

Keeping a Grip on the Grid: A Response to Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon

Doret J. de Ruyter
Free University, Amsterdam

In her paper "Navigating Epistemological Territories," Barbara Thayer-Bacon proposes an alternative to traditional epistemology, namely a social feminist epistemology, that is characterized as a relational epistemology. In my reaction, I first want to comment on her description of traditional epistemology and secondly I want to pose some questions about her proposal.

In the first part of her paper, Thayer-Bacon describes the assumptions of traditional epistemology. She starts with a rather general definition. "Epistemology looks at questions about the justification of beliefs, not at how we come to believe certain things." Though her own epistemology explicitly embraces the last question, questions about the justification of beliefs are central in her paper and thus, by this general definition, she should consider herself a traditional epistemologist as well.

Later on she describes several characteristics of traditional epistemology that make it doubtful whether her adjective "traditional" is adequate. For instance, she suggests that traditional epistemology does not address questions on the context of discovery. Empiricism however does examine that question. Also her claim that in traditional epistemology feeling, emotions and intuitions have been viewed as detrimental does not seem correct, since for instance philosophical theories like phenomenology and intuitionism have based their epistemic claims on precisely those qualities. And Hume for instance has founded his morality on moral sentiments. For Thayer-Bacon the most important characteristic of traditional epistemology seems to be that it claims absoluteness. But this is also inadequate, since for centuries skepticism and other varieties of relativism are also thought to be part of epistemology, but those cannot be described as absolute conceptions of epistemology. Thus her characterization of traditional epistemology seems mistaken. Perhaps, following Burbules¹ and Harding,² it is the Enlightenment conception of epistemology that she has in mind. This first comment is not the most important one to make and some might think it trivial. But since Thayer-Bacon dedicates most of her paper to traditional epistemology as well as to its objections and corrections, I think she could have been more precise.

Regarding Thayer-Bacon's social feminist epistemology I would like to raise two questions I consider important and will end with a remark about grids.

The first question concerns the status of her epistemology. It is not clear to me whether Thayer-Bacon thinks her epistemology to be *fallibilist* or *relativist*. "*Fallibilist*" means "a degree of flexibility can be built into the notion of rationality in terms of how conclusions might be reached. Such conclusions must nevertheless be subject to evaluation through some process of testing or assessment that is meant to show that not all interpretations or applications of the principles are equally valid."³ Thus, although a sort of pluralism is possible within a fallibilistic view, all opinions can be subjected to methodologically neutral reasoning by means of which it is possible to decide rationally whether opinions from dissimilar frameworks are right or wrong. "*Relativism*" implies that it is only possible to decide on the truth or falseness of knowledge from within a certain framework and denies the possibility of neutral criteria to decide on the validity of knowledge claims between different frameworks. Here is no objective knowledge independent from the knower.

Thayer-Bacon's own relativistic position is not an extreme, subjective view. As a *qualified* relativist she grounds her claims "in experiences and practice, in the efficacy of dialogical negotiation and action." The criteria used to evaluate judgments can be thought of as the best, though a qualified relativist acknowledges that these could be limited, so she could be wrong.

Is her epistemology either fallibilist or relativist? On the one hand she argues that if one embraces fallibilism, in the end one must embrace relativism.⁴ On the other hand, however, certain statements in her paper make me doubt whether her epistemological claims are not indeed fallibilist and not relative.

I want to illustrate my confusion with the following three points:

Thayer-Bacon writes that she would say "I am right, qualified by a socially constructed view of knowledge, so I know I could be wrong" in opposition to Siegel who would say "I am right, absolutely, until proven wrong." In stating that she could be wrong she seems to imply that she has certain criteria for this judgment. And is she in this not suggesting there are neutral criteria to which one can refer for deciding one is right or wrong?

She offers, I believe, two criteria for her feminist epistemology. This epistemology is relational, but not unqualified. Knowledge should be developed in social relationships of a certain quality; the people engaged should have the opportunity to express their ideas. Secondly, knowledge is useful if it contributes to practical reconsideration in which women's interests are not subordinated to those of men. Are these criteria relative? As meta-criteria, are they really only valid for and within a specific feminist epistemology? If Thayer-Bacon thinks they are, what would be the consequence for her political aims regarding the position of women? By claiming them to be relative she, at the same time, frustrates these aims.⁵ For, her theory could not then be prescriptive outside the feminist framework.

Thayer-Bacon thinks her epistemology is better, though not the best, truest or most original, because it is more open and inclusive "as it attempts to be self-conscious, and reflective, adjustable and adaptable." By making this claim she appeals to criteria she thinks to be true or valid. And of course she is right by stating these to be criteria epistemology, on her opinion, must meet. But does not that imply that an implicit claim that these criteria are not relative? How else could she defend her epistemology to be better than other epistemologies that do not meet these criteria?

The second important issue concerns ideological features. Thayer-Bacon writes that she hopes that her epistemology is less open to ideological abuse than traditional epistemologies. If she were to defend a relational epistemology, that might be right, but by offering a more specific feminine epistemology her hopes must evaporate. Since this epistemology has a necessarily distinct ideological preference, it is like any other ideologically colored theory, open to abuse. Her epistemology can be accused of being woman-centric. This is due to her criterion of the usefulness of knowledge, one that dictates knowledge should contribute to a practical reconsideration of the world in which women's interests are not subordinate to those of men. But, why is the usefulness of knowledge attached to the position of women? Why this particular group? Why should not knowledge be useful to every human being? Thayer-Bacon's answer to the last question is that it should be useful to anyone. She states that "women and men from different ethnic backgrounds and ways of life should find this theory applies to them." This could certainly be right for her relational epistemology, but is questionable for her feminist epistemology.

In relation to this point I must say that I do not understand the necessity of a particular feminist epistemology. By formulating an epistemology that is attached to the position of women, Thayer-Bacon renders her view provincial which I consider very problematic. This provincialism allows that every group define its own epistemology. So it would be perfectly possible to end up having, for instance, male, female, Christian, Muslim, African or European epistemologies. I would be more enthusiastic about her feminist proposal if Thayer-Bacon had presented her proposal as an internal

venture, thus as an attempt to diminish possible existing male biases in epistemology, instead of defining an alternative epistemology. For I do think it is necessary that epistemology be sensitive to its own possible biases, that it continually reflect upon the criteria considered best in order to find better ones.

Thayer-Bacon's opposition to absolutism makes her view susceptible to a politically, ethically and educationally impotent relativism, which can be dangerous. In morality I do think it is right to teach children that battering people because of their gender, race or color is *absolutely* wrong. And regarding the criteria or rules of reason and rationality, I would teach children that there are neutral criteria with which it is possible to evaluate claims of reason and which their own reasoning must meet. For instance, if Neo-Nazis claim that National Socialism is true democracy, I want children to be able to say that that statement is wrong, that it is a persuasive definition which does not meet the right standard of reasoning.

The last question I want to raise concerns Thayer-Bacon's claim to remain true to the fact that epistemological theories are grids people place upon the world, that they are stories people make up. I agree with her that the places the grids are put on the world are artificial. But this does not imply that the agreement made on the position of the specific longitude and latitude lines are arbitrary. For Flew, who uses lines for another example: "There may also be, and again there often are, good reasons why the line to be drawn should be drawn through this particular point rather than that, or at least good reasons why it should be drawn through one of the points of this particular sort rather than through any of the rest."⁶ In making an agreement we should give the best reasons we have. This is not to claim that we will never have better reasons, but as we have them now, they are the best and can be claimed as justified. Thus, grids, while socially constructed, are not arbitrary. In navigating epistemological territories, I keep a firm grip on the grid as the best and most justified we have, until proven better.

1. Nicholas Burbules, "Two Perspectives on Reason as Educational Aim: The Virtues of Reasonableness," in *Philosophy of Education 1991*, ed. M. Buchmann and R. E. Floden (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992).

2. Sandra Harding, "Feminism, Science and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed L.J. Nicholson (New York/London: Routledge, 1990).

3. Burbules, "Two Perspectives on Reason as Educational Aim."

4. For a fallible though not relative position, see Harvey Siegel, "Two Perspectives On Reason as an Educational Aim: The Rationality of Reasonableness," in, *Philosophy of Education 1991.*, ed. M. Buchmann and R. E. Floden (Normal, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992).

5. See for a debate on this within feminist epistemology: "Part I: Feminism As Against Epistemology?" in *Feminism/Postmodernism.*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York/London: Routledge, 1990).

6. Antony Flew, *Thinking about Thinking* (London: Flamingo, 1985), 106.