

Book Review

# Shifting Ground. Knowledge and Reality, Transgression and Trustworthiness

Naomi Scheman  
Oxford University Press, New York, 2011

*Anna Boncompagni*\*  
anna.boncompagni@gmail.com

There are two main influences that can be identified in Naomi Scheman's work: Wittgenstein and feminism. Both of them are well recognizable in the collection of her articles and contributions that Oxford University Press has recently published, *Shifting Ground. Knowledge and Reality, Transgression and Trustworthiness* (2011, pp. 251). The book contains eleven essays that originally appeared between 1995 and 2008, organized around three themes: epistemological considerations (part I: Knowledge), ontological considerations (part II: Reality) and social and political issues (part III: Transgression and trustworthiness). These three parts, as we shall see, are kept together by the general aim of the book: to show the worth of «theorizing from explicitly transgressive social locations». (p. 4)

Wittgenstein's influence is particularly clear in Scheman's reflections on the «ground» and in what she calls the «terminal moraine» (p. 63). The failure of foundationalism, in her opinion, does not imply that the whole idea of ground is suspect and useless. Rather, it can be reformulated in terms of a terminal moraine, that is, in terms of the many pieces of rock that a glacier leaves when it recedes. The metaphor, chosen as an image of the post-war American born Jewish identity, is implicitly meant to contrast the vision of a conservative Wittgenstein which may arise from his insistence on the solid «bedrock» of our form of life: when no reasons for our actions can be given anymore, «the spade is turned» (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 217) and we must accept forms of life as they are. Nevertheless, a terminal moraine composed of different, non-homogeneous identities and narratives is no less a ground than a solid bedrock, and Wittgenstein himself, in Scheman's reading,

\* PhD candidate, Department of Philosophy, University of Roma Tre, Rome, Italy.

points at the importance of acknowledging the different practices and standpoints which characterize our ways of living (see chapter 8; it is important to note, however, that Scheman is not interested in an exegetical work). In this way, any discomfort and not «feeling at home» in our practices can become a vital resource for social change. The point of view of those who are at the margins of a form of life provides a way out from a dualism that Stanley Cavell (1976, p. 47) had described as «the Manichean reading of Wittgenstein» (p. 151): the search for an independent view from nowhere (a view from no point of view) on the one side, and the acceptance of any human practice in which a person may find herself to be involved, on the other. The former option, Scheman argues, is illusory, the latter is fatalist, but a self-conscious marginal outlook offers a third way. Social critique and political action are thus made possible and, most relevantly, necessary.

It is by stressing the value of differences, and particularly of marginality, that we can see, besides Wittgenstein's influence, Scheman's second main source of interest, feminism and women's studies. This should not be surprising, since she is also co-editor of *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein* (2002). Feminist epistemology, in particular, shows that «privilege in European modernity is distinctively marked by the tendency to take its own particularities as generic, to cast those who differ from its norms not just as inferior, but as deviant» (p. 42), and that this tendency has shaped both the conception of subjectivity and the ideal of objectivity in scientific research. It is only by paying attention to diversity and oppression that the artificiality of the disinterested, a-sexed, independent subject can be made clear, and its identification with the privileged male Western individual can emerge. At the same time, the ideal of objectivity (commonly associated with the idea of an independent reality and the abstractness of norms of scientific method) turns out to be nothing but a misleading conception, historically constructed and connected to that same notion of the individual developed in the course of modernity. Those who are in a privileged position, to become aware of their own status beyond its apparent neutrality, need that different standpoints are available, as well as the voices of the marginalized and of the subordinated, which need to be effectively heard in order for a deeper objectivity to be achieved. By focusing the attention on queer and eccentric positions, the problematic nature of central positions emerges. In this way their centrality can be questioned; in other words, it can be *queered*, as the well-chosen title of one of the essays (“Queering the Center by Centering the

Queer”) suggests. The social construction at the basis of any apparent position of natural centrality is evident if we consider, following Scheman, a double aspect hidden in it. For instance, heterosexual identity, from the point of view of what she calls «heteronormativity», is both natural and virtuous (and homosexuality both an illness and a sin); the same can be said of the Christian identity from the standpoint of «Christianormativity» (to be Christian is to follow one’s own true nature, on the one hand, and a duty, on the other hand). This mixture of natural and normative, which usually goes unseen, already shows that central identities are the fruit of a complex and deeply interiorized social construction.

The acknowledgment of the need for marginalized points of view leads to what is probably the most interesting proposal in Scheman’s book: a new conception of objectivity, in which the partiality of any vision of the world is not regarded as a bias to be corrected, but as an incompleteness to be filled through other visions. Instead of aiming at an epistemology of parsimony, according to which what has to be achieved is an ideal knowledge purified from any perspectival distortion, she proposes an epistemology of *largesse*, where objectivity is to be obtained precisely in the other way around, by allowing different perspectives to work together. Objectivity so conceived makes realism compatible with a perspectival approach: only if you and I see the same thing *differently*, that thing can be said to exist (while if I see it and you do not, and, equally, if we both see it as identical in spite of our different positions, it means that it does not exist, or that it is an illusion). This way, Scheman suggests a solution to Wittgenstein’s urging for «not empiricism and yet realism», that he defined as «the hardest thing» in philosophy (p. 156).

If realism is bounded to a perspectival approach, then ontology itself must be reshaped. What Scheman is primarily interested in, in the second part of the book (devoted to reality), is the ontology of emotions and identities. In this second part, she moves from the concepts of center and periphery (that occupied the foreground in the above-mentioned essay on the queer positions) to Wittgenstein’s insights on mental states. By considering psychological descriptions and explanations as fundamentally social, her purpose is to oppose on the one hand the naturalistic accounts of physicalism, on the other hand the immutable definitions of essentialism. Again, she refers here to the feminist reflection, particularly relevant in this respect because it allows us:

to see the importance and the possibility of holding on *both* to the idea that our mental lives are constituted in part by the ways we collectively talk and think

about them, *and* to the idea that such talking and thinking are not arbitrary and that the realm of the mental is no less real for being in this sense ‘made up’ (p. 84).

Realism and objectivity are not given up, but are reinforced by the adoption of this stance. The image which Scheman uses to explain the difference between an essentialist and a perspectival approach to emotions is that of constellations and galaxies (p. 98). Emotions are not like galaxies but like constellations: their identity as complex entities is not given by any essence or nature, but it is relative to explanatory schemes that rely on social meaning and interpretation. Nevertheless, they exist, can be seen and have causal powers. This is not true of emotions only, but of objects overall (with a generalization which seems, actually, to be still in need of work), as their nature is not derived from the sum of their parts, but from the narratives in which they are included, and their integrity is essentially bound up with their relationships with other objects.

Since objectivity depends, as we have seen, on the existence and the effective possibility of allowing different voices to be heard, Scheman’s remarks about social ontology are linked to her commitment to a fully-fledged *political* vision of philosophical work. The inclusion of the voices of the marginalized, indeed, requires precise and concrete steps to take on a social, political, academic and even personal levels, and these steps may not be easy to make. Queer identities, for instance, require that we cast doubt upon our own identities, and any reflection on our form of life calls into question what we refer to when we say «we» in the course of philosophical reasoning. The awareness of our dependence, in any epistemic task or activity, on others, has as its effect the search for a more and more shared ground, where solidarity plays a key role. Objectivity itself can be achieved only through trustworthiness, where trustworthiness is defined, in the context of research practices, as «what makes it rational for people to accept research findings – to build future research upon them, to utilize them to inform public policy, and to use them to guide individual choice and community action» (p. 172). It is no coincidence, then, that in Scheman’s book personal and autobiographical considerations abound. To make research within this normative framework means to take a personal commitment to work for social institutions that are worth of trust, and for research methods that facilitate participation and social inclusion, as shown in the case of community-based research (topic discussed in the co-authored chapter 9). Political and epistemic aims are thus taken to be intertwined aspects of the same task, which imply – as the book aims at

showing – the inclusion of the marginalized positions in scientific research and theorizing. Personal passion along with a pleasant and clear writing and a useful and complete apparatus of footnotes and bibliography, contributes to make the book both enjoyable and challenging.

## REFERENCES

- Cavell, S. (1976). *Must We Mean what We Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scheman, N. (2011). *Shifting Ground. Knowledge and Reality, Transgression and Trustworthiness*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Scheman, N. & O'Connor, P. (2002). *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein*. University Park (PA): The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. G.E.M. Anscombe & R. Rhees (Eds.), G.E.M. Anscombe (Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.

