

"The Context Distinction: controversies over feminist philosophy of science"

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Abstract

The “context of discovery” and “context of justification” distinction has been used by Noretta Koertge, Elizabeth Anderson, Richmond Campbell, and Lynn Hankinson Nelson in debates over the legitimacy of feminist approaches to philosophy of science. Koertge uses the context distinction to argue against the possibility of gender, race, class and other social factors being epistemically relevant to knowledge formation. She contends that social factors belong in only the “context of discovery,” where research questions are chosen and pursued. She argues that such factors should be excluded from the “context of justification,” in which evidence for scientific claims is evaluated, to ensure against bias and political distortion. Since the basic assumptions of feminist epistemology violate this context distinction, Koertge argues that the approach of feminist epistemology is misguided. Elisabeth Anderson and Lynn Hankinson Nelson, among others, defend feminist epistemology against these charges.

In this paper, I evaluate their defenses and show that in these debates the use of the context distinction is deeply ambiguous and so masks underlying disagreements about when and why philosophers should look to scientific practice and about the aims of philosophy of science more generally. Traditionally, distinctions have been used to dissolve puzzles by showing how the puzzles reduce to shared assumptions, or they have been used to open up a debate to allow for further possibilities. However, in this case, Koertge uses the context distinction to close down the conversation by barring certain approaches, thereby obscuring points of true disagreement about the nature of justification. Nonetheless, Koertge raises important questions that have been too quickly set aside by Anderson and Nelson. I argue that the use of the context distinction masks underlying debates about naturalism and the nature of justification.

These issues about what constitutes justification are not essentially feminist, nor do they necessarily turn on views of values and ideology, or Koertge’s worries about biased inquiry. Rather, they depend on determining what method we should use to develop an account of justification: Establish a priori meta-principles, or look in part to scientific practice? The distinction also masks underlying disagreement about the nature of justification: Will we find one universal account of justification (such as falsificationism), or will different episodes in science require unique accounts of how evidence supports a scientific claim? Examining these debates can be fruitful for feminist epistemologists; a disentangling of these ambiguities highlights important concerns that need to be met as those in science studies strive to map how social factors get legitimately incorporated into the evaluation of knowledge claims.

Keywords: context of discovery, context of justification, context distinction

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