This paper takes up the recent epistemological turn in feminist theory and some of the problems thereby raised. The fundamental aim of feminist theories in general is to analyze (and change) gender relations. It may be argued that the term 'epistemology' in feminist discourse should not be defined too narrowly. For the most part it is a comprehensive concept that refers to various aspects of both knowledge claims and grounds for knowledge in not only scientific, but also ethical, moral, and political contexts. The discussion in this paper, however, will concentrate mainly on epistemological questions as they relate to science.

When feminist epistemologies are proposed, they not only set out to legitimize a new field of inquiry; often they also question the entire 'scientific project' and its underlying metaphysics. While feminist critical theory has a lot in common with other radical oppositions to traditional philosophy of science, it differs in its strong emphasis on epistemological concerns. The term 'feminist epistemology' calls upon us to replace a male-centred epistemology with a female/feminist-centred one. The point is that traditional science and philosophies of science are considered to be male-biased, while a science grounded in a feminist epistemology is regarded as potentially non-biased.

Feminist epistemologies have been usefully examined by proponents like Sandra Harding (Harding & Hintikka (eds.) 1983; Harding 1986, 1987). They have been presented as a basis for both a radical critique of traditional philosophy of science and as a logical and coherent alternative. I shall argue that both of these claims are beset with immense difficulties; they somehow create more problems than they solve. My point of departure in discussing these issues is the theory of science, especially that branch of it that focuses on the relationships and interaction between social and cognitive aspects (or factors) in science and research.

First of all I want to emphasize that, in my view, the recent epistemological turn in feminist theory tends to over-estimate metatheoretical aspects; it tends to do so both when criticizing existing science and in its proclamation of a science grounded in a feminist epistemology. On both counts there is a tendency to misconstrue science as an activity dominated by philosophical conflicts and obligations. Such one-sided epistemology-centred philosophy of science has been questioned by, among others, Richard Rorty (1980) and Rom Harré (1986). This development, though an unintended effect of feminist critiques of science, is nevertheless a possible outcome.

Although there are, of course, many important differences between traditional epistemological orientations and the feminist discussion, the exaggerated focus on epistemology may lead to untenable conclusions, particularly when it comes to the significance of metatheoretical aspects in science. One consequence is that important distinctions between cognitive and social factors tend to collapse.

My main concern in this paper is with feminist epistemologies. I have found that many female, and of course feminist, scientists and theorists discuss issues related to the theory of science. Many feminists have naturally been working as scientists or philosophers without reflecting on or criticizing the basic assumptions of their disciplines, and certainly there has always been theoretical discussion within feminism, sometimes leading to contradictions in the women's movement. The recent philosophical turn, however, has to a certain extent introduced a new kind of interest in feminist philosophy, which is sometimes only rather distantly connected to political feminism.

Feminist epistemologies are constructed to justify feminist scientific and philosophical activity and to provide a new basis for the new kind of feminism; a process that is fraught with its own special difficulties. Some of the more obvious differences between women, regarding interests, positions, and tasks in society, which were the source of political contradictions within the women's movement, now tend to collapse in women's academic studies, under the notion of one overarching common knowledge-base, founded on gender.

In this paper I shall be concerned with some of the problems confronting the feminist epistemological project. They may be formulated in many different ways, but there are at least three main tensions and oppositions that appear to be most influential and relevant to the present discussion. These are:

1. The tension between objectivism and relativism.
2. The problem with the social dimension in men's and women's thinking.
3. The opposition between different interpretations of the concept of 'difference'.

These three related issues are difficult to settle in feminist discourse, and each of them tends to create new problems. In what follows I shall deal with each of the issues under a separate heading.

Objectivism and relativism

There are many more or less sophisticated definitions of these two terms, but I find that Richard Bernstein has given a valuable one in his book Beyond Objectivism and Relativism (1984). He writes:

By 'objectivism', I mean the basic conviction that there is or must be some permanent, ahistorical matrix or framework to which we can ultimately appeal in determining the nature of rationality, knowledge, truth, reality, goodness or rightness...

In its strongest form, relativism is the basic conviction
that when we turn to the examination of those concepts that philosophers have taken to be the most fundamental, we are forced to recognize that in the final analysis all such concepts must be understood as relative to a specific conceptual scheme, theoretical framework, paradigm, form of life, society, or culture... (op. cit., pp. 4-5).

Under objectivists Bernstein means to include not only the rationalists and empiricists, but also foundationalists and essentialists. Relativism, on the other hand, is defined as the dialectical antithesis of objectivism. It may be argued that this definition is too inclusive as far as objectivism is concerned, and that it misses some of the central aspects of relativism. Also, it might be argued that the complete counterposition of objectivism and relativism belongs to a traditional, Enlightenment discourse, and has no validity outside this discourse. Most oppositions have a common logic underlying their polarity, which makes it possible for them to define each other negatively. For my purposes, however, this counterposition of two opposing trends has the advantage that it alerts us to some of the incompatible tendencies in feminist epistemologies.

The problem may briefly be described in the following way: If existing, 'traditional' knowledge is considered false, and not only inadequate because of its one-sidedness, there must be possibilities for a true(r) knowledge. Also, there should be plausible and tenable ways of explaining why traditional knowledge is male-biased, while feminist knowledge is not. If both kinds of knowledge, the 'male' and the 'female' (or feminist), are considered biased, we are faced with a kind of relativism entailing that different views are equally (either) true (or false). Some feminist theorists tend to subscribe to this view, but I would not call it representative, at least not among feminist philosophers. Unless one supposes that male-biased theories somehow misdescribe reality and misrepresent how things are, it is difficult to make sense of much of feminist science criticism. This assumption, however, tends to lead to some kind of objectivism: but objectivism is at the same time associated with a masculine epistemology, which feminism sets out to oppose. Thus we land in the difficult situation of having to defend a kind of 'feminist objectivism', while rejecting all other forms of objectivist claims. Consequently, feminist epistemologists need very strong and convincing arguments. They will have to answer some complicated questions about why women and/or feminists have correct versions of how things really are, and why they are the only ones who enjoy this privileged position.

These problems place feminists in the same boat as some Marxist standpoint theories, for example the one outlined by George Lukacs in which the proletarian class-standpoint is designated as cognitively privileged. Another variant is found in Karl Mannheim's theses concerning so-called 'free-floating intellectuals'. The common point of departure in privileged-position views is that social position in society is the ultimate guarantee in truth-finding procedures or practices.

Now, such a theory of knowledge is no doubt a non-relativist one, in as far as it does not support the view that there are many equally true conceptions of reality. Using Bernstein's definition, we can call it an objectivist view - one which holds on to a conviction concerning some kind of foundations for knowledge. The feminist version of objectivism is referred to as 'feminist standpoint epistemology'. It is founded on the claim that women have a cognitively privileged position in society, so that their knowledge is superior to men's knowledge. This privileged position is taken to be rooted in or generated by women's experiences, defined in a broad sense.

The contours of feminist epistemologies had hardly acquired a distinct identity, when they were challenged by postmodernist/anti-foundationalist thinking. Even though this postmodern trend is far from unitary and is wide-ranging in its opposition to modernity, some of its critical assumptions and insights are particularly significant when viewed from a feminist perspective. In brief, its critical position is really a radical one, because it challenges what lies at the root of the entire Enlightenment project, viz. the very idea of a foundation for knowledge.

Anti-foundationalism rejects all of the dichotomies on which Enlightenment epistemology rests, including subject/object, rational/irrational, reason/emotion, and language/reality. It also rejects the presuppositions involved in these dichotomies - the ideas of a coherent, unified self, a rationalist and individualist model of knowing and the possibilities of a metalanguage. The knowing 'subject' is taken to be always heterogeneous and socially constructed, so all kinds of essentialism are opposed.

What follows from these objections to the Enlightenment ideas is, among other things, that 'truth' is always plural and situated and that epistemology itself has to be questioned. All thought is biased and there exists no position from which a correct view, in an absolute sense, may be grounded. The term 'feminist epistemology' is itself misleading from an anti-foundationalist point of view. Postmodernist challenges, when taken seriously, undermine the feminist epistemological project, unless the idea of a new cognitively privileged position can be defended. In my reading of the feminist standpoint epistemology, the crucial issue in determining its plausibility is to what extent it is tenable to uphold women's experience as a legitimation of a grounding for knowledge. To examine that issue, I will now turn to the second of the above-mentioned tensions in feminist epistemology.

The problem with the social dimension in men's and women's thinking

Much of the feminist critique of traditional science and its philosophy presupposes that modern epistemology results from a male way of knowing, which of course in its turn as-
It arguings for a return to a focus on femaleness. Most feminists philosophers expresses a masculine way of thinking and re-acting upon the world (Merchant 1980, Keller 1985). Some feminists, such as Mary Daly (1979) or Dale Spender (1980), together with most of the French feminist deconstructivists, have asserted that theory as well as language is male-biased and completely permeated with masculinity. They are identifying Enlightenment rationalism as a distinctly male/masculine mode of thought. Closely related to this view is a concept of the essential female. Daly is but one example of feminists arguing for a return to a focus on femaleness. Most feminists involved in the epistemological turn seem to support this view in one way or another, and thus they believe that the fundamental dichotomies of Enlightenment thought are rooted in the male/female dichotomy. In my opinion, there are several problems with this view. First of all, it is far too inclusive — it gives no room to distinguish masculine aspects in thinking or in the products of thought, from aspects not genderized at all. It tends to see every idea (in, for example, philosophy or meta-theory) about everything as male-biased, as if the hegemony of dominant conceptions were complete. Patriarchy appears free of conflicts and contradictions, totally dominated by a unified masculinity. According to Toril Moi (1985) this view expresses a central paradox in feminism: "given that there is no space outside patriarchy from which women can speak, how do we explain the existence of a feminist, anti-patriarchal discourse at all?" (p. 81). Closely related to this is the fact that rationalism may be (and has been) questioned and criticized without any references to gender. It seems to be of the utmost importance then to define what masculinity entails and also what it excludes. Why is it masculine at all to reason in a rational way? And how do women reason, or don't they?

Secondly, the assumptions cited rely too heavily on popular views of typical male and female behaviour; stereotyped versions of how we are supposed to act and think are reflected in these stances. Such views easily fall into mystifications about male rationality and female intuition, masculine clear thinking as opposed to feminine emotional thinking, without paying attention to the possibility of a dialectical interaction within the two sexes between the two principles — the masculine and the feminine.

I agree with Judith Grant (1987), who suggests that feminists, in their eagerness to oppose and criticize male-biased reasoning, seem to have been too hasty in proposing the idea of a special women's knowing from experience. For my part, I consider the basic idea as acceptable, if it were extended to all kinds of experience and knowing, not only women's. If we recognize all thinking as social, the assumption would cease to be problematic. In that case it should be evident that, as concepts, male/femaleness are socially and historically constructed categories and hence variable; also it becomes clear how it is hard to settle, once and for all, exactly what is covered by each concept.

It is only when the gender categories are used to distinguish between male and female reasoning that I find the claim suspect and doubtful. The failure to realize that both men and women 'use', so to speak, their experiences when thinking about reality and constructing theories carries with it a tendency to lean too heavily on a traditional and individualistic epistemology. At least it seems to be with such underpinnings that male reason is opposed to female experience, male 'culture' to female 'nature', and women's knowing considered to be different from men's.

The premise on which the argument rests, then, if a tenable one, postulates radically different experiences between men and women, and very similar and gender-specific experiences within the two sexes. The difficulty is, first of all, that it is problematic to define the communality in all women's and men's experiences. As far as women are concerned, feminists have put forward various proposals; among them gender-identity based on psychological development (Chodorow 1978), mothering (Ruddick 1980), women's caring work (Rose 1983), and women's subordinate social position (Hartsock 1983). The problem with all of these proposals is that the experiences referred to are not shared by all women; even if they did, they are always inserted in different social relations and not all women would necessarily live through the touchstone experiences in the same ways. Furthermore, experiences are always interpreted differently in different social contexts; historical epochs, class positions, and so on.

Ontologically it seems to be plausible to argue that there exists a shared material world which is part of experience. But if so, the material world is not itself experienced, nor directly given. Rather, it is mediated, verbalized and interpreted in socially constituted forms.

A second remark I find important to make concerns female/feminist-interpreted experience, and its incorporation in science as a social institution. In actual practice, women and the way they interpret their experiences is not contextually independent. Interpretation is influenced, confronted and questioned by other — often rival or competing — ideologies and interpretations, so that the theorized experience loses something of its 'originality'. Postmodernism provides a good example of how influential and challenging ideas may clash with a female self-image; other trends naturally provide similar challenges. Not only ideas, but also experiences get changed within a new context, which is one of the reasons why there tends to be a gap between academic and political feminist discourse. Lynne Segal (1987) discusses the increasing distance between those feminists engaged in various campaigning activities and those engaged in intellectual work, in Great Britain in the 1970s. Academic feminism, in her view, turned out to be too abstract, while on the other hand activist strands of feminism supported an extreme anti-theoreticistism; the result was antagonisms and conflicts (pp. 51-55).

The many difficulties of conceptualizing the meaning of the term 'experience', and the problems with defining both the categories male and female, have been recognized in recent feminist epistemological discussions. It has been admitted for instance that there are many women's experiences and that therefore it is possible to maintain that, epistemologically, lesbian women, black women, working-class women, Third World women and so forth, all have different and
group-specific knowledge. A problem for a feminist epistemology based on experience, then, is that the recognition of differences seems to require that we postulate different groups of interests. 'Pluralism' may appear to solve problems within feminism, but this does not necessarily mean that the position of feminism is epistemologically strengthened vis-à-vis other theories. My main concern in this respect is where to draw the line? Why not add even further categories, such as young women, old women, married or unmarried women, women with or without children, well-educated, professional women, and so on...? This multiplication of groups and specific interests I think shows that one somehow ends up in extreme subjectivism. On the other hand, if women are not thought of as having some epistemological communality, what is the point of trying to distinguish women's thinking from men's, since it does not add anything that is epistemologically interesting?

Given all this, how do we then ground a feminist epistemology? I do not think there is any feasible way of doing this. Taken to its extreme, the privileging of multiple experiences leads to a highly relativist view of knowledge and thus turns out to be a counter-argument that mitigates against the standpoint position. This is even more apparent in the third tension in feminist theory, to which I now turn.

The opposition between different interpretations of the concept of 'difference'

As already suggested, the conceptualizing of differences has recently become more complicated in feminist discourse. Not long ago 'difference' was mainly related to differences between the two basic categories – men and women; these categories themselves were seen as relatively unproblematic. The new politics, however, taking into account the differences within these categories, is now challenging conventional feminist claims. It is clear that various qualifications have to be made if the concept of 'difference' is to be used in a meaningful way in the present context. I am certainly aware also of the difficulties of just transforming it to feminist thinking.

The term 'difference' stems from the 'poststructuralist' philosopher Jacques Derrida, and it is central to the discussion of many theorists today. In the contexts of feminist theory the term has emerged together with the oppositional trends that I have already outlined, flowing from the postmodernists and anti-foundationalists (Flax 1987, Moi 1985, Rose 1986, Sawicki 1986, Scott 1988, Young 1986).

Most influential as far as feminist discourse is concerned is that the apprehension of difference within women is a project that cuts across the idea of a common feminist experience. One of the major achievements of the poststructuralist analysis of difference has been to criticize and deconstruct the 'unified subject', i.e. Enlightenment-man, present to him/herself, and capable of understanding other persons. According to Young (1986) this is what Derrida calls a metaphysics of presence and Adorno the logic of identity; a metaphysics that represses or denies difference (p. 1).

Now, when feminists make use of the poststructuralist conception of 'difference', they are in fact not just integrating the concept itself. What emerges is a new way of doing philosophy, which has as one of its basic tenets the rejection of a logic of identity. Many feminists seem to refer to multiple subjects that would be interpreted identically in an ideal situation. We find a gap, then, between the understanding of 'difference' as a term denoting many different realities, and looking at it as the mainstay for the anti-thesis to unified, present and limited entities. Only in the former case it is useful and valuable for defending the standpoint epistemology, taking the multiplicity of feminist experiences and 'realities' as a possible domain for grounding. 'Difference' in a poststructuralist sense, however, dissolves the unified subject wherever it is constructed; thus it radically undermines the possibility of defining any bases at all for the epistemological turn in feminist theory.

The problem concerning feminist uses of postmodern influences is further aggravated by the fact that, while there is no unique way in which one might conceptualize gender differences, at least not in any stable and interesting sense, at the same time women's oppression is not purely ideological or discursive. The postmodern turn to language itself as the determining factor, not only expressing but constructing consciousness, does not provide an adequate and sufficient account of power relations and dominating forces. There certainly are some important links between poststructuralism and feminism that need further elaboration, but they are not in favour of epistemology.

Conclusions

I have given a critical account of the attempts to construct a feminist epistemology, identifying three main tensions in feminist theorizing. It has been argued that none of the problems may be solved at the theoretical level. The tension between objectivism and relativism is inherent in the feminist standpoint epistemology and cannot be overcome. Either there is a feminist objectivist standpoint, grounded in a women's position in society, or there is no such standpoint. If it is recognized that there are many various, and sometimes necessarily contradictory, 'women's standpoints', there is no possible way of deciding which one is the objective one.

Furthermore, I have tried to demonstrate that 'experience' when used as a basis for knowledge is an extremely vague term. Experiences are always influenced by the contexts surrounding them, and therefore never coherent or identical for all women. Even if all women shared certain 'determining' experiences, it is by no means obvious that this would give rise to the same kind of knowledge.

I reject experience as a grounding for feminist epistemologies, and I oppose the proposals that men and women do have different ways to knowledge. I also reject the idea that philosophical and scientific concepts are totally genderized. Feminist challenges to science are in my view very important and valuable, in so far as they identify and contribute to a recognition of formerly ignored groups and problems; in the process feminists thus highlight new and important areas where research is needed. This, however, has less to do with epistemology than is suggested by the recent epistemological turn in feminist theory.
Notes
1 Stanley and wise (1983) are arguing for a concept of many realities, both related to the idea of masculine and feminine realities and to the idea of many feminine realities. Since they are denying objectivity and 'truth-seeking' in general, and the only notion of theory they want to allow is one based on ethnomethodology, I don't regard their approach as neither epistemological nor relevant for my discussion. See also Grimshaw (1987) for an interesting discussion of the position of Stanley and Wise.
2 See Johansson, footnote 1 above.
3 See Harding (1986) for an overview of these stances.
4 See for instance Barrett's article 'The Concept of Difference' in Feminist Review, no. 26, 1987, for an interesting discussion of these matters.

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