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Representative Practices: Peirce, Pragmatism, and Feminist  
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KORY SPENCER SORRELL

**Representative Practices: Peirce, Pragmatism, and Feminist Epistemology**

New York: Fordham University Press, 2004. xx + 202 pp.

In this interesting discussion of Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism Kory Sorrell focuses on *representations*, multiply parsed i) as images, pictures or perhaps exhibitions; ii) as acts, thus something people or groups of people actually do, whereby they affirm or claim authority or authorship; and iii) as people standing in for someone/something else, rather as an attorney stands for — represents — her or his client (2, 3). Epistemologically, his concerns are about whether or how epistemic agents can *know* that a putative representation really represents, how to assess the role of power in representative practices, how to judge the efficacy of representations' functions in mediating actions. In Peirce's philosophy he finds rich resources for engaging these issues. And as his title announces, he turns to feminist epistemology to illuminate "the intersection of different kinds of power and representation . . . crucial to understanding practices of representation and useful for suggesting promising strategies for amelioration of those practices" (4). The first chapters offer a critical exegesis of Peirce's work on categories, substance, and constructive representative practices. Although it appears earlier, feminist epistemology figures principally in the fourth chapter, while in the final chapter Sorrell outlines his provocative project for an ethic of representation. Since I have undertaken to write this review despite a professed lack of expertise in Peircean philosophy or pragmatism, I shall restrict my remarks to brief general comments on the Peirce sections, and refrain from addressing the esoteric technicalities of Sorrell's analysis. I reserve my specific comments for how he enlists feminist work in advancing his project.

[In view of this appeal to feminist inquiry, one difference between Sorrell's position and mine should be noted. Possibly to signal gender inclusiveness, Sorrell often substitutes a presumptively generic feminine pronoun for the traditional, generic masculine (e.g. "A person sees the world in ways prescribed by the theories that *she* holds" [14, emphasis added]). The motivation may be commendable, but the consequent artificiality is troubling. Gender sensitivity, I suggest, is best manifested in acknowledging the sexual politics of situations, practices, institutions; recognizing that "inclusivity", in some circumstances, is neither desirable nor possible. Where its realization is plausible, it could be signalled by "he or she", "her or his"; but where for material, political or other reasons the subject *could not* be male, "she" and "her" proclaims as much, as do "he" and "his" where it could not be female. For feminists and other traditional Others such intransigent exclusions require acknowledgement. Neither casual insertions of the feminine nor appeals to logical possibility or political desirability perform this task well.]

Sorrell's careful elaboration of the status and substance of Peirce's categories issues in a mutable conception of realism that "gives a place to the particularity of experience" (51) while affirming the possibility of "discovering the specific nature of things" (53) which can guide empirical description while allowing for practical transformations in how substances are conceived. Thus he avoids the dichotomy of either having to affirm an essential fixity or denying that substances subsist independently of human practices and interests, while retaining ways of engaging multiple connections, disconnections, relations, and influences between and among substances. Although it is often unclear what the term "substance" does that the more mundane "thing" or "object" could not, the account is mostly persuasive. Yet the move to objectivity independent of human interests or preferences, along with the simple affirmation that the nature of the world "may be known by inquirers" independently of mediation by social practices (65), is too swift. No evidence is provided to support the claim that knowledge does not depend on the community.

Nor, and more discomfiting given Sorrell's proclaimed affinity to feminist philosophy, is the discussion of Judith Butler's views sufficiently prepared. A reference to "feminists *such as* Judith Butler" (66, emphasis added) fails to indicate who they are, since Butler alone figures in what follows; and the appeal to Butler's analysis of the "'body' as an effect of discourse . . . [which] signifies nothing outside itself" (67) is again so swift, so minimally situated within her work, that it does not serve Sorrell well as a way of introducing issues of human embodiment, thereby making space for (multiple, diverse) feminist interests. What exactly is Butler's "linguisticism" (66)? Such putative terms of art are not self-explanatory. Thus the mutability of bodies as sites of interaction, their status as epistemic objects, their social-political insertion into two-sexed binary systems (following Ann Fausto-Sterling, 69), appear without the complexity Butler's analysis confers on matters of bodies' inscription within the effects of power.

Its title suggests that this book is meant to count as a contribution to feminist epistemology; and to some extent, it fulfills this implicit promise. Sorrell's chapter four analysis of "communities of inquiry", with its announced attention to matters of "authority, constraint, and inclusivity" (117), potentially makes common cause with feminists on central epistemological issues. His appeal to how questions of authority within epistemic communities figure in Peirce's philosophy, and to the part played by narrative practices, will strike a chord with some feminists, prompting them to seek thematic resources in Peircean pragmatism. Yet such an alliance might not be an easy one, for Sorrell acknowledges that Peirce "has a particularly homogeneous understanding of who constitutes members of the community of inquiry" and Peirce's "man of science . . . [was] characteristically interested in problems of nature independently of social or cultural conditions" (119–20). Nonetheless, it is to confront vexed questions of epistemic authority and responsibility while

refusing the homogeneity of Peirce's community that Sorrell turns to feminist epistemology.

This move is commendable, and troubling: commendable because he does illuminate points of commonality worthy of amplification, between Peirce's epistemic concerns and those that have occupied feminist theorists; troubling, first, because he does not engage with feminist work whose explicit purpose is to establish connections between feminism and pragmatism;<sup>1</sup> and second, because his argument draws upon a narrow range of feminist philosophy, stopping short of more recent critical articulations and revisions of the positions he sketches, where the authors develop points he criticizes them for having neglected. An analysis of these revisions would have strengthened his case while making it more current, and nuanced.

Space does not permit a full elaboration of my point, but it allows some indication of where the argument might have gone. Consider Sorrell's discussion of standpoint epistemology, which he reads from Nancy Hartsock's 1983 version (reprinted in Tuana and Tong, 1995) and Sandra Harding's 1986 version.<sup>2</sup> To both he attributes the unsubtle view that the oppressed, because of how they are situated, do and should have superior "epistemic clout": that "Theirs is a description of what *really* is happening, and the accounts offered by their oppressors, where divergent, merely reveal the oppressors' own mystification" (127). Now, in its most simplified form, this observation does catch something of what standpoint theorists argued in the early 1980s; but the theory has been refined and revised by these very authors and others: notably, for Harding, in "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology", where she introduces the provocative idea of "strong objectivity"; and for Hartsock in *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and other Essays*.<sup>3</sup> Given standpoint epistemology's status as a new, evolving position, one would expect Sorrell to have consulted such works before mounting his critique. Later standpoint theory (i.e. later than the examples he cites) does take into account the problematic consequences of suggesting that "the members of a distinctive group of persons, women, share a privileged standpoint on reality" (130). It works away from earlier attempts to aggregate women, and/or the oppressed, as one homogeneous group. Moreover, Sorrell's claim that, for standpoint theorists, "those below *necessarily* have better knowledges . . . those above do not and cannot know what those below know" (131, emphasis added) discounts the centrality of conscious-raising to standpoint theory's early articulations, which goes some way toward countering each of these points. Despite his disclaimers in this chapter, he seems to presuppose punctiform knowledge claims abstracted from material-social circumstances, whose readily demonstrable truth or falsity is all that is at issue. Standpoint theory, whatever its failings, is more sophisticated than his reading suggests.

Troubling also is Sorrell's criticism that for standpoint theorists "epistemic disputes . . . between the marginalized and their oppressors are to be decided strictly in favor of the former" (131): that the descriptions of their lives advanced by the marginalized "take on an unimpugnable, hermetic

character" (I32). While it is true that feminist standpoint theory starts from and seeks to understand women's experiences, against an epistemological tradition where abstraction from experiential particularities has been a *sine qua non* of epistemic respectability, it is false to assume that in so doing it substitutes a tyranny of incontestable privileged access for the old tyranny of discounting women's — and other Others' — capacities to know their own lives. Nor does it limit knowledge to what is experienced (I33). Strong objectivity, in particular, extends the reach of epistemological pertinence well beyond the particularities of individual knowings, to examine the effects of situation, materiality, social positioning, and so much more in making knowledge claims possible. Most standpoint theory has a strong critically interpretive component.

Turning to authority, Sorrell again calls upon Peirce, in this instance to move away from the insularity with which he charges Hartsock and others (I47), and to recommend Peircean "fallibilism" as a route toward enabling criticism that continually produces improvements in accounts and, more significantly for this topic, allows a community to discern "how epistemic authority *ought* to be allocated" (I46). It is not clear, however, that he avoids the errors of which he accuses Hartsock. In suggesting that a community can find a criterion for discerning just authority in Peirce's methodological approach, he begs the very question he has posed: according authority to those "who use scientific methods precisely because they are most likely to produce good representations" (I46) leaves unaddressed the questions of how *this* claim can be supported, who establishes the content of "good", whether science can be assumed to speak for itself, to be self-justifying, and a host of others. Standpoint theorists have argued precisely what he charges them with failing to address: that representations (though this would not be their chosen term of art) "provide the means for showing how different locations may themselves, owing to various forms of privileging, influence practices of representation" (I49): and the question persists for him, as for Hartsock in his reading: "How do you know?"

To elaborate issues of inclusivity, Sorrell presents an intriguing ethnographic example: Nancy Scheper-Hughes's representation of *carnaval* in a Brazilian town. His purposes are to contest the derivation of putative universals from particular examples, and to claim that Scheper-Hughes's account is "inclusive" in exposing the effects of marginal experiences of *carnaval*, often subjugated in traditional representations of its social effects. Reading it for its inclusiveness, labelling it an example of a responsible representation (I56) prepares the way for Sorrell's transition, in chapter five, to an "ethic of representation". The kernel of this position is in the claim — with which I concur, with reservations — that there is an ethical dimension to "our" representations "that is no less important . . . [and] in many cases . . . *far more* important — than adequacy to the reality in question" (I58). My reservations centre on the word "our". *Whose* representations are these? Clearly the answer has to do with the "shared understandings" that

mark participation in “the community”: but the question persists. Admittedly, Sorrell follows feminists Lynn Nelson (162), Naomi Scheman, and Gloria Anzaldúa in acknowledging that “persons participate in multiple communities ... [marked by the] intersection of social categories such as color, race, gender, and sexual orientations” (170), and requiring multiple forms of understanding. To develop a pragmatic criterion for evaluating forms of understanding (174ff), he enlists Dewey and James rather than Peirce, for the place they accord inclusivity as a moral — and presumably also epistemic — criterion. Inclusivity, he maintains, “makes for better and more reflexive depictions of the real” (179): whereas the official story about *carnaval* is “inadequate, overly general, naively one-sided”. If people’s actions were mediated by Schepher-Hughes’s account, he proposes, conditions of inequity could be addressed, marginalization challenged, and the situation “would tend to improve” (179). I would like to conclude on a comparably optimistic note. But despite its feel-good qualities, inclusivity is a troubled value and a troubled criterion: it can be as imperialistic and oppressive as any of the more notorious exclusions. In philosophy, Anglo-American epistemology has claimed an inclusiveness that would level differences and specificities under one set of universal, logically possible abstract conditions. Early second wave feminism’s proclaimed inclusive sisterhood was rightly criticized for its derivation from affluent, able-bodied white women’s lives. Colonisers have sought to include “the natives” in the beliefs and material blessings of the white Christian “way of life.” And the list could be extended *ad infinitum*. So while I commend the motivation of Sorrell’s ethics of representation, I cannot take the route he recommends for realizing it.

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#### NOTES

1. See for example the Special Issue, *Feminism and Pragmatism of Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 8.2 (1993); and Charlene Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996.

2. See Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986; Nancy Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism” [1983]. In Nancy Tuana and Rosemarie Tong, eds., *Feminism and Philosophy*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1995.

3. Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology”. In Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies*. New York: Routledge, 1993; Nancy Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1998.