



Gender and philosophy of science: The case of Mary Hesse

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 10 August 2011

Received in revised form 5 December 2011

Available online 28 January 2012

Keywords:

Mary Hesse
Philosophy of science
Gender
Symmetry

ABSTRACT

This article is composed of two intertwining narratives. The first is a discussion of the concept of gender in relation to philosopher of science Mary Hesse's theoretical contributions and academic experiences. The second narrative takes issue with the gender concept at a more general level and particularly to discuss its strengths and limits. The article alternates between a discussion of different claims from gender theorists and a presentation of Mary Hesse's academic experiences. I conclude that although the gender concept has, until now, only been used in an asymmetrical sense, i.e., negatively linked to women's careers and positively to men's, it will not necessarily be identically used in the future. Both empirical findings and conceptual changes may make room for a more differentiated understanding of gender.

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When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*

1. Introduction

This article has a dual purpose. One is to relate philosopher of science Mary Hesse's academic life to gender aspects; the other is to take issue with gender as an analytical category in studies of knowledge production. The two purposes are connected in the sense that although gender aspects are focused, the intention is not one of demonstrating failures or shortcomings of a female philosopher's university career due to her sex but rather to consider whether it is possible to bring gender to the fore without anticipating the outcome of the analysis. Most often, studies of gender are conducted with the objective of showing that women are excluded or marginalised and therefore unsuccessful. Mary Hesse, however, belongs to the small group of female, well-known and much appreciated philosophers of science, who may have succeeded either because gender did not matter, despite that gender structures often hamper women's careers, or because these structures can also be beneficial to women. The following discussion will offer some reflections on what role gender may have played in her career. Underlying this discussion is an interest in coming to grips with

the scope of gender as an analytical category, i.e., whether it is possible to put it to use in symmetrical approaches to scientific and/or philosophical knowledge or if it is conceptually limited to studies of male success and female failure.

1.1. Initiating a biography

For a fairly long time, I regarded biography as a quite complicated genre, tending to either hagiography or the opposite.¹ I took an interest in Mary Hesse's academic and personal life in a way similar to biographers' occupation with specific persons. It started when I came across a photograph from the philosophy of science conference held in Colston in 1957.² The picture in question shows 42 philosophers: all except one are male. The only woman turned out to be Mary Hesse. I already knew some of Hesse's articles and books, such as her inspiring *Revolutions and Reconstructions in the Philosophy of Science*, published in 1980. Most appealing in that book is the combination of clarity of style and respectfulness in tone in her analysis of the sociological inputs to scientific knowledge. Being a qualified philosopher, her careful approach to social theories of science was

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¹ For a most interesting collection of papers on scientific biography, see Shortland & Yeo (1996). Recent examples of academic historical biography are found in Berghahn & Lässig (2008). See also Hallberg, forthcoming (2011).

² This article is contained within my research project: *Mary Hesse—philosopher of science in times of unrest*. Between 2001 and 2008, I have conducted several taped interviews with Mary Hesse in her home in Cambridge, and we have also had many informal conversations. In addition to the interviews with Hesse, I have also talked to and interviewed friends and former colleagues, among them Anna-K. Mayer, Liba Taub, David Bloor, Simon Schaffer, Steven Shapin, Robert M. Young and John Ziman.

quite unusual. So, when I looked at that particular photograph, a number of questions about her professional life came to mind, which were soon followed by other, more personal matters to interrogate. Thus, a biography-like project was sketched.

Hesse was born in 1924 and retired from her position as Professor at Cambridge in 1985. Professionally, she was a contemporary of, among others, Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend and contributed to a similar critique of the rationalist philosophy of science that they delivered. She also shared their engagement in the history of science and aspired to bring history and philosophy of science closer together. Her distinguished career definitely deserved a biography, and the photograph drew my attention to the personal element in science and philosophy in a broad sense, gender aspects particularly.

Thus my biographical aspirations began with a particular gendered gaze.³ I saw a woman and added a whole range of theoretical assumptions that basically were developed decades after the conference was held, underlining gender as an analytical category. Most of Hesse's academic work was done before feminist approaches to science and epistemology had evolved, and her theoretical contributions did not address gender issues. Nor did she belong to the group of obviously discriminated academic women. Why then, link gender aspects to Hesse's professional experiences and, accordingly, what difficulties may arise from such a project?

1.2. Gender as analytical concept and the sociology of error

As a term, gender is neutral, only signalling diverse attributes and psychological differences of the two (or more) sexes. However, in feminist and gender theory 'gender' normally brings inequality between the sexes into play and is either used to shed light upon women's marginalisation and exclusion, or to criticise male dominance. When applied to science and philosophy, a gendered gaze makes clear why men have been more successful than women or why established epistemological claims are structured the way they are. Hence, in feminist investigations, gender is used to determine both what is wrong, false, or mistaken in science and philosophy and what it takes to right it.

My discussion of gender questions differs from such standard accounts. Inspired by the sociology of scientific knowledge developed by David Bloor (1976) and others associated with the Strong Programme⁴, I support the idea of symmetrical and impartial approaches to knowledge; and I reject the idea that only beliefs that are considered wrong, false, or mistaken can be explained by social factors. The common name for such a limited scope is "a sociology of error". Those committed to symmetry reject the idea that knowledge claims have intrinsic values in the sense that some claims are essentially rational and others irrational, and some arguments inherently good and others bad, hence refusing a strict dichotomy between epistemic and social factors. Instead, all beliefs about the world are constrained and stabilised both by nature and culture, and it is only with hindsight, when a belief has already been established and taken for granted, that it is judged to be a rational claim. The problem with gender analyses is that gender is the social understanding/construction of the sexes, there is little room for nature, and what is socially constructed explains why science has gone astray. Gender studies, thus, fall into the category of sociology of error, and gender becomes the pre-given for why men succeed and women fail. In addition, gender is a politically loaded category—and much more so than for instance "the social", which may refer to a multitude of factors.

However, gender, if it were not bound to a predetermined assumption of superiority/inferiority or better/worse, would, I argue, qualify for social, symmetrical studies of knowledge production. But gender seems to be an organising principle in all known societies, and it cannot in advance be disqualified among relevant factors to explore. Thus, gender may be perceived as one of many possible categories with consequences for the process by which an individual or a community makes decisions, choices and comes to agreements about the arrangement and structure of scientific work and for what counts as good arguments, accurate methodologies, and relevant conclusions, for example. From the idea of symmetry, it follows that if gender approaches to science and philosophy in general should not be doomed to analyses of male successes/female failures or to privilege women's standpoints over men's, then the concept must become less predictable and more 'neutral', i.e., open to the various roles that gender may play in different settings. In other words, a symmetrical approach to gender may take differences into account without previously defining a necessary and constant order between the sexes.

Of particular significance is whether the concept of gender lends itself to examination of a woman's university career that has been successful in accordance with traditional standards or if it plays only an insignificant role. Mary Hesse's career as a philosopher of science is in no way a failure. She has been most influential and vastly respected. Still, a discussion concerning gender expectations and arrangements will give a more complex picture of her academic experiences. Some of these conditions may have been to her disadvantage, whereas others might have had the opposite role. While certain gender structures have created obstacles for women of science through history, it is likely that the very same structures have also been helpful in the process of extending traditional female roles in society for those women who manage to go beyond them. In what follows, I will discuss different aspects of Mary Hesse's academic experience, reflecting on if and how gender might have played a role, and consequently, in what sense gender as an analytical concept has a place within symmetrical studies.

2. Mary Hesse—female philosopher of science

Mary Hesse does not represent the *excluded* woman, the stereotype of much contemporary theorising. Jacques Derrida (2003, p. 12), for instance, notes that "In our culture [...] the woman is so to speak excluded or in an asymmetrical relationship. She represents precisely the one who is outside of the system, excluded from the system; [...]". At first sight, Hesse is rather the opposite of someone who is outside of the system. Her publication list is immense; she has been appointed to a vast number of committees; she has been invited to and attended a very large number of conferences and universities as speaker, visiting professor, conference organiser; she has been honoured for her work in several ways, and so on. Hence, if my motive was to write about female marginality in the academic system, I certainly chose the wrong "subject". After all, this was not my motive.

I was, rather, fascinated by the opposite, i.e., how she managed to succeed so well in a system often described as utterly male, though it is not clear what that means apart from the obvious dom-

³ The concept of gaze as used by Michel Foucault (1991 [1963]) is not directly referring to vision but rather to the structures of what is possible to imagine and to know. The notion of a gendered gaze, then, denotes that the possibility of perceiving gender differences is not due to inherent biological or physical essences but rather to the consequence of epistemological and social changes.

⁴ Other early advocates of the strong programme were Barry Barnes, Donald McKenzie and Stephen Shapin.

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