

What Can She Know?
Feminist Theory and the
Construction of Knowledge

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feminists a promise of a rich and extensive "free play" of a plurality of differences unhampered by any predetermined gender identity.¹⁰ This promise of freedom explains its initial appeal. Nonetheless, in place of the old essentialism, it risks positing a new form of determinism in which human agents are swept along by a tide of discourse that they are powerless to resist. Hence their 'agency', in effect, seems to count for naught. This facet of postmodern subjectivity must give feminists pause.

Aware of these problems, Alcoff explores a subtle way of reconceptualizing subjectivity, particularly female subjectivity, in terms of 'positionality'. A subject's identity would be understood as "relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies, and so on." Female subjectivity is a relational construct, but it is neither immobilized nor stabilized, as it is in the impersonal structures of androcentric discourse, where it is defined *in relation to* a single, undisputed norm: masculinity. In fact, 'positionality' explicitly resists taking any one position as referent, be it the position of the masculine norm; of white, middle-class feminism; of female separatism; or whatever. The point is not to advocate quiescent liberal tolerance, however. It is to analyze, assess, assume accountability for the positions one occupies, while engaging in critical dialogue with, or resistance against, occupants of other positions, in cognizance of their political implications. Identity forms and reforms, according to Alcoff, in contexts of "concrete habits, practices, and discourses,"¹¹ which are at once fluid, unstable, yet amenable to quite precise, determinate articulation at specific historical sites and moments. These articulations—say, a woman's narrative of her experiences as a heterosexual feminist activist, working for better daycare—are open to social and political critique, remapping, renegotiation. Yet they designate positions that are, at the same time, sufficiently stable to permit active political involvement. Positions are at once loci for the active construction of meaning—meaning that is neither simply discovered nor imposed, but constructed—and foci for sociopolitical critique. The positionality proposal draws on specifically located beginnings in and elaborations of the second-person relationships that are pivotal points in any life history. It creates a political space for reinterpreting and engaging

¹⁰Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism," p. 418.

¹¹*Ibid.*, pp. 433, 431. I discuss the implications of positionality further in Chapter 7.

critically with the forms of authority and expertise that circumscribe women's control over their lives.

Authority and Expertise

The structures of power-knowledge in western societies, within which women must claim their identity and power, are historically rooted in an ancient, taken-for-granted biological determinism. One of its earliest articulations, in which it has undeniable epistemological import, is in the passage from Aristotle's *Politics* that I cite in Chapter 1. With reference to the human soul, Aristotle observes that "the slave has no deliberative faculty at all; the woman has, *but it is without authority*, and the child has, but it is immature."¹² In this chapter and the following one, I analyze persistent variations on this representation of 'woman' as a creature whose deliberative faculty—her capacity to think, judge, and know—is *without authority*. The fixity of this conception yields the political consequence that women frequently find themselves in positions of reliance on 'experts', even when they have good reasons to believe that they *know* as well as, or better than, the experts do. In this chapter, I show how convictions about their rational incapacity structure women's constructions of their own psychological well-being: matters that concern each woman most directly and about which she would expect to be in a good—if not perhaps the best—position to speak with authority. In the next chapter, I show how this same assumption can vitiate women's efforts to achieve authoritative cognitive status in aspects of their work in which, on the basis of their experience, *their* expertise should be acknowledged.

There is nothing contentious about the assertion that there are close connections among knowledge, expertise, and authority. People commonly assume that knowledge is the basis of expertise and that expertise confers authority on its possessors. A person of recognized expertise, in a social/epistemic community, is usually in a position to have his (and sometimes her) pronouncements respected and to be consulted as an authority when expert advice is required. Expert endorsement cannot confer truth on knowledge claims, yet arguments in favor of taking certain claims seriously derive reasonable support from references to the expertise of the authorities who endorse them.

¹²Aristotle, *Politics* I, 1260a, emphasis added.

Consider debates about the efficacy of vitamin C in curing or preventing colds. To date, its powers have not been definitively established, but when doctors of known expertise and authority testify in its favor, the credibility index rises. Hearing the detractors, people want to know about their credentials, as indicators of how seriously their claims to expertise can be taken.

This state of affairs is simply part of the division of intellectual labor essential to the smooth functioning of complex epistemic communities. The advantages of the division clearly outweigh its disadvantages, for no one *could* acquire all of the specialized knowledge a person would need in order never to be reliant on someone else's expertise.¹³ Such reliance is evident when people make major purchases and in the opinions that inform their decisions to vote, to see a play or a film, to support or protest against technological developments, and to refrain from taking certain medications. It would be impracticable to condemn it. Yet it is an ongoing problem for cognitive agents, both individually and collectively, to ensure that their reliance is neither naive nor ill-informed. Because people often have no choice but to consult 'experts', the process of learning whose pronouncements are properly authoritative and deserving of credence is crucial to the development of a capacity to know well and to the establishment of a person's status as a responsible member of an epistemic community. Concentration upon individual, putatively autonomous knowledge claims that derive from 'direct' contact with the world obscures the role of these credibility-discerning and -establishing activities. Theorists of knowledge often forget how small a portion of their knowledge people gain by first-person experiential means. In fact, people are fundamentally dependent on one another—on their parents, children, teachers, students, friends, on reporters, authorities, and experts—for what they, often rightly, claim to know.

It is as important, then, for a would-be knower to be able to recognize when *someone else* knows and can be trusted as it is to be able to demonstrate that she herself is knowledgeable and can do certain things reliably and well. In fact, the issue of establishing and relying on authority and expertise, morally, politically, and epistemically, turns on questions about how to be appropriately judicious and circumspect in granting and withholding trust. Like all cooperative en-

¹³ I discuss some implications of this division of labor more fully in my *Epistemic Responsibility*, chap. 9. For an instructive discussion of feminist implications of the division of intellectual labor, see Kathryn Pyne Addelson, "The Man of Professional Wisdom," in Harding and Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*. Nelson has an extensive analysis of Addelson's article in chap. 4 of *Who Knows*.

terprises, the division of intellectual labor depends on the cooperator's ability to *trust* one another to play their parts responsibly. Baier observes, "We inhabit a climate of trust as we inhabit an atmosphere and notice it as we notice air, only when it becomes scarce or polluted."¹⁴ In situations of unequal power, people may, indeed, need to *learn* to notice it: to trust themselves to claim validity for their experiences and to be critical where they sense that they have placed their trust unwisely. It is not easy for a woman who has minimal faith in her deliberative capacities to adopt such a critical stance.

The problematic of trust plays into the tensions I discuss in Chapter 3—the tensions generated out of efforts at once to assert constancy of traits and attributes—of 'character'—and to escape the rigidity and politically vexed implications of unified, humanistic subjectivity with its attendant essentialist problems. A conception of multiple, fluid, continually repositioned subjectivity sits uneasily with claims that it is both possible and politically crucial to know people well enough to trust them. This unease at the crux of 'the identity crisis in feminist theory' signals the recognition of a paradox that has always to be renegotiated: subjectivity is neither stable nor unified, yet it is impossible to affirm political identities and allegiances in the absence of reliability, accountability, and trust. The friendships on which the best political alliances are modeled can neither be created nor sustained without trust. Friendships do not do well when the friends are required frequently to prove their trust, yet excessive demands of consistency and rigid predictability can damage friendships irreparably. Likewise, in larger alliances, it is important to maintain a steady assumption of trust, yet not to assume so rigidly that there are no means of accommodating the contradictions of multiple subjectivities.

The appropriate move, as I see it at this stage in the development of feminist thought, is not to dissolve these paradoxes by opting for one of the two 'sides' unequivocally. It is, rather, to develop creative strategies for maintaining the tension between them: placing trust where practical deliberation suggests that it is reasonable to place it, with these people, in these circumstances; recognizing that it may, ultimately, be necessary to revise one's judgment—and that decisions to trust are indeed poised unsteadily between incompatible beliefs about subjectivity *even though* trust, to be worthy of the name, needs to be placed firmly and with conviction. Uncomfortably as these recommendations may sit with the expectations of principled deci-

¹⁴ Annette Baier, "Trust and Antitrust," *Ethics* 96 (January 1986): 234. My thinking about trust has benefited from Baier's work on the subject.

siveness of standard moral theories, they have a certain phenomenological, experiential appeal. Many people conduct their relationships quite well on the basis of the practical reasoning on which these processes depend: often their lives are neither chaotic nor ossified, and they retain definite capacities for action.

Trust involves making oneself vulnerable, granting other people access to, and even control over, valued aspects of one's life, conferring on them the power as much to damage, destroy, or misuse those things as to take care with them. People trust one another with their intimate secrets, with the power to intervene in their mental and physical health, with the health and well-being of people they love, and with their most valued possessions, to mention only a few of the areas where trust extends. It is a risky business, whose very imperceptibility enhances the risks. Conferral and acceptance of trust require second-person interdependence in its most open and most fragile aspect.

This fragility is most apparent in unequal relationships. Inequalities result from the differences in people's capacities to consent to trusting relations: infants and children, the senile, the very sick, people who are illiterate or linguistically marginalized often cannot give informed consent, yet trust may be essential to their survival. The persistent 'infantilization' of privileged white women in patriarchal societies, in the name of their delicate natures and deficient deliberative capacities, renders them fundamentally unequal to 'the man of reason' and often meekly acquiescent in the unwitting and unquestioned trusting that is expected of them.¹⁵ Such relationships show clearly that the contractual morality of the autonomous moral agent is inadequate to grasp the complexities of trust. The rhetoric of voluntary agreement cannot account for the politics of trusting. As Baier puts it: "Men may but women cannot see morality as essentially a matter of keeping to the minimal moral traffic rules, designed to restrict close encounters between autonomous persons to self-chosen ones. Such a conception presupposes both an equality of power and a natural separateness from others, which is alien to women's experience of life and morality." The power differentials that construct women's political and social positions show that it is rational to trust only "in the absence of any reason to suspect in the trusted strong and operative motives which conflict with the demands of trust-

¹⁵It is important to bear in mind that 'woman's nature' is a class- and race-specific phenomenon: poor women, unmarried women, and the women of color or of marginalized ethnic groups, who are expected to do hard physical labor, are represented as much less delicate.

worthiness as the truster sees them."¹⁶ Trust-based relationships lend themselves readily to the forms of exploitation to which women of all classes, races, ages, and persuasions have long been subject.

Issues of the politics of knowledge are variously implicated in conferring and withholding trust. Knowing other people is central among them—knowing people well enough to trust them wisely, to be sensitive to their trust, and to take account of the responsibilities that trusting enjoins. Being sufficiently self-aware to acknowledge one's capacity to participate in relationships that require trust is equally crucial. This form of epistemic power is not readily won by 'underclass' persons. (The consciousness-raising strategies of the 1970s were designed to enable women to claim it.) As long as women's visible behavior conforms to social expectations, the assumption is that they have consented to occupy the places that silence and oppress rather than empower them. It is vital for women to learn how to evaluate the 'experts' expertise, to recognize what makes a doctor, teacher, therapist, colleague, or friend worthy of trust. In areas where an expert's authority is a product of education and training, it may be necessary to learn enough about the subject matter (say, medical options) to understand and accept or reject expert advice. No one can become an expert in every area of specialization; many women, with encouragement and support, can become well enough informed to know where it is reasonable to place their trust. Only by so doing can they resist the disempowering effects of authority and expertise. Women have to challenge and reconstruct the meanings of expertise if they are to take control of their lives.

Placing trust wisely in situations of unequal power requires learning to differentiate *authoritative* manifestations of epistemic authority from merely *authoritarian* ones. The distinction turns upon the competence, the informed and hence justified position of an authoritative expert, contrasted with the *power* of an authoritarian knower to claim credibility on the basis of privilege alone or of ideological orthodoxy, rather than on a basis of responsible epistemic practice.¹⁷ Power may also be a product of authoritative knowing, but it is more likely to be earned than arbitrarily claimed. An authoritative knower is often diffident about his or her degree of expertise, fallibilist, and prepared to reconsider or even to reserve judgment. Authoritarian knowers, who have more reason to be diffident, often are less so. Learning to recog-

¹⁶Baier, "Trust and Antitrust," pp. 249, 254.

¹⁷I am drawing here on an earlier discussion of this distinction in my "Simple Equality Is Not Enough," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64 (suppl.) (June 1986): 48-65.

nize justified authority, then, is complicated, for high-ranking positions of authority can be won through ideologically sanctioned exploitative maneuvers almost as readily as they can be achieved in consequence of careful knowing. By the same token, low(er)-ranking status is not, unequivocally, a sign of ignorance or lesser reliability. In its extreme form, authoritarianism becomes "the domination of the ignorant masses by a powerful elite."¹⁸ Even its less extreme forms have this potential.

For women, learning to place their trust wisely is doubly complex because of the tenacity of beliefs about their lack of rational capacity which still echo Aristotle. These beliefs sustain men's paternalistic control over women's lives. Women's lack of authority in their own 'deliberative faculties' apparently makes it right and proper for men, who by nature do have such authority, to allow women to benefit from it. Reasons in favor of this relationship are all the more cogent for men whose deliberative faculties have been honed in professional, 'scientific' training. Yet the fallibility both of the 'arts' and of the 'experts' whose authoritarian practices I discuss below reveals the necessity for circumspection in seeking their help.

The difficulty of fulfilling this requirement is exacerbated by a further consequence of women's alleged lack of deliberative authority. In Aristotle's scheme, an aspiring virtuous young man discerns the nature of moral and intellectual virtue by observing the conduct of virtuous citizens in the polis. He learns goodness by emulating the good, wisdom by emulating the wise. Yet these possibilities are not available in the same way for women. Not even the wives of politically visible men have access to the public spaces where virtuous conduct presents itself for emulation. Women's lives do not afford access to a community with whom they could evaluate the models, even if they could observe them; nor can they act publicly in places where their conduct, too, could count as a paradigm of virtue. Nonetheless, the fact that women in the Greek polis were credited neither with moral nor with intellectual virtue is persistently explained on the basis of their deficient reasoning powers rather than their social position. In the 1990s women are still largely invisible as moral and intellectual authorities, notwithstanding Rosi Braidotti's optimistic claim that "the presence of real-life women in positions of authority and knowledge is opening up new possibilities for self-image and identi-

fication in women."¹⁹ They are few in number, and it is still too easy to dismiss them as the exceptions that prove the rule.

The notorious scarcity of intellectually authoritative women imposes a subtle constraint on women's resistance to paternalism. Historically, there are notably few exemplary female knowers: no female Newtons, Descartes, or Darwins (though now we have Barbara McClintock). Hence women commonly have access only at second hand to ideals of cognitive authority. They frequently have to approach such ideals through a translation process that must traverse or circumnavigate the dogma according to which these possibilities are closed to women.²⁰ The problem is that for a woman to believe in her competence to evaluate and challenge authority she needs faith in the credibility of her judgment. Circumspection is a luxury reserved for people who have succeeded in achieving the conviction that people like themselves *can* plausibly claim authority. So although I am not urging that people can model their aspirations only on the achievement of people just like themselves, I am suggesting that a sense of cognitive dissonance constrains their aspirations when women *always* have to define their cognitive standards according to possibilities only rarely available to people like themselves. People learn about their possibilities, initially, from observing what people 'like them' (whatever the extension of that phrase) can do. They do not jump from rooftops expecting to fly, because they learn that that is not a human possibility. Analogously, people acquire a sense of how people like themselves can think and act, a sense that they ingest to the extent that it can determine their position on the epistemic map.

Logically, every way of thinking, kind of creativity, and level of intervention and challenge is as open to women as it is to men. Such an assumption is integral to the autonomy-of-reason view that reason is alike in all men. But realizations of logical possibility are thwarted in practice, for women, by the tenacity of structures informed by essentialist conceptions of 'woman' that deny credibility to their projects. It is not enough for a woman simply to refuse the essentialism

¹⁹Rosi Braidotti, "Ethics Revisited: Women and/in Philosophy," in Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross, eds., *Feminist Challenges: Social and Political Theory* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), p. 51.

²⁰Elisabeth Young-Bruhl remarks: "So great . . . is the weight of prejudice about women's abilities and achievements as thinkers that we often look to the lives of thoughtful women with questions not about how they thought of their thinking but with questions about how they thought at all, how they managed *not* to be as this great weight of prejudice prescribed." Young-Bruhl, "The Education of Women as Philosophers," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 12 (Winter 1987): 207.

¹⁸This is Ursula Le Guin's phrase, in *Language of the Night*, quoted by Hilary Rose in "Dreaming the Future," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 3 (Spring 1988): 120.

and act according to her own lights, with the full authority of a competent knower, in the expectation of public acknowledgment. Communal standards of received discourse work as much to constrain as to facilitate and legitimate cognitive pursuits, and selves are socially constituted. Hence there is no unconstrained place in a woman's psyche from which she can affirm her *real*, authoritative self simply by thrusting aside the practical and ideological constructs that have produced her (present) position. Women are not trapped without recourse in the Aristotelian mold, but resisting its tenacity, breaking out of its constraints, requires more than a simple decision to evade its influence.

Although the advantages of a division of intellectual labor cannot be denied, then, many women in male-dominated societies are too heavily reliant on experts. Where expertise poses as absolute authority and is supported in its pose by institutional and professional structures and affiliations, it is difficult for women to challenge its verdicts, to seek open-ended, interpretive advice, to displace pronouncements from 'on high'. Women's increasing engagement in consumer movements and in self-help medical and legal groups is an important step in enabling them to take power and responsibility into their own hands. The engagement works precisely because of its solidarity in collectivity, its structural opposition to oppressive structures. Women who have lived in situations of excessive heteronomy need to be able to claim greater autonomy in order to gain freedom from the paternalistic oppression of masculine expertise. That ability can be achieved only by working collectively to reshape the stereotype-informed structures that erode their capacity to claim authoritative status.

Stereotypes and Ideology

Epistemologically, stereotypes—whether of women, blacks, the working classes, or the elderly—are both puzzling and paradoxical. Stereotype users are usually convinced that they *know* that women—or blacks, or the working classes—are just as the stereotypes say, even when they are confronted with more than enough empirical evidence to undermine their convictions. On any test of justification or adequacy, stereotypes would come out poorly, except perhaps on a crude coherentist test, where they might cohere well with assumptions about women, and women and men, that they themselves reinforce. They are the most inadequate of claims to know other people.

Yet when the complexity and ambiguity of claiming to know another person is smoothed over by the epistemological assimilation of people to objects, the crudity of stereotypes is obscured. It might even seem that it is no more significant to claim that a woman's nature is determined by her biology than it is to claim that a table's 'nature' is determined by the materials from which it is made. Yet there is a major difference. In 'S knows that p' statements about women, the place is held by a condensed theoretical construct—'woman'—whose sociocultural-political dimensions need to be articulated and analyzed. 'Woman' and 'table' are asymmetrical labels; people can be stereotyped, material objects cannot.

Although stereotypes are crude epistemological tools, a facility in their usage often masquerades as knowledge. Yet stereotypes generate both epistemic indolence and epistemic imperialism—patterns scarcely indicative of good knowing. Indolence is evident in a user's conviction that he knows what he is talking about to the extent of claiming absolution from any requirement to know it better. Such absolution encourages intellectual *akrasia*, an entrenched reluctance to inquire further lest one have to "reconsider a range of treasured beliefs."²¹ Imperialism is manifested in a conviction that the stereotyped category is summed up, that the putative knower has put his or her mark on it, labeled it for what it is, and claimed it as part of his or her stock of cognitive possessions. There is an arrogance at work here which claims a right to be heard as an authority about the object of the stereotyping. That arrogance feeds into the totalizing effect of a stereotype, in which the stereotyped, generalized 'other' subsumes every concrete 'other' absolutely, making of stereotypes loci of power and control. To borrow a formulation of Andrea Nye's, a stereotype acquires the status of a form of language that claims for itself "the authority to tell us who we are and what we may do."²²

According to the principles of informal logic, stereotypes amount at once to hasty generalizations, and to illegitimate appeals to authority. Both in stretching accidental characteristics to sum up all people of a certain 'sort' (be they women, or blacks, or even men) and in posing as finished products, not open to amendment, stereotypes are like judgments based on hasty generalization. Yet a stereotype will not derive solely from the process of simple enumeration from which hasty generalizations ordinarily are constructed. Stereotypes are as

²¹ I take this phrase from Amélie Rorty, "Akratic Believers," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 20 (April 1982): 179.

²² See Andrea Nye, "The Unity of Language," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 2 (Summer 1987): 96.

much the products of accumulated cultural lore as of inductive evidence based in limited experience. They are the engrained and tenacious products of acculturation processes that continually confirm their legitimacy.

Stereotypes of 'woman' pose as knowledge of who women essentially are, of what they are like, and hence of how they should appropriately be placed and treated in society. (The passive voice signals women's powerlessness in societies in which their place is not chosen, but assigned by the speakers of the dominant, stereotype-informed discourse.) Stereotypes construct women as 'generalized' objects of knowledge that are often sharply discontinuous from women's self-conceptions and -understandings.²³ Yet they are so efficacious in sustaining the construct that women are often constrained to adjust their self-conceptions to align with the stereotype-informed conception of their 'real' nature. Hence stereotypes inform and legitimate structures of authority and expertise in mutually reinforcing processes of confirmation and fulfillment. Women do not simply don a stereotype as they might a costume or a role: this is not a matter of superficial overlay. They are encoded by, marked with stereotypes, from earliest infancy. They learn to suppress suspicions that there is something amiss, to blame themselves rather than the stereotype when their experiences suggest that the 'fit' is less than perfect. Stereotyped conceptions of 'woman's nature' count among the most intransigent features of the sociopolitical-epistemic structures that shape and restrict women's lives, inducing them to acquiesce in those restrictions.

A simple repudiation of stereotype-imposed restrictions is not so easy, though. The very possibility of knowledge depends on categories and systems of classification: a language comprised only of particulars could neither be spoken nor understood. Nor is it easy to see how one could take the initial steps toward knowing someone without a preliminary category-guided set of moves, if only to situate her for purposes of opening an exchange. So categories—even stereotypes—perform a useful preliminary function in relationships. But any aspiring 'second person' relation sets out at once to correct for the stereotype, to discard it.

Categories and classifications resemble stereotypes in many respects: they, too, derive from cultural traditions; they generalize and abstract from experience. Categories and classificatory schemes differ

most saliently from stereotypes in their open-ended, 'fallibilist' possibilities, which contrast with the dogmatic rigidity of stereotypes. That difference may be more ideal than real, for categories and classifications have a tendency to ossify and become closed. It is worth emphasizing, however, for cognitive agents can control the process: even though they need categories, they can learn to resist stereotypes. Consciousness raising is partly about this kind of resistance. Stereotypes afford the very starkest illustration of essentialism at work, showing how it precludes knowing people well and legitimates their objectification.

The affinity between stereotypes and dogmatism is no accident. Historically, the term 'stereotype' was adopted expressly to convey a rigidity of mind and narrowness of perception. It referred originally to a form of printing and rigid duplicating. In 1922 Walter Lippmann appropriated it for social science, to refer to "pictures in our heads." He argued that "the 'real' environment is altogether too big, too complex and too fleeting for 'direct acquaintance'" and that stereotypes serve "to preserve us from all the bewildering effects of trying to see the world steadily and see it whole."²⁴ From this description, stereotypes sound like necessary devices for coping adequately with the world. But coping adequately depends on knowing well, on trying to see things 'steadily' and 'whole', however approximate the results may be.

Stereotypes, for Lippmann, offer control where there might only be chaos and confusion. They promise fulfillment, Nye observes, of an ancient philosophical "dream of oneness, order, and harmony, of a clarity of thought which would reduce diversity to overriding design or principle."²⁵ The unity-of-science project is one aspect of that dream. Nye detects a "unity of language" project that is a complementary or derivative aspect: it accounts for the appeal—and the tenacity—of stereotypes.

On Nye's account, it is hardly surprising that the stereotype's assumed position as knowledge of how women *are* renders it immune to counterevidence. The philosophical unification of language—and hence of the knowledge assumed to be embedded in it—is produced out of a refusal to hear what others say, how they perceive themselves

²⁴Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (1922; New York: Free Press, 1965), quoted by Hilda Kuper, "Colour, Categories, and Colonialism: The Swazi Case," in *Colonialism in Africa 1870-1960*, vol. 3, *Profiles of Change: African Society and Colonial Rule*, ed. Peter Duignan and L. H. Gann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971). The fact that an evaluation of stereotypes is central to feminist critiques of anthropological work in Africa needs no explanation. (Helen Callaway brought this article to my attention.)

²⁵Nye, "Unity of Language," p. 97.

²³The allusion is to Benhabib's article, "Generalized and Concrete Other," which I discuss in Chapter 4.

and conceive of their experiences. All of this unruly particularity is encompassed and tamed within the authoritarian, dominant discourse. The rational ordering of that discourse, like the stance of the stereotype-informed autonomous reasoner, is achieved by suppressing particularity and diversity. Nye notes: "Instead of expressing personal experience, language must be grounded in authoritarian, impersonal truths." Stereotypes are *applied* to the social world—to other people—just as formal logical structures are applied to the physical world, to eliminate flux and contingency and to make possible a knowledge characterized, above all, by definiteness and fixity. Nye maintains that "the unification of language rests on and begins from the position that there is *no way* to understand what others feel or understand as uniquely their own."²⁶ Such a conviction is plainly compatible with the individualism I discuss in Chapters 3 and 4, for which persons are opaque to one another, and self-other relations are hostile and divisive. Such conceptions of subjectivity and relations do not require their adherents to know one another any better than stereotypes permit.

Like categories and other classifications, stereotypes abstract from 'reality' to create fixed points in its complexity and fleetingness, ways of finding one's way around. They are not easily undermined, because they are often accurate, at least to some extent. They function as cluster-concepts, so that the reality component at their core lends them an unwarranted credibility. But this is the accuracy of a caricature, not of a portrait, and it yields the kind of truncated picture that a caricature does. The problem is not that caricatures tell no truths, nor that they tell only partial truths where genuine truths would somehow be 'whole'; it is that caricatures control perception unduly. It was probably not easy to talk to Charles de Gaulle without focusing on his nose, even though interviewers knew that he was *more* than his nose. Caricatures make it difficult to see that 'something more'; they shrink one's perceptual possibilities.

Morally, a caricature is more benign than a stereotype, for there is a grammar of caricature creating and viewing which makes it possible to 'correct for the context'. A caricature proclaims its own partiality: someone who recognizes a politician from it knows the rules of the game. But stereotypes tend to be presented 'straight', to give 'the facts', to sum up just how people of a certain narrowly designated sort are, and to fit this person into that slot without remainder, obscuring any other view of her. They conceal their own partiality,

²⁶Ibid., pp. 99, 105, emphasis added.

and the element of truth that they capture compounds the concealment. In the rigidity of a stereotype, there is none of the play and interplay between speaker/writer/artist and audience that there is in the creation and interpretation of a caricature.²⁷

Functionally, a stereotype is like a Kuhnian paradigm: exceptions tend to be discounted as aberrant rather than to threaten the stability of the stereotype.²⁸ Stereotypes are strengthened and more firmly entrenched on the basis of confirming instances, yet they are not significantly weakened by seemingly contradictory ones. In fact, they are curiously elastic even in their rigidity: they stretch and shift to accommodate contradictions and reestablish themselves. Hence it is not easy to undermine them.²⁹ As with unified meanings in general, a 'namer' has a good deal at stake in keeping labels intact to control the complexity, fleetingness, and incipient chaos of the experienced world. A detached knower needs common meanings, Nye observes, for "as long as names are allowed to shift and mutate, they will not be understood and the speaker, removed from ordinary discourse, will remain alone."³⁰ When the conservation of such 'common meanings' appears to be a requirement for keeping a social order intact, then counterevidence is the more assiduously suppressed, whether consciously or otherwise. Cynthia Russett shows that, in the nineteenth century when claims for sexual and racial equality were being pressed on all sides, threatening social upheaval, scientists devoted themselves to demonstrating the 'naturalness' of the old order. "Scientists responded to [the] unrest with a detailed and sustained examination of the differences between men and women that justified their differing social roles." Among the many results of this examination was the

²⁷Consider the contrast between stereotypes and archetypes. Whereas an archetype opens a range of interpretive possibilities, a stereotype has just the opposite effect. It closes off interpretation, conceals complexity and ambiguity.

²⁸See Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, for an account of the role of paradigms in normal science. I discuss this feature of stereotypes at greater length in Chapter 6. De Beauvoir's discussion of myths of femininity shows that they operate very much as stereotypes do. She writes: "As against the dispersed, contingent, and multiple existences of actual women, mythical thought opposes the Eternal Feminine, unique and changeless. If the definition provided for this concept is contradicted by the behavior of flesh-and-blood women, it is the latter who are wrong: we are told not that femininity is a false entity, but that the women concerned are not feminine" (*Second Sex*, p. 286).

²⁹Both women who do and women who do not fit stereotypes are oppressed by them. An apt illustration of how women remain "caught in the stereotype" comes from a British newspaper account of a woman trade union member's complaints about sexual harassment. This woman "was not taken seriously by some of those in authority because she was single, middle aged, and ordinary looking." Ann Smedley, "Faint-hearted Progress," *The Guardian*, June 18, 1985, p. 22.

³⁰Nye, "Unity of Language," p. 106.

construction, by nineteenth-century psychologists, of a "feminine psyche very much in accord with prevailing cultural views of womanhood—gentle, emotional, nurturant, weak-willed, and dependent."³¹ Dislodging stereotypes of woman turns people's lives upside down: for the men who occupy positions in the power structure that are threatened by this upheaval, the experience is not pleasant.

It would be a mistake, though, to claim that stereotypes and paradigms are perfectly analogous. Kuhn argues that it is impossible to engage in normal science in the absence of a paradigm; and yet it is both possible and morally-politically imperative for knowledge of other people to get free from the constraints of stereotypes. Nonetheless, two points of comparison attest to the aptness of the analogy. Consider first the *power* exerted by both paradigms and stereotypes. The intrication of knowledge and power is now (especially following Foucault) a philosophical and political commonplace, and the entrenched institutional and disciplinary power of a paradigm can confer legitimacy on aspiring scientific endeavor or relegate it to the limbo of unacceptability. Stereotypes function in the same way in designating legitimate, as opposed to aberrant, female conduct and social positioning. Their effect is as apparent in women's efforts to establish themselves in more public places as it is in dictates about how women should conduct the personal, more 'private' aspects of their lives.³²

Second, consider the process of paradigm change. In Kuhn's view, scientific revolutions occur when the explanatory power of a paradigm is exhausted or when it encounters so many insoluble puzzles that it can no longer sustain its hegemony. A point comes when the paradigm has been subjected to so many strains that it must give way to a new paradigm, with greater explanatory power; though sometimes there is a period of interregnum before a new paradigm is articulated and established. This aspect of the paradigm-stereotype analogy gives feminists reason for optimism. Stereotypes of woman are going through a period of strain such that there are good reasons

to hope that they will give way to new constructions and representations. To this end, feminist critical inquiry has to be sustained.

The most persistent stereotypes of 'woman' (= middle-class white women) amount, in fact, to variations on the Aristotelian theme of woman's lack of deliberative authority. Subjective and emotional in their judgments, scatter-brained, politically immature, financially irresponsible, and constitutionally delicate, women are incapable of sophisticated, abstract thought. Their minds are forever occupied with trivia; their conversation is largely gossip, itself construed as trivial.³³ Women should be allowed neither to engage in serious professional occupations nor to perform hard physical tasks; they should participate neither in the 'processions of learned men', the professions of hardheaded men, nor the sports of athletic men. Their role is to bear children and to maintain the 'home', man's haven in a heartless world. Stereotype-derived 'knowledge' about what women *are* is both prescriptively and descriptively hegemonic. Despite their obvious inadequacy, these stereotypes define what it is to be a 'good' woman, contribute to keeping women in their proper place, and provide reasons for condemning women as deviant who attempt to defy their prescriptions.

Despite their putatively universal scope, however, most of these standard stereotypes—like the Aristotelian claim—apply to the traits and conduct of the (heterosexual) mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives of the men of the dominant social groups. Working class, black, Hispanic, and other marginalized women are differently stereotyped, sometimes in terms of animality, closeness to nature, wanton sensuality. It is in the interests of the stereotypers not to rule out the participation of these women in hard physical work nor to discourage them from performing sexual services. The pieces of all of these stereotypes are movable across class and racial boundaries, according to the shifting requirements of the stereotyper. Many men want their wives to be all at once.

My point in focusing on stereotyped conceptions of woman's nature that masquerade as knowledge is not the purely empirical one that authorities and experts have just not looked carefully enough, that their observations are systematically skewed, whereas more careful looking would correct their errors and produce a more accurate

³¹Cynthia Eagle Russett, *Sexual Science: The Victorian Construction of Womanhood* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 10, 42.

³²As Katherine O'Donovan shows in *Sexual Divisions in Law* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1985), gender ideology, encapsulated in stereotypes, structures the public/private dichotomy and dictates the boundaries of each of its 'sides'. Law both creates and sustains the dichotomy in its decisions about what behavior is amenable to public intervention and what should remain unregulated. See my review of O'Donovan's book in *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 2, 1 (1987): 190–198.

³³Patricia Meyer Spacks reclaims gossip as a cultural form that has the "capacity to create and intensify human connection and to enlarge self-knowledge," in her *Gossip* (New York: Knopf, 1985), p. 19. She characterizes gossip as a "mode of exchange [which] involves the giving and receiving of more than information" (p. 21).

view of 'woman'. An empiricist analysis of this 'knowledge' cannot account for its persistence in the face of an accumulation of evidence that clearly discredits it. According to the empiricist model, a normal observer in normal observation conditions should be able to perceive correctly and hence to know. Such possibilities do appear to exist if a sufficiently simple example, like knowing that there is a book on the table, is treated as paradigmatic. In such examples, the acculturation process that makes observational claims possible has receded from view, creating the impression that no judgmental background is implicated in the making of a knowledge claim.

Stereotypes are at once invested with power from, and a source of power for, ideologies that underwrite a social-structural differential in the distribution of power and oppression, according to a sex/gender system that ensures the superiority of (certain) men and the inferiority (albeit variously) of women. In linking stereotypes with ideology, my intention is not to appeal to ideology conceived as a (Marxian) superstructure that generates after-the-fact conceptions to legitimate an economic (or other sociopolitical) arrangement. The linkage is more aptly conceived with an ideological structure like Antonio Gramsci's "common sense": an embedded, uncritical, mainly unconscious set of perceptions and understandings of the world which constitute a 'common' framework in a given era, culture, or social space. Gramsci allows the appropriateness of calling such an embedded philosophical orientation 'an ideology', so long as the word is used "in its highest sense of a conception of the world that is implicitly manifest in art, in law, in economic activity and in all manifestations of individual and collective life."³⁴ I use 'ideology' as a working concept to connote a set of beliefs, values, and representations that need to be explained with reference to the interests or position of some social group, a set of meanings in terms of which people live their sociocultural situation. Such meanings are implicated in the construction of subjectivity and the reproduction of power relations; in Michele Barrett's words, they "succeed insofar as [they] can produce acceptance of existing power structures as 'natural.'"³⁵ Ideological sociopolitical apparatuses, and the stereotyping practices that they produce, are intricately linked with power relations and interests that shape social realities so that they are accepted as naturally as, say, geological reality.

³⁴ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. and ed. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), pp. 322, 328.

³⁵ Michele Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: Verso, 1980), cited in Kramarae and Treichler, *Feminist Dictionary*, p. 206.

Neither the role of ideology nor the interests it sustains are always explicit or conscious. Hence its manifestations have to be uncovered and discovered. For the unmasking process, early second-wave feminists adopted the Marxism-derived term 'consciousness raising', to make the point that women's unconscious acquiescence in the structures of patriarchy amounted to a 'false consciousness' like that of the proletariat under capitalism. Yet Foucault sounds a cautionary note: he distrusts the term 'ideology', for "it always stands in virtual opposition to something else which is supposed to count as truth":³⁶ it presupposes the existence of a free, unconstrained place where the pure, unconditioned, and unmediated truth is available. For Foucault, there is no such place. Cognizant of the impossibility of dislocated argument, yet asserting the power of interrogation and refusal, Teresa de Lauretis advances a counterproposal: "The subject that I see emerging from current writings and debates within feminism is one that is at the same time inside and outside the ideology of gender, and conscious of being so, conscious of that twofold pull, of that division, that doubled vision."³⁷ That division opens a space for agency, for developing strategies of reconstruction and resistance.

From the fact that no unmediated, dislocated truths are available, it does not follow that no truths, values, or interests are better than others. Nor is the point that ideological positions and frameworks are pernicious; it is only that they require critique and demand accountability. Debate is not foreclosed in analyses of ideology, but reopened to address issues that are at once subtle and complex. Critique may have to proceed case by case, however. Science, as I argue in Chapter 4, may not be specifically sexist, even though it is commonly androcentric. Its androcentricity may inform and be informed by stereotypes of class and/or race, which also have to be uncovered and analyzed. Ideological commitments are differently manifested across domains of discourse, disciplines, and cognitive projects.³⁸

The omnipresence of stereotypes and ideology demonstrates the necessity of developing a critical, self-reflexive 'history' of beliefs and practices to understand the persistence of stereotype-informed beliefs that fly in the face of empirical evidence. Explanations that draw straightforward causal connections, in which beliefs are simply caused by the evidence and formed in a tabula-rasa-like open mind, are

³⁶ Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, p. 118.

³⁷ De Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender*, p. 10.

³⁸ I owe this point to Alison Wylie, "Gender Theory and the Archeological Record."