

Feminist Standpoint Epistemology and Objectivity

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Can the feminist approach to epistemology only work in a relativistic framework that rejects the traditional concept of objectivity? Feminist standpoint epistemology seeks to create a stronger objectivity by rejecting the traditional concept of objectivity, yet not becoming a relativistic epistemology either. In her article *Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is "Strong Objectivity?"*, Sandra Harding, a prominent advocate of feminist standpoint theory, addresses this topic explicitly and argues that the objective strength of standpoint theory is its belief that knowledge is socially situated. Harding, like most standpoint epistemologists, is making three central claims: 1) knowledge is socially situated 2) marginalized groups have an advantage in being able to spot biases that the dominant group cannot see, and 3) knowledge should be built upon the marginalized perspectives (Bowell para. 1). For the purposes of this paper we will look primarily at Sandra Harding's response to the question of whether or not feminist standpoint theory can work within an objective framework rather than a relativistic one. Harding's article deals with the relationship between standpoint theory and what can be called "*traditional science*". We can define "*traditional science*" as science that focuses on the examination of the object of research solely. Standpoint theory, in contrast, insists on the examination of the researcher as well as examining the object of research. Before we can deal with the question of relativism and objectivity, let us take a look at Harding's definition of standpoint epistemology.

Harding argues that knowledge is socially situated (353). In other words, who we are as knowers affects what we can know. Specifically, Harding uses the example of *spontaneous feminist empiricists* (354) to demonstrate the dependency of research

results to the social situation of the researchers. Harding defines the original *spontaneous feminist empiricism* as the “‘spontaneous consciousness’ of feminist researchers in biology and social sciences who were trying to explain what was and wasn’t different about their research process in comparison with the standard procedures in their field” (354). Harding, while not ideologically aligned with the spontaneous feminist empiricist, notes that research done by spontaneous feminist empiricists was often able “to produce less partial and distorted results” (352) than research done by males. Harding therefore argues that the knowledge these feminist empiricists were able to produce was scientifically superior to that of their counterparts, precisely because of the feminist’s socially situated standpoint. Hence the feminist endeavour of spotting androcentric assumptions in the production of knowledge is simply “good science” and can help “maximize objectivity” (356).

Objectivity, for Harding, seems to be more attainable if people are aware of their own social situation. Harding criticizes the concept of neutral objectivity. Harding refers to this concept as, in a phrase coined by Donna Haraway, the “God-trick” (360), which is when researchers attempt to observe the universe with a complete impartiality that is supposedly bias free – what Thomas Nagel calls “the view from nowhere” (Crumley 213). Harding admits that while traditional science is good at eliminating social values so that experiments can have the same results across cultures, she also claims that “the scientific method provides no rules ...for even identifying... social concerns and interests that are shared by all (or virtually all) of the observers” (Harding 360). For standpoint epistemologists the scientific endeavour, as it is now, is flawed because it was created by people from particular social situation who had influence and power (355).

Harding argues that the system within which female empiricists are operating (traditional science) is one that lacks space and methods for researchers to reflect on their social situation, leaving them blind to their inherent biases. How then can people identify their own biases? Harding argues that marginalized groups have an advantage over others in spotting biases (357). The author likens standpoint epistemology in the production of knowledge to Marxism in politics with its production of goods by the marginalized workers. Harding argues that dominant groups are so engrossed in their dominance and power that they are blind to their own assumptions (357). For example, the Marxist worker would be acutely aware of the owner's assumptions and biases. Similarly, according to Harding, feminist researchers would be similarly aware of biases in the scientific community since the scientific community has historically been dominated by men and androcentric assumptions (355). For Harding, having women in science is helpful as in the case of the spontaneous feminist empiricists, but ultimately not enough: for feminist standpoint epistemologists the system needs to be changed to incorporate marginalized groups.

Harding, in keeping with the view of standpoint epistemology, argues that the starting place for producing knowledge should come from the standpoint of marginalized groups. Harding contrasts spontaneous feminist empiricism to standpoint theory, and writes:

[s]tandpoint theorists think that this is only part of the problem. They point out that retroactively, and with the help of the insights of the women's movement, one can see these sexist or androcentric practices in the disciplines. However, the methods and norms in the disciplines are too weak to permit researchers *systematically* to identify and eliminate from the results of research those social

values, interests, and agendas that are shared by the entire scientific community or virtually all of it. (355)

For the standpoint theorists the prevailing knowledge production community is “too weak” to systematically uncover and eliminate all of its “social values, interests, and agendas” (355). Thus to “maximize objectivity” in research (356), the scientific community needs to incorporate the standpoint of marginalized groups such as feminists. Having people from various backgrounds participating in the knowledge production community might be beneficial for the scientific method, providing the inclusion of various perspectives. Presumably Harding would be open to drawing from a variety of groups to meet the goal of what she calls “good science”— science that is less distorted and partial.

Although Harding is critiquing dominant knowledge production communities, she does not reject the importance of science in her standpoint theory. Her critique of “bad science” shows us that she is not rejecting science itself. To have “bad science” Harding must have a notion of what “good science” is. In other words, “good science” must have normative standards with which to critique “bad science.” For Harding “bad science” is the more distorted and partial scientific research that resulted from androcentric assumption (355). Harding seems to be using science to help elucidate how social situations within the scientific community affect scientific assumptions, practices, and outcomes. Harding is accepting at least some notion of objectivity, although she also seems to reject our ability to be bias free.

Harding is not an absolutist about knowledge: rather, her approach differs from a traditional approach to epistemology and thinkers like Descartes who looked solely at the objects of inquiry rather than their own social situation. For Harding, both the

researcher and the research subject should be critically examined, because for her a purely objective analysis of the universe by an impartial thinker is a myth. Descartes on the other hand, retreated into his mind in the belief that he could see the world objectively. Descartes attempted to use *a priori* reasoning to discover universal principles that were, for him, unrelated to any social situation or even the physical world. For Harding we are intimately connected to our social situation and the physical world and cannot separate ourselves from them.

Harding's theorising, while outside the approach to philosophy of thinkers like Descartes, does not fall into the category of relativistic epistemology. Harding is not a postmodern feminist since she argues for a starting point (standpoint) for knowledge, whereas some postmodern feminists might be against the notion of a standpoint. Standpoint theory's starting point for knowledge production requires that the knowledge producer reflects on the relationships between sex and class, for example, and specifically draws on marginalized groups. Harding argues for objectivity, but she thinks we have too many biases to see reality as it really is. For Harding, standpoint theory can minimize our biases, though not eliminate them completely; the theorist is aware that her standpoint theory is a work in progress that "will be replaced by more useful epistemologies in the future – the fate of all human products" (364). Harding is not an absolutist, or relativistic: neither is she strictly a skeptic.

Feminist standpoint epistemology uses a multitude of perspectives to gain a foundation for knowledge and so avoids becoming skepticism. Feminist standpoint epistemologists believe that there are cognitive gaps between "evidence and theory" (Crumley 215). Harding, like other feminists, thinks that gaps between evidence and theory are filled with our own social values, agendas, and politics (Harding 360). This

way of thinking is very much like the skepticism of David Hume, who thought inductive reasoning was produced by gaps in our cognition filled with nothing more than our own past experiences and subjective projections (Crumley 47). If standpoint epistemologists argue, like Hume, that there are gaps in our cognition which are filled with social values and imagination, then what prevents standpoint epistemologists from being skeptics and therefore making anti-knowledge claims? Insofar as it moves us closer to truth, filling the cognitive gaps with the social values of one marginalized group would be no better than filling it with the social values of another. Yet, perhaps unlike strict skeptics, Harding argues that we can move closer to maximizing objectivity (361). For example, she thinks that the sciences can reveal truths about the world, e.g. her notion of “good science.” For Harding, in the absence of having an objective view (God’s eye view) of the universe, what is necessary to produce knowledge is the inclusion of as many perspectives as possible when creating knowledge; this variety of perspectives might then be molded into our knowledge communities. Prioritizing a multitude of perspectives discourages the dominant socially situated perspectives that, without the multitude, otherwise gain too much authority in the production of knowledge which ultimately produces “bad science.” Being aware of social biases will help one find security in one’s knowledge-producing pursuits, and, as previously stated, minimize one’s biases while producing more objective knowledge.

Feminist standpoint epistemology holds that knowledge is socially situated and argues that marginalized groups have an advantage in spotting unexamined assumptions and biases in the knowledge production community. Thus for standpoint epistemologists traditionally dominant knowledge communities (i.e. scientific communities) need to be adapted to include otherwise marginalized perspectives. The

incorporation of marginalized perspectives will lead to greater and more accurate objectivity. Feminist standpoint epistemology diverges from the epistemology of detached absolutism and skepticism, while not being a relativistic epistemology either. Ultimately standpoint theory augments inquiry by broadening its scope and by adding a level of self-reflection and interrogation to any knowledge producing community.

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