also that women's knowledge and abilities were bound to fare badly as long as male standards prevailed (which might be equally difficult, since what she has seen of the standards recommended by feminists is unlikely to make her yearn to be judged by them). But even if those difficulties could be overcome, the more fundamental problem would remain. The idea that any group's knowledge claims cannot be properly assessed by the standards of another group is itself the epistemological theory being advocated, opposed to the one the inquirer now holds, and it therefore cannot be invoked as any part of an argument that her present view should change. And, again, from the point of view of her present
ideas of epistemology, any move towards judging each group by its own standards would itself constitute a wrong to disadvantaged groups, inducing them to mistake their real deprivation for inappropriate attitudes of the privileged.

The same thing happens if it is claimed that knowledge is at root a matter of politics: that feminist epistemology is a matter of revealing "a politics of truth, logic, and reason," and that until this is understood women will be misled by standards that pretend to objectivity but are really nothing but manifestations of unjust male power. Once again, the idea that knowledge is a matter of politics is itself the epistemological position being defended, and therefore the claim that women are wrongly treated by epistemologies that deny it cannot be used as part of the argument in its defense. And until the traditional feminist has been persuaded to change her mind, she will continue to think that attempting to persuade women of its truth is, once again, to delude them into thinking that nothing but politics is needed to transform their ignorance into knowledge, and so obstruct their acquisition of the real knowledge that is needed for effective political activity of any kind.

The problem cannot be escaped even by a retreat to the most blatant political position of all, and the argument that we must adopt the epistemological ideas claimed as feminist because until we do, things will be worse for women: that the progress of women depends on making this change. Even that, if taken as a defense of a serious epistemology (as opposed to one professed in public for political reasons but denied in private), presupposes the idea that epistemology is a sort of thing that is logically secondary to ethics, which is itself an epistemological theory. 27

Because the root of this matter is a logical one, it makes no difference how many variations of detail are tried. The point is essentially the one that was made at the beginning of this article, about the foundations of feminism: that criteria by which proper treatment and assessment can be recognized need to be in place before it can be said that the present state of things is falling short of them. The claim that some set of epistemological and scientific standards results in inappropriate treatment of women and their ideas cannot be used as an argument against those standards, because, necessarily, to accept those standards is to accept that anyone measured by them is treated appropriately.

Anyone who is suspicious of such succinct generalities, however, can easily test arguments individually by recalling the image of the feminist on the shore, who must be offered reasons to abandon her current views for those of feminist epistemology. It will be found for any argument she might be offered that if the reasons given for the recommended change

27. And, furthermore, a pragmatically self-refuting one. If we can tell what is going to benefit women we must think we know something about how the world works, and therefore must presuppose an epistemology other than the one we are supposed to be defending.
from traditional to feminist epistemology are themselves feminist—if they depend in any way on the idea that current epistemology wrongs women or is bad for women in any way—they will turn out to depend not only on highly contentious empirical premises, but also on revisionary epistemological claims that presuppose the conclusion and therefore beg the question.28

Now of course all this shows only that feminist justifications of what is claimed as feminist epistemology cannot work. It still leaves open the possibility that the feminist on the shore might find other, non-feminist, reasons for changing her epistemological ideas, just as she earlier found non-feminist justifications for changes in various first-order beliefs about the world. Philosophers have for centuries been producing epistemological arguments that have nothing to do with feminism, and some such argument might persuade her that these approaches claimed as feminist were the best ones to accept. Furthermore, if she did become convinced that these new epistemological ideas were right, and that women would do better under these than under the old ones, she would also—necessarily—conclude that women were wrongly treated by traditional epistemology, and might well see it as part of her feminist politics to develop, and persuade others to adopt, the epistemology she now regarded as right.29

This is pretty obviously what has happened in the case of feminist epistemologists. These feminists have been persuaded by particular approaches to epistemology—typically the kind that derive from ideas about the sociology of knowledge and science, and stress the idea that dominant groups set the standards—and these ideas then form the foundation both of their future inquiries and of the form their feminist politics takes. And that, as far as it goes, is fine in principle, but it must not be mistaken for there being any feminist reasons for accepting that, or any other, approach to epistemology. The fact that some belief is held by a feminist does not make it a feminist belief.

So what all this means is that the situation is just the same for the feminist on the shores of feminist epistemology as it was in the early stages of her feminist inquiry. Feminism may, perhaps,30 prompt her to raise particular epistemological questions, and if the answers to her questions lead her to epistemological change, that change will affect both her politics and the course of future inquiries. But still her feminism cannot itself be the determinant of the answers.

28. Or perhaps (though this possibility has not been discussed here) to depend on traditional epistemological claims that contradict the conclusion.

29. In fact it would be stretching things a bit to count this as part of feminist politics, since it would be for the benefit of anyone who was disadvantaged by the present sort. This aspect of the arbitrariness of counting a particular kind of epistemology as feminist is in effect noted by Alcoff and Potter (p. 4), though differently expressed and understood. There is no sign of their being aware of the other problems involved in claiming particular theories as feminist.

30. This is, however, probably much less likely than in the case of first-order inquiries.
Feminism, in other words, can never escape its beginnings as an applied field. Conclusions about what should be done by feminists for women—irrespective of whether they want what is just or right for women, or merely what is good for them—are at all stages essentially derivative, and dependent on more fundamental ideas. No beliefs about matters of fact, and no theories of epistemology or science, can be required by feminism, because feminist conclusions depend on them.

This means that to attach the label “feminist” to particular theories of epistemology or anything else is completely arbitrary. In no sense that is not seriously misleading can there be any such thing as feminist epistemology.

6. CONSEQUENCES

The most immediately obvious way into the analysis of what goes by the name of feminist epistemology is to take the specific claims, presuppositions, and lines of argument claimed by their advocates as feminist, and subject them to critical analysis. That, however, is not what has been going on here. This article has been concerned only with the more fundamental problem of how feminism fits into these inquiries at all, and the essential conclusion is that although it certainly has a place, that place is limited. To try to go beyond it is to run into incoherences far more damaging to the idea of feminist epistemology than any criticisms of the details of its content.

To risk an analogy no doubt much too frivolous for such solemn matters, but salutory for just that reason, the place of feminism in scientific and philosophical inquiry has emerged as strikingly similar to that of James (“The Amazing”) Randi in the Uri Geller investigations. When scientists started investigating Geller’s telepathic and spoon-bending exploits, they of course thought they were conducting a careful inquiry that eliminated the possibility of fraud. Scientists, however, do not know about conjuring. When Randi was brought in, his practised eye went immediately to what had been made invisible to the lay observer, and the Geller tricks were exposed. And this did, in its modest way, affect the course of science. Anyone whose view of the world had been influenced by the Geller phenomena now had to eliminate these apparent data from their calculations, and rethink their view of the world—and perhaps even their ideas about scientific methodology—on a different basis. But even if Randi’s contribution had been a thousand times greater—even if every-

31. See the beginning of § 4.
32. It may be objected that “feminist” can legitimately be used to mean (more or less) “done in a characteristically female way,” and that in this sense the word it is not arbitrary to claim particular approaches as feminist. This point is discussed in the Coda.
one engaged in the inquiries had been busily conjuring, and all the data had had to be scrapped—he still would have been doing nothing that could possibly be described as conjurist science. His contribution lay entirely within the familiar framework of scientific investigation. He put the scientists in the way of eliminating certain misleading information, but they themselves had to be able to confirm that the suspected tricks were actually going on: If Randi had claimed that the tricks must remain invisible to anyone who lacked his conjurist insights, nobody would have been in the least interested. And after this purge of misleading information, the scientists went on just as before, influenced by conjuring only to the extent of being aware of that kind of possibility for deception. It would have been absurd for Randi—at least qua conjurer—to say anything about what data should be taken into consideration after the spurious ones had been eliminated, or which theories were most promising, or what direction future research should take, let alone for him to have offered anything claimed as conjurist approaches to science as a whole.

Notwithstanding obvious differences between the two cases, the contribution of feminism to academic inquiry has emerged as much, the same in kind. Feminists come to academic inquiry of all sorts with particular concerns—and, after a while, with some accumulated expertise—that make them look where others may not have thought to look, and that frequently lead to their discovering what had previously been unknown and finding anomalies where all had been presumed smooth. But all these discoveries must be visible to anyone who is willing to consider them, and once they have been made, the question of how science and philosophy should proceed is no more the concern of feminists than of everybody else. There can be no feminist reasons for adopting either first- or second-order beliefs of any kind.

The proposal of this article is that this simple point provides the most effective way of coping with the phenomenon of so-called (as I must now insist) feminist epistemology. It combines two great advantages, of being relatively simple and easy to demonstrate, and of considerable power once established.

Consider first the simple aspects that make the point relatively easy to demonstrate.

First, the argument depends not at all on what the content of feminist epistemology is supposed to be. This is a great advantage, because anyone who takes on the details not only has an enormous task on hand, but also runs the perpetual risk of wrangles about misrepresentation. None of the foregoing arguments depends on the detail of what any feminist thinks, so it makes no difference, for instance, whether or not what is claimed as feminist epistemology is accurately characterized by Alcoff and Potter as being specifically geared to "unearth the politics of knowledge," or whether I am right in my speculation that much of the impetus to feminist
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epistemology arises from confusions of level. The essential point is a logical one about the relationship of feminism to any theory of epistemology, or, for that matter, any other type of theory claimed as feminist.

Second, the claim is itself simple and straightforward, involving none of the appalling complications waiting to ensnare any critic brave or unwary enough to start from inside feminist epistemology and try to find a way out. Although developing and illustrating the argument may take some time in the first instance, all that is really involved is a simple logical point: that feminism can provide no justification for holding one theory rather than another. It is also relatively easy to demonstrate, since even if the general argument is thought to be in some way suspect, any particular argument that is attempted will provide an illustration. The important point to keep in view—the landmark, when everything else has vanished into the fog—is the question of why the feminist with still-conventional views of epistemology should change to the views claimed as feminist; and it can quickly be shown that if the argument offered has anything to do with her feminism, it will run into question begging or self-contradiction. She cannot be persuaded to change her epistemological views on the grounds that her present ones discount women’s knowledge, for instance, since until she has changed those views she will not accept that what she is discounting is knowledge.

And finally (though Mill might have described this as “resembling those celebrations of royal clemency with which . . . the king of Lilliput prefaced his most sanguinary decrees”34), the argument has the advantage of being essentially mild and unprovocative, because it implies no criticism of the substance of anything that is claimed as feminist epistemology. All it does, as such, is insist that answers to questions of epistemology and science are presupposed in any arguments about the proper treatment of women, and therefore cannot themselves be required by feminism. It shows that if the feminist on the shore is to be persuaded to embrace the theories claimed as feminist, she must be offered non-feminist reasons for doing so; but that does not imply that such reasons could not exist, or that the whole thing is nonsense.

So the case being presented here is relatively simple and relatively uncontentious; and all this sweetness and light may, perhaps, suggest that its implications cannot be very far reaching. It may even seem to leave the heart of the issue untouched, in allowing for the possibility that what goes by the name of feminist epistemology may be good epistemology even though not feminist. But although that may be technically true, in fact the case argued here has direct implications that are almost frighteningly out of line with the prevailing culture of academic politics, and indirectly makes all the difference that any skeptic needs.

34. Mill, op. cit., 44.
The most important direct implication is no doubt obvious. It is that a commitment to feminism—to righting the wrongs of women—gives not the slightest presumption in favor of any theory or set of beliefs that happens to have labelled itself "feminist." Once it is recognized that such theories can have no feminist justification, and that the name is arbitrary and misleading, it becomes clear that they should all be treated exactly as if the name were not there. Decisions about their appropriateness for teaching in universities, or for publication by serious publishers, should positively not be distorted by the mistaken idea that women's past oppression must entitle whatever calls itself feminist to special consideration. And in fact the case is even stronger, because the argument applies equally to the question of whether some area of theory is worth even detailed preliminary study. If an initial skim of any part of the literature suggests that its content is weak or confused or misguided, then—in a world of far too many books, where deciding to read one means not reading others—even the most committed feminist can, with a limpid feminist conscience, decide to go no further. She may, of course, have made a mistake, but that is true of all the other books she has no time to read, and she would certainly be making a mistake if she allowed the spurious association with feminism to influence her decision.

The second heretical implication of the arguments so far is that no expertise whatever in these knowledge-connected subjects—epistemology and the sciences—comes of being a feminist. A feminist awareness that sex-connected anomalies may come up in particular areas, or that hitherto unnoticed questions may arise in them, does not constitute expertise in these areas. In fact it is rather the other way round. Until she has enough of a grip on a particular subject, a feminist cannot be adequately aware of the ways in which sex-connected anomalies may lurk within it, or where to look for undiscovered facts that might be of feminist significance. Once again the conjuring analogy is useful. If Randi had been summoned to seek out conjurist fraud among scientists dealing with esoteric parts of modern physics, he would have had to learn a certain amount about the physics before he could see where lay the possibilities for deceit by conjuring. No matter how conscious a feminist may be of women's oppression, she will not spot subtle mistakes in patriarchal argument unless she has enough training in logic to understand how good arguments work, nor recognize inadequate evidence in any part of science unless she knows what adequate evidence looks like.35

35. It would be irrelevant here to ask, rhetorically, "by whose standards?", or otherwise raise questions about the standards of logic and scientific method being used. This argument is neutral between different possible standards. Resolve the fundamental problems of these matters any way you please, even reaching conclusions that are skeptical or relativist, and the argument about feminism goes through in the same way: until you understand how to apply whatever standards you do accept, you cannot see whether the treatment of women is wrong.
And what this means, schematically speaking, is that neither science nor epistemology can be properly studied in women’s studies departments, or taught by feminists qua feminist. These subjects must be taught—by all means in the company of people who are aware of the need to keep on the lookout for sex-connected anomalies—in departments of science and philosophy, by people who have enough background in the area to understand how to conduct inquiries and seek out anomalies. There is no problem of principle about this, because the arguments that show that no theories or beliefs can be feminist also show, by implication, that they cannot be patriarchal or phallocentric either; if they cannot be inherently emancipatory, neither can they be inherently oppressive. And when such departments make new appointments, they are seriously misguided if they think that concerns for women oblige them to appoint specialists in what goes by the name of feminist epistemology or feminist anything else. They can advance the cause of women by looking for excellent scientists or philosophers who have some special awareness of the way feminist issues may arise in their fields, but that is quite a different matter.

Even this does not suggest that there is anything wrong with the content of what is claimed as feminist epistemology. All the theories and approaches misleadingly claimed as feminist could, in principle, survive the loss of the name, and be regarded as worth teaching and publishing whether thought of as feminist or not. But the association with feminism has provided a hothouse within which nonsense has at least had every chance to rampage, and theories claimed as feminist must be tested by seeing how well they can survive a draft of cooler air.

It is obvious, in the first place, that the name of feminism—the apparent seal of authenticity—makes all the difference in the world to the way theories claimed as feminist are approached. Absorbers of feminist epistemology are not epistemological surfers who have been entranced in passing by the substance of these theories, only to find later that they were claimed as feminist. It is feminism that has drawn the crowds, and attitudes to feminism will inevitably extend to what is seen as feminist. The apparent connection with feminism will at the very least affect where sympathizers give the benefit of any doubt. Committed feminists will be more inclined to attribute obscurity to their own confusion than to confusion in the theory, and to accept on trust conclusions whose supporting arguments they have too little time or skill to assess; fellow travellers will uneasily presume that there must be something in what is going on, and will be...
reluctant to resist the baffling academic appointments and courses of invisible merits that proliferate around them. But take away the label, and feminists will see that they need positive reasons for venturing into these waters rather than excuses for staying out, and feminist sympathizers will be no more willing to endure the severe cognitive dissonance many of them now suffer than they would for the sake of flat earthers or crop circlers.

The protection provided by the name, furthermore, stretches even further when the related idea takes root that science, epistemology, or anything else should be approached through feminism, rather than the other way round. Just about anything can be made to seem plausible to people who approach their subject from the far side of the relevant academic disciplines, unequipped with the techniques of detailed criticism that are the basis of all real progress in both science and philosophy, and in no position to identify as caricatures whatever silly or simplified ideas may be attributed to the opposition. Astrology can seem well-founded to people whose scientific background is too vague to allow criticism of plausible generalities ("science has shown that the stars do have an influence on the earth"), but it cannot survive even a minimal acquaintance with post-Newtonian physics. The inconsistencies hidden by the generalities glare in the details. Creationism can flourish among people who start with the Bible, keep themselves entirely surrounded by creationists, and limit their acquaintance with paleontology and scientific method to selected odds and ends, but they could never have reached creationism from paleontology. Whether or not the epistemological ideas claimed as feminist have any merits, they can hardly fail to look plausible if approached from the direction of feminism, through sweeping ideas about the imposition of alien standards on an oppressed group ("men have had the power and have used their patriarchal standards to dismiss women's knowledge," or whatever), and perpetuated by a self-justifying rhetoric that rejects all outside criticism as irrelevant because patriarchal. The test is to see how well the theories can survive an approach from the other direction, by people who are familiar with the relevant techniques of detailed criticism, and who do not have to rely for their understanding of standard epistemology on the rather surprising accounts that sometimes appear in the feminist literature—many of which are quite enough on their own to make change seem a matter of urgency.

My own suspicion is that not much would survive. If the whole idea of feminist epistemology rests on a mistake, that in itself bodes ill for the details; and enough has already been said in passing—about confusions

37. *See*, e.g., note 17, above, but there are innumerable examples. If feminists think the rest of the world goes around with epistemology like this it is no wonder they think change is needed—though of course even if it is, that does not mean that it is needed for feminist reasons.
between epistemological and first-order standards, knowledge and knowledge claims, the politics of knowledge and the politics of epistemology, and various others—to suggest a range of serious problems. And to the extent that Alcoff and Potter are right in seeing feminist epistemology as "an unashamedly political intervention," there is also the fundamental logical difficulty in the idea that politics even can, let alone should, be at the root of things. Politics is a matter of manipulation to bring about a desired set of ends, and therefore nobody can start making political calculations until they think they know more or less how the relevant parts of the world work. That not only means that first-order beliefs must precede politics, but also presupposes an epistemology that has nothing to do with politics. Anyone who tried to think seriously and in detail about how to go in for politics on the basis of an epistemology that took power to be at the root of what knowledge actually was, would soon be stopped by dizziness.

However, to demonstrate all this would take a good deal of detailed work, and would also distract attention too far from the essential point. What matters is the conclusion not that these ideas are misguided, but that their worthwhileness must be assessed in complete independence of their claimed connection with feminism, and that, worthwhile or not, they must not be taught or given special consideration as feminist.

This is not an easy position to maintain against the tide of current academic and political opinion. The assumption that professing feminists must be the guardians of women's legitimate interests, combined with vague ideas about the entitlements of oppressed groups to define their own oppression, means that protesters rash enough to take on feminist epistemology or feminist anything else are likely to find themselves accused of patriarchy, phallocentricity, androcentrism, and no doubt devouring their young; and many of the accused—especially morally sensitive men—have now become sufficiently guilt-ridden to suspect uneasily that it may all be true. So it is worth concluding with one final moral to be drawn from these arguments, concerned not so much with persuasion as with stiffening the moral resolution of the already persuaded. Resistance may become easier if it is recognized that tolerance of the various approaches that have taken on the name of feminism is not only not required by concerns for the emancipation of women, nor even an irritating but intrinsically harmless background to efforts to achieve it, but a positive obstruction that actually tends to perpetuate and entrench the very oppression of women that most people take feminism to be opposing.

This is another consequence of the essential derivativeness of feminism. To reach the conclusion that women are in some way oppressed, you must appeal to standards of ethics and rationality that are not being met in the treatment of women. Whatever your standards, it would be manifestly absurd to support something that by those standards actually tended to perpetuate the oppression of women, just because it called itself feminist.
The point will be most obvious to anyone who has approached feminism from the direction of fairly ordinary ideas of science and epistemology. Once you have reached such conclusions as that traditional claims about the nature and position of women have always been inadequately supported by the evidence and are often mistaken, that women have had various direct and subtle obstacles placed in the way of their acquisition of knowledge, and that their abilities have never been impartially assessed or their achievements acknowledged, that shows the direction your feminist politics must take. You must therefore be positively opposed to any movement that encourages women to disdain as patriarchal the very ideas in philosophy and science you have been trying to ensure they are given full opportunity to learn, or that demands recognition as special ways of knowing for the contrived ignorance you have been struggling to remedy, or that seems to be trying to smooth into mere patriarchal knowledges the traditional knowledge claims you have been trying to expose as unsupported travesties. And if such a movement calls itself feminist, that only provides a reason for redoubling your efforts to thwart it.

But irrespective of whether your epistemological ideas are of these traditional kinds, or whether you think the content of the ones claimed as feminist may have something to be said for them, there is still the matter of allowing any particular view within either science or philosophy, or for that matter ethics (to return to that), to count as feminist at all. If you come to feminism through the idea that women have been seriously deprived of access to knowledge and science, and kept in a situation that has entrenched misunderstandings of their nature and potential, what appears as the most important issue is not which particular theories happen to be generally accepted at any time, but the kind of education—and, more broadly, intellectual culture—that makes the proper discussion of all these things possible. This is something that the claiming of any particular set of views as feminist will actively work against, for all the reasons already discussed. Women cannot learn philosophy or science as long as they see these things as aspects of feminism, rather than feminism as raising questions within them.

It is hard to imagine anything better calculated to delight the soul of patriarchal man than the sight of women’s most vociferous leaders taking an approach to feminism that continues so much of his own work: luring women off into a special area of their own where they will remain screened from the detailed study of philosophy and science to which he always said they were unsuited, teaching them indignation instead of argument, fantasy and metaphor instead of science, and doing all this by continuing his very own technique of persuading women that their true interests lie elsewhere than in the areas colonized by men. And, furthermore, outdoing even his own contrivances, in equipping them with a sophisticated,
oppression-loaded, all-purpose rhetoric that actually obstructs any serious attempt at analysis.

It is not easy to resist the rhetorical fuzziness of fashionable conceptions of what is needed for the emancipation of downtrodden groups, but if these arguments are right, this is one of the clearest moral and intellectual necessities going. Our positive duty to women—not to mention such matters as truth, academic standards, and other things we normally take ourselves to be committed to—absolutely demands an unremitting opposition to all these confusions. If the simple point is held on to that there is no intellectual or moral theory that anyone should accept in virtue of being a feminist, and that the achievement of what most of us think women are entitled to will actually be held back as long as it is thought that there is, perhaps it may be easier to summon up the necessary moral courage.

CODA: FEMINIST JURISPRUDENCE

An article specifically concerned with epistemology may on the face of it seem an odd inclusion in a journal of legal theory, but the connection with jurisprudence is probably more or less clear. Most of the arguments have been of a quite general kind, about the relationship of feminism to epistemology as a discipline rather than about the content of particular epistemological theories, and they apply in much the same way to all areas of feminist inquiry. In law, jurisprudence, political theory and ethics, even more than in epistemology and science, there are many questions that would probably not have been asked but for feminist awareness, and whose answers may significantly influence attitudes both to the situation of women in particular and to moral standards and social organization in general. But it remains true that whenever the inquiring feminist changes or extends her ideas, the justification for her doing so will ultimately have nothing to do with her feminism, and therefore that there are no particular kinds of belief she should hold or approaches she should adopt in virtue of being a feminist. Feminism may propel her inquiries, but it can never dictate her conclusions.

And once again, if there seems to be any doubt about this as an abstract thesis, it can be checked in the same way as for science and epistemology, by individual consideration of any arguments used by feminists to defend particular conclusions in areas such as law and jurisprudence. It will again be found that if any of the arguments used to support theoretical change are themselves feminist—appealing to claims about appropriate attitudes to women and their ideas—they must depend on ideas that are themselves more fundamental than feminism, and whose merits therefore cannot be determined by feminism.

Issues of law were, of course, among the very first raised by feminists. The earliest feminist challenges to the status quo concerned women’s legal
subordination to their husbands and their formal exclusion from most areas of male territory; and, as already claimed, these early arguments to feminist conclusions—conclusions that women were wrongly treated—did not depend at all on new approaches to jurisprudence or political theory. The feminist claim was essentially that standards already applied to men were not impartially applied to women. Traditional ideas about divinely ordained stations in life had by that time to a large extent given way to ideas about individuals' entitlement to achieve whatever they were capable of, and against the background of such liberal ideas the subordination and restriction of women was demonstrably arbitrary. As in the case of science and epistemology, feminists began with a challenge to the system in its own terms, and an appeal to the very principles in terms of which their opponents were trying to justify the traditional arrangements.

This pattern is also followed when feminists begin to shift their attention from the formal and conspicuous to matters less obvious, and to recognize that even when the laws themselves do not arbitrarily disadvantage women, their interpretation and implementation may achieve the same end by other means. Feminists may, for instance, look at the treatment of women and men convicted of similar crimes, to see whether supposedly obsolete ideas about appropriate behavior for the sexes are reflected in unequal attitudes to sentencing. Or they may wonder whether laws apparently designed for the protection of women are actually implemented in such a way as to have quite different effects in practice. If feminist investigation shows, for instance, that the police are reluctant to intervene on behalf of battered wives because they regard domestic violence as a private matter, or that sentencing is less severe than for comparable assaults outside the home, that will show that deeply ingrained ideas about the rights of men over their wives are still coming between women and the equality that is theirs by law. If investigation of the workings of the rape laws shows that dress or sexual history counts against the acceptability of a woman's claim to have been raped, that will suggest that rape is not really regarded as unconsented-to sex, as it is supposed to be, but still, in the traditional way, as the pollution of an otherwise innocent woman. Feminist inquiry of this kind may have far-reaching effects on politics, but the inquiries are directed by familiar standards of what is right or just, and the ensuing feminist policies are justified in terms of those standards.

But of course the time inevitably comes when some feminists start to challenge the very ideas in terms of which earlier conclusions have been defended, and when that happens the inquiring feminist may once again find herself on the shores of new theories that are themselves claimed as feminist. As long as she keeps her cool, however, and concentrates on the question of what justification there is for changing her existing views, she will still find that whether or not good reasons can be found for accepting these new theories, they cannot be provided by feminism.
Suppose, for instance, she encounters arguments to the effect that feminists should adopt new ideas about equality, because the kind of equality sought by the original feminists—the liberal removal of restraints on opportunity—shows itself as inadequate, in leaving women still unequal to men. She may well think there is something in this idea, and perhaps begin to wonder whether she should abandon her ideas of equality of opportunity for others requiring some kind of equality of outcome. If she does, however, she will not be able to justify the change through an argument that without it women cannot be truly equal to men. To do so would be to presuppose equality of outcome as the appropriate standard, because until she has made the change she will regard inequality of opportunity as the denial of true equality. Once again, the feminist on the shore must assess the new idea in order to find the direction her feminism should take, rather than the other way round. Feminist conclusions remain essentially dependent on more fundamental ideas.

There is, however, one element of the argument about feminist epistemology that does not carry over quite so straightforwardly into matters of jurisprudence and ethics, and which—although impossible to deal with adequately in a note of this length—is important to mention for more than its specific connection with jurisprudence. This is the conclusion that the application of the term “feminist” to particular theories and approaches is arbitrary and seriously misleading. This conclusion can still be

38. This point is addressed and specifically denied by Patricia Smith in the introduction to her anthology FEMINIST JURISPRUDENCE (Oxford University Press, 1993), at 8–9:
The acceptance of diversity within feminism has led some critics (and even some feminists) to contend that there is therefore no common feminist perspective . . . . Feminism can be reduced to those theories that inform its many facets. Liberal feminism is reducible to liberalism; postmodern feminism is reducible to postmodernism; and so on. Thus, it is claimed, feminism provides no new idea, no new theory. It is simply the application of old theories to the particular problems of women’s oppression.

Smith says this position is mistaken for various reasons, claiming first that even if it were true of some views, such as liberal feminism, it could not be true of radical feminism, whose centerpiece is “the structure of gender or sexual identity itself.” This idea she claims as the “core insight” that “now informs all other feminist theories,” and says:
Radical feminism starts with the idea of sexism as gender, the idea that gender is socially constructed within a hierarchy that embodies male domination and female subordination. Everything else flows from that. One may agree or disagree with this idea, but it cannot be reduced to another theory.

Not only can it be so reduced, however; it must be. This idea must depend first on an epistemology and science that support the factual claim about the “construction of gender”; and second on a set of values according to which the particular kind of domination involved is wrong.

Radical feminists do typically believe that the oppression of women is the most fundamental kind of oppression, irreducible to any other, and they may also claim that all other oppressions flow from this one, or (differently) that only through the removal of the oppression of women can other oppressions be removed. But the claim that the oppression of women is irreducible to any other oppression (which, incidentally, seems to me true, although that is not to say anything either about the construction of gender or about causal connections with other types of oppression) is quite different from the claim that the theory that the oppression of women is irreducible to any other oppression is itself irreducible to any other theory.
reached in the case of jurisprudence and ethics, but an extra twist of argument is needed to make out the case.

The point is this. In the context of epistemology it was possible to make a quick transition from the claim that there could be no feminist justification of particular epistemological ideas to the separate claim that the application of the term “feminist” to any of them was arbitrary, because the way the arguments were presented showed that these ideas were thought of as feminist specifically because they were regarded as essential for giving the appropriate weight to women’s knowledge claims and ways of investigating the world. Since no ideas could possibly be justified in that way, it followed that no ideas could be feminist in that way.

That, however, leaves open in principle the possibility that there might—in other contexts, if not that of epistemology—be other kinds of reason for claiming particular ideas or approaches as feminist; and there is indeed at least one other very familiar and well-entrenched meaning of the term that must not be overlooked. It is often clear that when an idea or approach is claimed as feminist, what is meant is that it is essentially female, and represents women’s ways of going about things.

This interpretation is sometimes explicitly rejected by feminists, but it undoubtedly floats in the feminist air, and in fact is probably the most popular idea (certainly among non-feminists) of what is meant by “feminist” in contexts like this. Most arguments about whether there are such things as feminist science and feminist ethics, for instance, seem in practice to be about whether men and women have radically different approaches to these subjects. This idea is, furthermore, certainly one that lurks around the terrain of feminist jurisprudence. Among the immensely varied writings to be found in this general area there are many that make claims about what feminist jurisprudence is; and it is striking how often in these contexts “feminist” is contrasted not only with “patriarchal” (which carries moral connotations of unjustified power), but also simply with “male” or “masculine.”39 “Feminist” appears to mean, in many contexts, something on the lines of “done or approved by women.”

My own impression—though I offer this here only as a hypothesis, since it would take some demonstrating—is that there pervades the literature a definite though unrecognized relationship between these two distinct uses of “feminist” when applied to particular approaches to subject areas or theories within them. When the term is used to characterize ideas that arise in first-order contexts—normative ethics, science, knowledge—it typically seems to mean that these ideas are essentially female. “Feminist ethics,” for instance, tends in normative contexts to refer to moral attitudes supposed to be characteristically female (consider, for instance, all the post-Gilligan material about care ethics, maternal thinking and the

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like); feminist science seems to be thought of as science that takes a female approach to the natural world and its investigation. But when the term is used to refer to more fundamental ideas—second-order ideas of epistemology, philosophy of science and metaethics, and to some extent the most fundamental principles of normative ethics—what is claimed as feminist seems to be what is thought necessary to give proper weight to what is regarded as female at the other level, and is therefore intended to mean something like "justified by the interests or entitlements of women."40 This is why the simpler meaning, "female in character," did not arise in the foregoing discussions of feminist epistemology. If the discussion had been more broadly about science and knowledge, it would have done.

In the case of feminist jurisprudence both these ideas seem to appear, and to show this same distinction of level. Sometimes "feminist" seems to apply to first-order approaches to ethics and justice thought to be characteristically female; sometimes it seems to apply to ideas that are thought necessary to give proper weight to women's ways of doing things, and therefore as justified by feminism. Even if I am right in my arguments so far, therefore, about the impossibility of there being jurisprudential ideas that are feminist in the sense of being justified by feminism, there might still be others that were feminist in the sense of being characteristically female. And if so, there could still be such a thing as feminist jurisprudence.

The most obvious question raised by this possibility is of whether any characteristics really are feminist in this second sense. Many people, including many feminists, may have considerable doubts about recent feminist claims about the extent of radical differences between the sexes. They may wonder how anyone can be confident about the nature of the real thing if women and men are supposed to be so riddled with "socially constructed gender"; and it may also seem to them that when men and women are given similar educations most of the claimed intellectual and moral differences between them vanish. But the question of whether any characteristics actually are feminist in this sense can be set aside for now, because there is, as usual, a more fundamental problem.

The problem is that even if "female" is a large part of the meaning of "feminist" understood in this way, that cannot be all there is to it. As claims about female-connectedness stand, they are simply descriptive, and the fact, if it is one, that some approach is more commonly taken by women than men is quite compatible with the idea that there is nothing to be said for it at all. When it was originally claimed that women's moral reasoning

40. This is in practice a symbiotic relationship. The more it is stressed that women's and men's ideas are different, the more it seems necessary to have a higher-level theory that stresses the equality or greater importance of women's; the more such theories become entrenched, the more is claimed about sex differences. This matter is much too complicated for full discussion here.
was quite different from men's, for instance, that was taken to show that women were immature moral reasoners. When feminists claim as feminist ideas they take to be characteristically female, however, they are obviously not meaning to leave open that possibility. The claim that some idea is feminist, coming from feminists, clearly implies a recommendation of it. That means that they must hold, in the background, more fundamental ideas and standards according to which these female ideas appear as good, and to be encouraged.41

What this means is that to accept the label "feminist" is to accept not only empirical claims about pervasive differences between women's and men's ideas and approaches, but certain background values and standards as well. If the inquiring feminist is persuaded by Gilligan's account about the differences between male and female moral reasoning, for instance, but holds background views according to which the female kind appears as a manifestation of moral immaturity, she will not have the smallest temptation to claim women's ideas as feminist. Her feminist impulse (to echo the earlier arguments about epistemology42) will be to see them as symptoms of women's deprivation, and to argue that women should be educated into better ways of thinking.

In effect, therefore, the same problem arises with this meaning of "feminism" ("female in character") as with the other ("justified by feminism"). This one has the advantage of being not actually incoherent, but it still implies an integral connection between the emancipation of women and particular background beliefs and standards, and is as misleading as the other in implying that these standards are essential to feminism. This means that this second sense of "feminist," when used to refer to positive ideas in jurisprudence, ethics or for that matter (to return to the subject matter of the main paper) science and knowledge, is as much to be resisted as the other. Even though both meanings are to be found in the context of feminist jurisprudence, therefore, the conclusion stands that there is no non-misleading, non-arbitrary way in which particular theories can be counted as feminist.43

If this is so, what are the implications for feminist jurisprudence as a subject?

41. Background ideas that would have this effect could take different forms. They could be positive ideas about morality that would show women's ideas as equal to or better than men's, or, perhaps, they could take some relativistic form that made different groups' ideas equal whatever their content. Some of the confusions in this area seem to arise from uncertainty about whether women's ways of doing things are being claimed as simply better than men's, or whether the idea is more that the world ought to be adapted to women's ways of doing things, whatever those are.

42. Supra, 500-501.

43. There could in principle, of course, be yet other meanings of "feminist" in these contexts, but it is hard to imagine what they might be. It is obviously no good proposing "accepted by feminists," for instance, since that is also question-begging.
As in the case of so-called feminist epistemology, anyone who skims through anthologies or courses that go by the name of feminist jurisprudence will find a huge range of highly disparate material, as varied in quality as in scope and content. Obviously the arguments presented here are not intended as a criticism of all this material. In the first place, again as in the case of epistemology, nothing has been said about the content of particular theories. The only issue has been the nature of their connection with feminism, and here, once again, the crucial distinction is between feminism as directing inquiries and feminism as supporting or otherwise characterizing conclusions. These arguments have been only against the second. No one who thinks seriously about the issues can be in any doubt about the importance of pursuing feminism as an inquiry in this area, since the problems it raises are of a quite distinctive kind, of overwhelming importance, and most unlikely to be adequately addressed unless tackled directly in their own right. All that is to be resisted is the claiming of particular conclusions and approaches as feminist, and their acquiring a spurious status in consequence.

This does have considerable implications for the idea of feminist jurisprudence, however, because anyone who accepts that feminism is properly thought of only as an inquiry will almost certainly lose any temptation to characterize what is going on as “feminist jurisprudence” at all. It becomes much more linguistically appropriate to think in terms of “feminist problems in jurisprudence,” or something of the kind. The expression “feminist x” does carry the implication of doing x in a particular way or on the basis of particular beliefs, and—I presume—has become entrenched only because so many feminists do think there are distinctively feminist ways of approaching the academic disciplines. For this reason, therefore, I do want to defend the strong conclusion that there can be no such thing as feminist jurisprudence, and to recommend the dropping of the term.

But although all this is important in its way, as a remedial exercise and intellectual clarifier, a more important conclusion is that these matters should be approached in such a way as to prevent the issue from ever arising at all. The main moral of the arguments offered here is neither terminological nor substantial, but methodological. If feminism is thought of as an inquiry—if the questions and the literature are approached from the point of view of the inquiring feminist—everything else falls into place.

For the inquiring feminist, the problem is clear. Her overall purpose, as an inquirer, is to decide what to think about all these feminist issues. As long as she has that purpose clearly in mind she need have no problems about how to approach the literature, whether or not it makes claims about what feminist jurisprudence is, and even when it might give a less well directed reader the adrift-in-uncharted-seas feeling. Her question about any new piece of literature, or any argument she hears, is of whether it gives her a
reason to extend or modify her present beliefs about the nature and position of women—or, indeed, about anything else.

The implications of this are probably clear from the earlier arguments about epistemology. The inquiring feminist needs to start, since she cannot read everything, by making an initial judgment (on the basis of her own preliminary investigations, or the recommendations of others, or anything else) about whether any piece of writing she contemplates is worth persevering with at all. If it seems to be, she will press on with it; if it does not, its coming with the label "feminist" attached is neither here nor there. She then proceeds with a series of questions. What, exactly, is the author trying to establish? (In many cases even that may be far from clear.) Is it something she herself does not, at present, have reason to believe? Does the argument give her any reason to change or extend her present beliefs? Does it suggest new lines of inquiry she ought to pursue? And so on. If she approaches the matter in this way, asking only, all the time, what reason she is being offered to change or extend her current beliefs, or how to redirect her lines of inquiry, the question of whether some idea is or is not feminist does not arise. It simply drops out of the analysis.

This is a methodological point of great simplicity, which is, incidentally, equally appropriate to all areas of inquiry, and particularly useful for coping with labels that arise in all areas of politics. Absolutely nothing is lost or distorted by approaching the issues of feminism in this way; in fact it seems to me the only way of systematically avoiding distortion. The approach is entirely neutral from the point of view of content, in jurisprudence, science or anything else, and leaves completely open all questions about what theories, standards and methods should be accepted, how different the sexes actually are, how much injustice to women still remains, and everything else. It does not in the least imply that the approaches now claimed as feminist should not be adopted; all it does is undermine the spurious status the feminist label has given them.

These arguments, therefore, should have no impact on any matter of substance. If they seem to, that in itself will be an indication of the extent to which the claiming of particular ideas and approaches as feminist has distorted the analysis of feminist problems, and of how much clutter needs to be swept away before the vast agenda of unfinished feminist business can be properly addressed.