

WHAT SALLY HASLANGER'S 'DAUGHTER' SHOULD BELIEVE

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Abstract. Sally Haslanger (2007) is concerned with epistemic questions resulting from feminist critique. Her discussion is illustrated by the concrete example of a 12-year-old girl involved in an argument with her parents about whether she should be allowed to wear a crop-top. Haslanger believes that a contradiction arises because the daughter's seemingly false statement that crop-tops are cute also appears to contain "important social knowledge" and thus seems to be false and correct at the same time. Haslanger tries to resolve this contradiction by making use of the concept of context-dependent truth. In this paper, I argue that Haslanger's approach cannot sufficiently solve the problem she has formulated. However, I claim that if we carefully analyze the different components of the disagreement, its epistemic, aesthetic and normative dimensions, we will come to the conclusion that there is in fact no epistemic contradiction to be resolved.

INTRODUCTION

In her essay " 'But Mom, Crop-Tops *Are* Cute' – Social Knowledge, Social Structure and Ideology Critique" Sally Haslanger (2007) investigates epistemic aspects of feminist critique. Specifically, she is concerned with the following problem: we sometimes hold particular belief systems to be "illusory". Yet, if such belief systems are widely shared, they can change social reality. In some cases this constructed social reality will make the initial belief system true. Haslanger considers this a contradiction and tries to resolve it.

In this paper, I will try to reconstruct the problem with which Haslanger is concerned using her own example of a daughter disagreeing with her parents over the cuteness of crop-tops. I will then argue why I believe that Haslanger's proposed solution, "Milieu Relativism", does not fully solve the problem she has formulated. However, I claim that if we carefully analyze the different components of the daughter's statement, its epistemic, aesthetic and normative dimensions, we will come to the conclusion that there is in fact no epistemic contradiction to be resolved.

I. THE PUZZLE

Haslanger's research question is taken over from Catharine MacKinnon (1989) who is *inter alia* concerned with building up a feminist epistemology. Although visibly influenced by MacKinnon, Haslanger seems unsatisfied with the clarity of MacKinnon's positive answers to the questions she raises (cf. Haslanger 2007: 71). It might partly be in pursuit of this missing clarity that

Haslanger chooses a clear-cut example around which she builds her discussion.

i. Haslanger's example

In this example a seventh-grade girl is involved in an argument with her parents about whether she should be allowed to wear a crop-top. While the parents reject crop-tops because they contribute to the sexualization of young girls, the daughter argues they are “cute” and that “[e]veryone knows” this (Haslanger 2007: 72). As Haslanger points out, it seems as if the girl and her parents disagree over the truth-value of the proposition:

(P) Seventh grade girls who wear crop-tops to school are cute [and are dorky otherwise].¹

According to Haslanger, when considering whether the daughter or her parents are justified in believing or rejecting (P), there arises an epistemic problem:

“If the social reality is organized around the cute/dork dichotomy, then there are cute girls and dorky girls, and it would be a mistake not to recognize this. This is important social knowledge. But at the same time it is tempting to say that the cute/dork dichotomy is an illusion. (...) So it appears that the daughter should believe that, say, seventh grade girls who wear track suits to school are dorks, and yet, if her parent is right, she should also not believe it.” (Haslanger 2007: 73)

In other words, we have an intuition that parents and daughter disagree about something beyond their mere personal tastes, and still there is a sense in which both seem to be right.

ii. The epistemic/moral distinction

When analyzing this seemingly paradoxical intuition, Haslanger begins by discussing the response that the use of the term “should” in “she should also not believe it”, is a moral “should” and not an epistemic one. Let us call this the epistemic/moral distinction (EMD). The way to understand this response is, I suggest, that while an “epistemic should” obviously only depends on what is true (or on the reasons we have for believing that something is true), a “moral should”, when applied to beliefs, must also take into account the effects these beliefs might have. The two “should”s can conflict. For example, it might be that if a certain true belief would motivate us to

¹ In fact, Haslanger at first offers two propositions. However, the second is close to being simply the contraposition of the first and contributes little to the analysis. Haslanger herself ignores it in the subsequent analysis for the very same reason (Haslanger 2007: 74).

act in a wrong way, we are morally obliged to believe something false.² EMD would suggest that such a conflict is the case in the disagreement over (P).

However, Haslanger dismisses EMD as not completely satisfactory. She does this for two reasons. First, she raises doubts whether a moral “should” can apply to beliefs at all, as they are not a matter of choice: “The daughter experiences her friends as cute in crop-tops and the track suited others as dorky, and this may not be something she can change at will.”

Second, our rejection of (P) “seems to involve a charge of inaccuracy or misrepresentation.” (Haslanger 2007: 74); the daughter’s belief in (P), built on the cute/dorky-distinction, seems “illusory” to us. But, of course, holding illusory convictions is an *epistemic* failure: thus, the framework seems not (only) morally wrong but epistemically false.

II. HASLANGER’S SOLUTION: MILLEAU RELATIVISM

Instead of EMD, Haslanger’s solution involves the concept of a *milieu*. An individual’s milieu is constituted by the “social structures within which he or she operates” (Haslanger 2007: 80), where *social structures* are very broadly understood: Haslanger uses the term as a “general category of social phenomena, including, e.g., social institutions, social practices and conventions, social roles, social hierarchies, social locations or geographies and the like” (Haslanger 2007: 77). After an extensive discussion of these concepts, in which she moves to more general questions of social ontology, Haslanger comes back to the discussion about (P) by analyzing in which way its truth might be relative to an individual’s milieu. The guiding idea is that truth is context-dependent. Following John MacFarlane (2005), Haslanger hereby distinguishes between *context of use* and *context of assessment*. Context of use captures the familiar idea that a certain proposition’s truth might depend on the context in which it is stated, either because it is *use-indexical*, i.e., the context determines its meaning, or because it is *use-sensitive*, i.e., the truth-conditions might be fulfilled in some contexts, but not in others (MacFarlane 2005: 326f.). In addition to this, “relativist” accounts of truth might accept dependence on the context of assessment. A proposition’s truth in this case depends on the standards of assessment of the assessor who states the proposition. This idea is widely accepted in the realm of aesthetic judgements. For example, the proposition “x is beautiful” does not seem to have a truth-value independent of a standard for the assessment of beauty. MacFarlane’s aim is to extend this idea to the truth-predicate in general (MacFarlane 2005: 328).

Haslanger applies MacFarlane’s framework by setting the girl’s and parent’s respective social

² An example for this can be seen in the famous “Paradox of Hedonism” (Sidgwick 1904): hedonism states that we should do whatever creates the greatest happiness. If Hedonism is (epistemically) true, however, we should probably (morally) believe it to be false because the immediate pursuit of happiness often creates the greatest unhappiness.

milieu as their context of assessment. With regard to their own milieu, both are right. Haslanger calls this position “Milieu Relativism” (Haslanger 2007: 81). Still, we can account for the feeling that the assessment made with respect to the girl’s milieu is illusionary by *criticizing* her milieu. Although Haslanger only sketches on which grounds such a criticism could be made, she believes that this solution is insofar satisfactory as we can claim that there is a sense in which both daughter and parents are correct, without creating a contradiction or ruling out further argument and critique.

i. Why Milieu relativism is not enough

Nevertheless, I believe Haslanger’s solution is not completely satisfactory. To see why, let us suppose we have succeeded in showing that the girl’s milieu is inferior to her parents’. The daughter would then be right in her belief in (P) only in a very weak sense: she can hold to it only by holding to an epistemically inferior milieu – something which does not seem like a reasonable option, thus she would eventually have to give up on (P) completely.

However, this weakens the daughter’s epistemic position too much. Haslanger’s initial justification for granting the daughter any right to believe that (P) was that she possesses “important social knowledge” as “social reality is organized around the cute/dork dichotomy”. But this fact supports (P) precisely because it is independent of the belief system shared by the milieu which created the “cute/dork dichotomy”: if categorizing girls in cute and dorky leads to a social structure in which these categories indeed apply, then this fact is true also with respect to the epistemically superior parents’ milieu, leaving us with the initial puzzle. It is not clear how milieu relativism would help out here. For this reason, I believe that it cannot account for everything that is puzzling about our attitudes towards (P) and fails as a solution.

III. AN ALTERNATIVE SOLUTION – THE DIFFERENT COMPONENTS OF (P)

If my critique of milieu relativism is correct, we might want to consider other solutions. The starting point, again, is that the girl seems to be both right and wrong at the same time in believing that (P). It would obviously be a possible way out to show that (P) consists of different components, some of them correct, some of them false. Haslanger discusses this possibility in form of EMD and rejects it for good reasons. However, there might be ways of structuring the components of (P) that both resolve the paradox and withstand Haslanger’s critique of EMD. This is what I want to achieve in the following.

i. Social knowledge

First, I would like to consider in which way the girl possesses “important social knowledge”. This

is not clear from Haslanger's paper because the inference "If the social reality is organized around the cute/dork dichotomy, then there are cute girls and dorky girls" is never further explicated or justified.

What seems to be meant by social reality to be "organized around the cute/dork dichotomy", is that there are two categories of girls, referred to as being "cute" or "dorky" and that these girls behave and are treated in different ways (for example, "cute" girls are accepted, "dorky" girls are dismissed). As this behavior is observable (even if it might be subtle at times), an external observer of the girl's milieu could distinguish between these two categories of girls. This latter fact explains in which way there indeed *are* "cute" and "dorky" girls – independent of the observer's own milieu. I believe that one component of (P) relates to these considerations:

(I) There are two categories of girls, referred to as "cute" and "dorky" in the girl's milieu where the first wear crop-tops and the latter track suits.

That the girl is aware of these categories, and thus believes that (I), can be seen by her fear that she will be a dork if she wears a tracksuit instead of a crop-top (Haslanger 2007: 72). I suggest that it is by believing that (I) that the girl possesses "important social knowledge".

ii. The normative and aesthetic components of (P)

If the girl is correct about (I), then in which way is her believing that (P) illusory? I propose that there are two other important components of the proposition:

(II) Crop-tops *are* cute.

(III) Girls wearing crop-tops are superior to those wearing track suits.

The first refers to the girl's own *aesthetic* attitudes. She simply finds that crop-tops are cute. The second is a normative judgement that crop-tops also reveal something about the girl wearing them: as opposed to girls wearing track suits, which are dorky, girls wearing crop-tops are cute. This judgement is more than merely aesthetic: It is clearly value-laden. It is an evaluation of a girl's character and determines the attitude towards her (compare also Haslanger 2007: 72).

Now, the girl cannot be epistemically criticized for component (II): this component is the expression of an aesthetic attitude, which is indeed milieu-dependent. But it lacks the possibility of critique which Haslanger is looking for, which is that aesthetic attitudes are both socially constructed *and* verified, such that if a certain group of people shares an aesthetic attitude, this constitutes an aesthetic norm and with regard to this group everything which applies to this

norm is beautiful (or “cute”). There is no point in saying that a group is aesthetically wrong about its norms: “De gustibus non est disputandum”.

This leaves component (III) as the objective of epistemic criticism. And indeed I suggest that the normative dimension of the girl's conviction are what can be best considered as illusory. This fits to an observation made by Haslanger when comparing the disagreement over (P) and a possible, similar disagreement where the daughter states: “But Mom/Dad, the girls who wear track suits to school are all on the track team.” (Haslanger 2007: 74). In the latter case, Haslanger plausibly asserts, we could not make much sense of a parents' reply “But sweetie, you won't be on the track team if you wear a track suit.” If we make the distinction between components (I)-(III), we can easily explain this. As opposed to the disagreement over (P), in this disagreement component (III), which is the component of (P) that constitutes an illusion, is missing.

iii. How (P) is illusory

There is, I suggest, a simple way in which (III) makes (P) illusory: (III) is false. Contrary to the girl's beliefs, girls wearing track suits are not inferior to those wearing crop-tops. We believe this not because of the aesthetic properties of crop-tops or track suits but because it is principally wrong to morally evaluate humans based on their outer appearance. It is in this sense in which the daughter should not believe that “seventh grade girls who wear track suits to school are dorks”.

This claim is unaffected by Haslanger's arguments against EMD. There is no “moral should” involved, the should is purely epistemic, it only applies to moral content.³ In this way the analysis of the different components of (P) as proposed here is different to EMD.

iv. How (P) manifests oppressive structures

It could be contested if the falsity of (III) is all that we find “illusory” about (P). What is missing in this account, it might be said, is that the daughter ignores how her belief manifests the oppressive social structure constituting the distinction between “cute” and “dorky” girls. I suggest that the daughter can indeed be criticized for this (as much as we can criticize 12-year-old girls for issues concerning social construction). But this critique would not be an epistemic one. On the contrary, it is at this point where we indeed get a moral “should”.

³ As becomes apparent, the analysis in this essay is built – as is Haslanger's paper (see, for example, p. 86) – on a cognitive understanding of morality, i.e., the position that moral statements can be true or false. Still, many non-cognitivist positions allow for moral statements to be true or false in light of a common ground that has been agreed upon. In case there is such a common ground for daughter and parents, the analysis could be meaningful from a non-cognitivist reading.

The daughter can manifest the cute/dorky structure in two ways: first, by having a certain aesthetic attitude and thereby contributing to the establishment of an aesthetic social norm, and second, by acting according to the norm, by publicly stating that girls wearing track suits are dorky, seeking only friends that wear crop-tops, advising her friends to adhere to the norm, etc.

The second point is obviously only a matter of moral considerations. But so is the first: contrary to beliefs, aesthetic attitudes are susceptible to *moral* criticism because they are, at least to some degree, a matter of choice. For example, if you like a certain joke and later realize that it is racist, it will not only change your normative attitude towards this joke but you will also be likely to find it less funny (“I cannot laugh about that”).

Similarly, for Haslanger one reason why the daughter should not believe that (P) is because believing (P) “will contribute to the patterns of beliefs and expectations that constitute the social fact that such girls are dorks, which would be bad.” (Haslanger 2007: 73). I propose to understand this, contrary to Haslanger’s own intention, as a morally based criticism of the girl’s aesthetic attitude (II).

CONCLUSION

To summarize, I claim that there is no epistemic problem in agreeing with the daughter’s parents and still granting the daughter to be right about something if we differentiate between the different components of (P): the daughter is right about the epistemic component (I), wrong about the normative judgement (III) and can be morally criticized for (II). As aesthetic attitudes can be changed, and there is something illusory about (P) in form of component (III), Haslanger’s objections to EMD are avoided.

Therefore, while Haslanger’s conceptual repertoire might be valuable for various purposes, it cannot serve to resolve an epistemic contradiction posed by the disagreement between the parents and the daughter - precisely for the reason that there is no such contradiction.

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