

WHAT IF DESCARTES HAD BEEN A WOMAN? AN EPISTEMOLOGY OF EMPATHIC PARTNERSHIP

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Abstract

An underlying assumption of much of public and academic discourse is that logic is a universal language transferable between humans, regardless of gender, race, religion, class, or culture. Conversely, personal experience is seen as simply that: personal. It may be a powerful way to illustrate a point or imbue it with passion, but it is not an argument in and of itself. Personal experience is particular, subjective, non-transferable, and *ineffective* due to its *affective-ness*. Yet our definitions of universal rationality have themselves been formed within particular contexts, primarily by Western males. Applying recent studies in the social sciences to a broader theory of knowledge, this paper will ask what androcratic assumptions males have brought into epistemology and what perspectives females have had to leave at the door? Specifically, is there a long-ignored partnership paradigm of female empathy (regardless of whether it is biologically or socially ingrained) that legitimates personal experience by allowing it to be transferable between humans? What might such a gylanic approach to knowledge yield for future ideologies and their corresponding social, political, and academic institutions?

Key words: Epistemology; Theories of Knowledge; Feminism; Empathy; Empathic Partnership; Descartes; Transferability; Partnership Epistemology

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It is common—in academia and daily life—to hear such statements as, “That might be your experience, but it is not mine. Personal experience is not an argument. You need to appeal to reason or science.” The underlying assumption is that reason is a universal language *transferable* between humans—regardless of gender, race, or culture—and

even perhaps transferable to non-humans. For example, the signals sent by the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) project to communicate with distant extraterrestrial life have consisted primarily of mathematical and scientific axioms written in binary code. Conversely, personal experience is seen as simply that: personal. It may be a powerful way to illustrate a point or imbue it with passion, but it is not an argument in and of itself. Personal experience is particular, subjective, non-transferable, and *ineffective* due to its *affective-ness*. Yet our definitions of universal rationality have themselves been forged within particular contexts, primarily by white, Western, wealthy, adult, males. This paper intends to question the male, androcratic element of that privileged definition, in line with Riane Eisler's belief that we need "a new cultural and economic analysis that no longer ignores the majority of humanity: women and children" (Eisler, 2019). The mention of children here is not entirely irrelevant to our female-focused study, for male children are often allowed to express feminine traits that they will later be prohibited from expressing as adult males.

Applying recent studies in the social sciences to a broader theory of knowledge, we will ask what assumptions males have brought into epistemology and what perspectives females have had to leave at the door? Specifically, is there a long-ignored female empathy—regardless of whether it is biologically or socially ingrained—that allows for personal experience to be transferable between humans? This is not to argue the much broader point that reason and personal experience are on par epistemically, but simply that transferability should not be considered the categorical distinction between them, and that a gylanic approach more mutually inclusive of female experiences would help foster this understanding. Note that this would not necessitate an essentialist view of femininity, for women may tend to be more empathetic for cultural rather than biological reasons and yet our epistemology may still remain lopsided in ignoring what we have come to culturally associate with women.

Western thought has primarily emphasized a Cartesian pursuit of "separation, autonomy, mastery, independence, and self-sufficiency," idealizing the "agentic ethic (self-protective, assertive, individualistic, pushing toward achievement) at the expense

of the communal ethic (being at one with other organisms, characterized by contact or union)” (Jordan, 1991, p. V). This makes sense because men tend to pursue “separation as it defines and empowers the self” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 156) and, as feminist authors have convincingly argued, there is a “masculine bias at the very heart of most academic disciplines, methodologies and theories” (Belenky, 1997, p. 6).

[If the human self is] conceived of as separate, alone, “in control,” personally achieving, and mastering nature, then relational ‘others’ may tend to be perceived as potential competitors, dangerous intruders, or objects to be used for the self’s enhancement. A system that defines the self as separate and hierarchically measurable is usually marked in Western cultures by power-based dominance patterns. In such systems, the self-boundary serves as protection from the impinging surround, and the need for connection with, relatedness to, and contact with others is subjugated to the need to protect the separate self. Abstract logic is viewed as superior to more “connected knowing”. Safety in power-based society seems to demand solid boundaries; self-disclosure is generally carefully monitored lest knowledge about the inner experience be used against one. As caricatured in this way, this actually prescribes much of the socialization of Western males. (Jordan, 1997, p. 16-17).

While girls, in preparation for motherhood, have traditionally been encouraged to be emotionally expressive and attentive to the needs of others, boys have instead traditionally been socialized to be “good soldiers” or “effective competitors in a largely alienated work world” where deep interpersonal connection is perceived as weakness (Jordan, 1991, p. 31). Furthermore, while both boys and girls are encouraged to identify with their same-gender parent, boy’s identification—due to a greater prevalence of physically and/or emotionally absent fathers—tends to be more abstract and generalized, focusing on an idealized male role as opposed to an interpersonal relationship (Jordan, 1991). These examples—a few among many—contribute to a definition of masculinity that is “emptied of the dress of the self” (Belenky, 1997, p. 215), forcing reality onto a procrustean bed and hacking off subjectivity, emotion, and

interpersonal relating and knowing. This definition has enabled academia to define thinking itself as abstract, impersonal, and objective, as epitomized by the Cartesian mind that is allegedly impervious to all outside influence (Descartes, 1993). Note that Descartes is enlisted in the title of this paper not as our primary interlocutor, but for rhetorical purposes as the representative figurehead and fount for a much broader swath of androcratic philosophy that dominates Western thought to this day. Nowhere is the pattern of using male experience to define the human experience seen more clearly than in models of intellectual development. The mental processes that are involved in considering the abstract and the impersonal have been labelled ‘thinking’ and are attributed primarily to men, while those that deal with the personal and interpersonal fall under the rubric of ‘emotions’ and are largely relegated to women (Belenky, 1997).

As Eisler writes in *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future*,

[U]nder the protective mantle of “objectivity” and “field-independence,” science has often negated as “unscientific” and “subjective” the caring concerns considered overly feminine by the traditional view. Thus, science has until now generally excluded women as scientists and focused its study almost entirely on men. It has also excluded what we may call “caring knowledge” [that] we now urgently need to select those human forms that are “in cooperation with evolution, rather than those that are antisurvival or antievolutionary. (Eisler, 1987, p. 283).

Women who succeed in such a phallogentric climate often have to forfeit part of themselves; that is, they have to think, behave, and become like men. This is epitomized in the clichéd image of the successful businesswoman forcing herself not to cry, or girls’ schools modelling themselves after men’s institutions to provide an education ‘equivalent to a man’s.’ Yet the impersonal ‘thinking thing’ of the Western self does not generally seem to fit women’s experience. For many women, true knowledge does not only “grow out of their academic work but in relationship with friends and teachers, life crises, and community involvement” (Belenky, 1997, p. 4).

Whereas men have tended to understand themselves and the world in light of impersonal separation and objectivity, women often find their identity, purpose, and truth “in the context of human relationship” (Jordan, 1991, p. 17). While men have traditionally been conditioned to see the psychological boundaries between themselves and others as beneficial to success and the pursuit of impersonal facts, women often climb over the psychological walls and freely transfer their personal experiences back and forth. In other words, women often seem to have the epistemological gift of empathy.

Empathy means “being with the truth of the other person's experience in all of its aspects” (Jordan, 1997, p. 27). It is distinguished from sympathy, in that it does not merely comprehend the other from the outside, but enters into their emotions, experiences, and psychological states, temporarily making them one's own. Empathy is not an exclusively female experience; both male and female infants, for example, demonstrate distress when hearing another infant's wail (Jordan, 1997). While researchers are still wrestling with the complex relationship of nature and nurture in the development of empathy, it is clear that at some point the empathic instinct is suppressed in males but fostered in females (Matlin, 1987). Determining the precise nature of this point—that is, whether it fits better into an essentialist or social constructivist narrative—is unnecessary for our argument here. Studies show that adult women tend to be more empathetic (Jordan, 1991), while adult men tend to consciously deny their lingering empathic instincts (Matlin, 1987), dismissing personal experience as non-transferable, emotional, feminine, or even ‘silly’. Yet it is precisely this ‘feminine’ quality that is so epistemologically advantageous. Mutual empathy blurs the “cognitive and affective” lines “between subject and object, knower and known” (Jordan, 1997, p. 15-16), allowing one's subjective experiences to be transferred to another. Empathy connects one not just to the words of another person—which can be easily affirmed or denied—but to the other person themselves, experiencing their world through perceiving their muscle movements, posture, expressed emotions, eye contact, and/or tone of voice (Riess, 2013). In other words, empathy recasts the ‘other’ as a

partner to have, to hold, and to know from within, instead of an enemy to be *dominated* or *dissected* from without.

Yet empathy assists not only in affective but also in cognitive transfer. For example, magicians and fortune tellers are often able to use empathy to intuit knowledge about their subjects (Trommater, 2022; Taylor, 2022), perceiving subtle emotional reactions to ascertain unusually specific details, such as what number the subject is thinking of, the name of their dead cousin, or other deeply held secrets. For a more academic example, Theresa Wiseman’s seminal study (2007) found that nurses who tested higher on a measure of empathy demonstrated increased “insight into the ways in which their patients experienced and coped with illness...facilitating problem solving and care planning...and [providing] understanding of the patient’s values and beliefs, needs and priorities...” (p. 62-67). Empathy may enable perspective-taking, while delaying hasty generalizations and premature judgment. For example, a health practitioner who assigns diagnoses based primarily on a rational analysis of statistical probability might dismiss the unique extent of a patient’s sufferings—lumping them into a broad category that may technically fit on paper but not in reality—while a more empathetic practitioner might intuit through the patient’s subtextual voice and mannerisms that something more severe and uncommon is at work.

In Wiseman’s concept study, she argued that 40 out of 53 articles on the topic maintained that empathy actually added to the subjects’ “objectivity,” for it requires setting aside one’s own framework to enter into “another person’s thoughts and feelings and meanings. One who empathizes sustains their objectivity and separate feelings even when confronted with disturbing psychological material” (Wiseman, 1996, p. 1163). Whereas reason has traditionally been seen as objective in impersonally critiquing others, empathy re-envision objectivity as temporarily setting aside one’s ego and assumptions in order to enter into the subjectivity of the other. Thus, empathy may enable one to transfer and gather a wealth of perspectives—a plurality of eyes—beyond the grasp of any individual lifetime, intimately connecting to those with different social, cultural, intellectual, or religious backgrounds. Thus, according to

Wiseman, men often seem to build fortresses around the self, while women scale the walls in the dark of night, returning—like spies with secret knowledge—in the morning.

Although the fact that women may have unique insights into the world should be enough to initiate a more mutual and gylanic re-evaluation of epistemology, many assume that empathy has to first answer the objections of androcratic reason. A common objection is that emotion gets in the way of empathic transfer, clouding one's judgment and ability to objectively pass on one's personal experience to another. But emotion is often precisely what one wishes to pass on. The goal of empathic transfer is not to take personal experience and repackage it in binary code, but to experience another's affective life from within their perspective, even if one cannot re-articulate in it 'rational' words. Thus, emotion does not necessarily get in the way of empathic transfer but is often the very thing that is being transferred. Furthermore, the assumption is that emotion is untamable, while reason (the alleged 'gold standard' of universal transferability) blinds no one. Yet reason—in immature heads—can be blinding and destructive, while emotion—in mature hearts—can be an incredible force for clarity, empathic insight, and interpersonal communication. Instead of reason versus emotion, perhaps it would be better for society to think in terms of healthiness: healthy emotion versus non-healthy emotion, healthy reasoning versus non-healthy reasoning.

Another common objection of androcratic reasoning is that personal experience is particular (for example, one person enjoys Bach, while another likes Bieber), and thus is not transferable in the absolute way reason or science is (for example, two plus two equals four, no matter who you are). Yet academia is already becoming increasingly aware of how one's context and personal experiences actually mold one's view of reason, time, space, logic, and causality. For example, Thomas Kuhn argued that even science does not proceed primarily through the objective accumulation of impersonal facts, but through revolutions—paradigm shifts—in the way humans subjectively view those facts (Kuhn, 1966). Perhaps Kuhn's most lasting contribution was the recognition that one cannot use the rationality of one's own worldview to build steps to an incommensurable paradigm. Rather, one must empathically enter into the circle of the

other in order to understand the other from within their world: their assumptions, values, methodologies, and definitions. Though a comprehensive summary of this ‘postmodern’ shift is beyond this paper’s scope, it suffices to say that empathic transfer is not limited to the particular, but is perhaps the very means by which one goes beyond one’s particular self, entering into the diverse voices, reasons, and experiences of others.

Though by no means exhaustive, these preliminary considerations suggest we may need to explore a renewed paradigm of what I am calling ‘partnership epistemology.’ The world is not full of ‘others’ to be dominated and dissected from without, but partners to be empathically known from within. A gylanic reconsideration of knowledge in light of this experience of empathic transfer is long overdue in our world, our culture, our schools, our relationships, and even our men. Men can still get in touch with the side of themselves that once empathically picked up on the distress cries of other babies, before they ventured into the macho world beyond the hospital and were shaped by the very experiences to which they are allegedly impervious. In breaking down the impersonal walls between the *self* and the *other*, empathy might just break down the fences between genders, races, cultures, and even epistemologies, allowing us to transfer our personal experiences, bringing back fruit from across the border of the other. We can choose to put down the hyper-masculinized ‘blade’ of intellectual combat and drop the scalpel of dissecting reason, instead extending a welcoming, womb-shaped, ‘chalice’ of table-fellowship and conversation.

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