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FEMINIST STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

Description

Another response to the question about how to justify the results of feminist research is provided by the feminist standpoint theorists. They argue that not just opinions but also a culture's best beliefs – what it calls knowledge – are socially situated. The distinctive features of women's situation in a gender-stratified society are being used as resources in the new feminist research. It is these distinctive resources, which are not used by conventional researchers, that enable feminism to produce empirically more accurate descriptions and theoretically richer explanations than does conventional research. Thus, the standpoint theorists offer an explanation different from that of feminist empiricists of how research directed by social values and political agendas can nevertheless produce empirically and theoretically preferable results.

Just who are these “standpoint theorists”? Three in particular have made important contributions: Dorothy Smith, Nancy Hartsock, and Hilary Rose.¹ In addition, Jane Flax's early work developed standpoint themes; Alison Jaggar used standpoint arguments in her *Feminist Politics and Human Nature*, and I developed briefly one version of this theory and later discussed the emergence of a number of them in *The Science Question in Feminism*.² Standpoint arguments are also implicit and, increasingly, explicit in the work of many other feminist thinkers.³

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The feminist standpoint theories focus on gender differences, on differences between women's and men's situations which give a scientific advantage to those who can make use of the differences. But what are these differences? On what grounds should we believe that conventional research captures only “the vision available to the rulers”? Even if one is willing to admit that any particular collection of research results provides only a partial vision of nature and social relations, isn't it going too far to say that it is also perverse or distorted?⁴ What is it about the social situation of conventional

researchers that is thought to make their vision partial and distorted? Why is the standpoint of women – or of feminism – less partial and distorted than the picture of nature and social relations that emerges from conventional research?

We can identify many differences in the situations of men and women that have been claimed to provide valuable resources for feminist research. These can be thought of as the “grounds” for the feminist claims.⁵

(1) Women’s different lives have been erroneously devalued and neglected as starting points for scientific research and as the generators of evidence for or against knowledge claims. Knowledge of the empirical world is supposed to be grounded in that world (in complex ways). Human lives are part of the empirical world that scientists study. But human lives are not homogeneous in any gender-stratified society. Women and men are assigned different kinds of activities in such societies; consequently, they lead lives that have significantly different contours and patterns. Using women’s lives as grounds to criticize the dominant knowledge claims, which have been based primarily in the lives of men in the dominant races, classes, and cultures, can decrease the partialities and distortions in the picture of nature and social life provided by the natural and social sciences.⁶

Sometimes this argument is put in terms of personality structures. Jane Flax and other writers who draw on object relations theory point to the less defensive structure of femininity than of masculinity. Different infantile experiences, reinforced throughout life, lead men to perceive their masculinity as a fragile phenomenon that they must continually struggle to defend and maintain. In contrast, women perceive femininity as a much sturdier part of the “self.” Stereotypically, “real women” appear as if provided by nature; “real men” appear as a fragile social construct. Of course, “typical” feminine and masculine personality structures are different in different classes, races, and cultures. But insofar as they are different from each other, it deteriorates objectivity to devalue or ignore what can be learned by starting research from the perspective provided by women’s personality structures.⁷

Sometimes this argument is put in terms of the different modes of reasoning that are developed to deal with distinctive kinds of human activity. Sara Ruddick draws our attention to the “maternal thinking” that is characteristic of people (male or female) who have primary responsibility for the care of small children. Carol Gilligan identifies those forms of moral reasoning typically found in women’s thought but not found in the dominant Western “rights orientation” of ethics. And Mary Belenky and her colleagues argue that women’s ways of knowing exhibit more generally the concern for context that Gilligan sees in moral knowing.⁸

One could argue also that the particular forms of any emotion that women experience as an oppressed, exploited, and dominated gender have a distinctive content that is missing from all those parallel forms in their brothers’ emotional life. Consider suffering, for example. A woman suffers not only as a parent of a dying child, as a child of sick parents, as a poor person, or as a victim of racism. Women suffer in ways peculiar to *mothers* of dying children, to *daughters* of sick parents, to *poor women*, and in the special ways that racist policies and practices affect *women’s* lives. Mother, daughter, poor woman, and racially oppressed woman are “nodes” of historically specific social practices and social meanings that mediate when and how suffering occurs for such socially constructed persons. Women’s pleasures, angers, and other emotions too are in part distinctive to their social activities and identities as historically determinate

women, and these provide a missing portion of the human lives that human knowledge is supposed to be both grounded in and about.

Whatever the kind of difference identified, the point of these arguments is that women's "difference" is only difference, not a sign of inferiority. The goal of maximizing the objectivity of research should require overcoming excessive reliance on distinctively masculine lives and making use also of women's lives as origins for scientific problematics, sources of scientific evidence, and checks against the validity of knowledge claims.

Some thinkers have assumed that standpoint theories and other kinds of justifications of feminist knowledge claims must be grounded in women's *experiences*. The terms "women's standpoint" and "women's perspective" are often used interchangeably, and "women's perspective" suggests the actual perspective of actual women – what they can in fact see. But it cannot be that women's experiences in themselves or the things women say provide reliable grounds for knowledge claims about nature and social relations. After all, experience itself is shaped by social relations: for example, women have had to *learn* to define as rape those sexual assaults that occur within marriage. Women had experienced these assaults not as something that could be called rape but only as part of the range of heterosexual sex that wives should expect.

Moreover, women (feminists included) say all kinds of things – misogynist remarks and illogical arguments; misleading statements about an only partially understood situation; racist, class-biased, and heterosexist claims – that are scientifically inadequate. (Women, and feminists, are not worse in this respect than anyone else; we too are humans.) Furthermore, there are many feminisms, and these can be understood to have started their analyses from the lives of different historical groups of women: liberal feminism from the lives of women in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and American educated classes; Marxist feminism from the lives of working-class women in nineteenth- and twentieth-century industrializing societies; Third World feminism from late twentieth-century Third World women's lives. Moreover, we all change our minds about all kinds of issues. So while both "women's experiences" and "what women say" certainly are good places to begin generating research projects in biology and social science, they would not seem to be reliable grounds for deciding just which claims to knowledge are preferable.

For a position to count as a standpoint, rather than as a claim – equally valuable but for different reasons – for the importance of listening to women tell us about their lives and experiences, we must insist on an objective location – women's lives – as the place from which feminist research should begin. We would not know to value that location so highly if women had not insisted on the importance of their experiences and voices. (Each woman can say, "I would not know to value my own experience and voice or those of other women if women had not so insisted on the value of women's experiences and voices.") But it is not the experiences or the speech that provide the grounds for feminist claims; it is rather the subsequently articulated observations of and theory about the rest of nature and social relations – observations and theory that start out from, that look at the world from the perspective of, women's lives. And who is to do this "starting out"? With this question it becomes clear that knowledge-seeking requires democratic, participatory politics. Otherwise, only the gender, race, sexuality, and class elites who now predominate in institutions of knowledge-seeking will have the chance to decide how to start asking their research questions, and we are entitled

to suspicion about the historic location from which those questions will in fact be asked. It is important both to value women's experiences and speech and also to be able to specify carefully their exact role in the production of feminist knowledges.

(2) Women are valuable "strangers" to the social order. Another basis claimed for feminist research by standpoint thinkers is women's exclusion from the design and direction of both the social order and the production of knowledge. This claim is supported by the sociological and anthropological notion of the stranger or outsider. Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins summarizes the advantages of outsider status as identified by sociological theorists. The stranger brings to her research just the combination of nearness and remoteness, concern and indifference, that are central to maximizing objectivity. Moreover, the "natives" tend to tell a stranger some kinds of things they would never tell each other; further, the stranger can see patterns of belief or behavior that are hard for those immersed in the culture to detect.⁹ Women are just such outsiders to the dominant institutions in our society, including the natural and social sciences. Men in the dominant groups are the "natives" whose life patterns and ways of thinking fit all too closely the dominant institutions and conceptual schemes.

In the positivist tendencies in the philosophy of the social sciences, these differences between the stranger and the natives are said to measure their relative abilities to provide causal explanations of the natives' beliefs and behaviors. Only understanding, not explanation, can result from the natives' own accounts of their beliefs and behaviors, or from the accounts of anthropologists or sociologists who "go native" and identify too closely with the natives. Because women are treated as strangers, as aliens – some more so than others – by the dominant social institutions and conceptual schemes, their exclusion alone provides an edge, an advantage, for the generation of causal explanations of our social order from the perspective of their lives. Additionally, however, feminism teaches women (and men) how to see the social order from the perspective of an outsider. Women have been told to adjust to the expectations of them provided by the dominant institutions and conceptual schemes. Feminism teaches women (and men) to see male supremacy and the dominant forms of gender expectations and social relations as the bizarre beliefs and practices of a social order that is "other" to us. *It is "crazy"; we are not.*

This claim about the grounds for feminist research also captures the observation of so many sociologists and psychologists that the social order is dysfunctional for women. There is a closer fit for men in the dominant groups between their life needs and desires and the arrangement of the social order than there is for any women. But this kind of claim has to be carefully stated to reflect the extremely dysfunctional character of the US social order for men who are *not* members of dominant groups – for example, African Americans and Hispanics. It is clearly more dysfunctional for unemployed African American and Hispanic men than it is for economically privileged white women. Nevertheless, with extremely important exceptions, this insight illuminates the comparison of the situation of women and men in many of the same classes, races, and cultures. It also captures the observation that within the same culture there is in general a greater gap for women than for men between what they say or how they behave, on the one hand, and what they think, on the other hand. Women feel obliged to speak and act in ways that inaccurately reflect what they would say and do if they did not so constantly meet with negative cultural sanctions. The socially induced

need for women always to consider “what men (or ‘others’) will think” leads to a larger gap between their observable behavior and speech and their thoughts and judgments.

(3) Women’s oppression gives them fewer interests in ignorance. The claim has been made that women’s oppression, exploitation, and domination are grounds for transvaluing women’s differences because members of oppressed groups have fewer interests in ignorance about the social order and fewer reasons to invest in maintaining or justifying the status quo than do dominant groups. They have less to lose by distancing themselves from the social order; thus, the perspective from their lives can more easily generate fresh and critical analyses. (Women have less to lose, but not nothing to lose; gaining a feminist consciousness is a painful process for many women.)

This argument can be put in terms of what women, and especially feminist women, can come to be willing to say. But it is less confusing if it is put in terms of what can be seen if we start thinking and researching from the perspective of the lives of oppressed people. The understanding that they are oppressed, exploited, and dominated – not just made miserable by inevitable natural or social causes – reveals aspects of the social order that are difficult to see from the perspective of their oppressors’ lives. For example, the perception that women believe they are firmly saying no to certain sexual situations in which men consistently perceive them to have said yes or “asked for it” (rape, battering) becomes explainable if one believes that there can never be objectively consensual relations between members of oppressor and oppressed groups. It is from the perspective of women’s interests that certain situations can be seen as rape or battering which from the perspective of the interests of men and the dominant institutions were claimed to be simply normal and desirable social relations between the sexes.

(4) Women’s perspective is from the other side of the “battle of the sexes” that women and men engage in on a daily basis. “The winner tells the tale,” as historians point out, and so trying to construct the story from the perspective of the lives of those who resist oppression generates less partial and distorted accounts of nature and social relations.

Far from being inert “tablets” – blank or not – human knowers are active agents in their learning. Knowledge emerges for the oppressed through the struggles they wage against their oppressors. It is because women have struggled against male supremacy that research starting from their lives can be made to yield up clearer and more nearly complete visions of social reality than are available only from the perspective of men’s side of these struggles. “His resistance is the measure of your oppression” said the early 1970s slogan that attempted to explain why it was that men resisted so strenuously the housework, child care, and other “women’s work” that they insisted was so easy and required so few talents and so little knowledge.

As I put the point earlier, knowledge is produced through “craft” procedures, much as a sculptor comes to understand the real nature of the block of marble only as she begins to work on it. The strengths and weaknesses of the marble – its unsuspected cracks or surprising interior quality – are not visible until the sculptor tries to give it a shape she has in mind. Similarly, we can come to understand hidden aspects of social relations between the genders and the institutions that support these relations only through struggles to change them. Consider an example from the history of science: it is only because of the fierce struggles waged in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to gain formal equality for women in the world of science that we can come

to understand that formal equality is not enough. As Margaret Rossiter points out, all the formal barriers to women's equity in education, credentialing, lab appointments, research grants, and teaching positions have been eliminated, yet there are still relatively few women to be found as directors and designers of research enterprises in the natural sciences.¹⁰ The struggles to end discrimination against women in the sciences enabled people to see that formal discrimination was only the front line of defense against women's equity in scientific fields.

Hence, feminist politics is not just a tolerable companion of feminist research but a necessary condition for generating less partial and perverse descriptions and explanations. In a socially stratified society the objectivity of the results of research is increased by political activism by and on behalf of oppressed, exploited, and dominated groups. Only through such struggles can we begin to see beneath the appearances created by an unjust social order to the reality of how this social order is in fact constructed and maintained. This need for struggle emphasizes the fact that a feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement. A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply by "opening one's eyes." Of course, not all men take the "men's position" in these struggles; there have always been men who joined women in working to improve women's conditions, just as there have always been women who – whatever their struggles with men in their private lives – have not thought it in their interest to join the collective and institutional struggles against male supremacy. Some men have been feminists, and some women have not.

(5) Women's perspective is from everyday life. A fifth basis for the superiority of starting research from the lives of women rather than men in the dominant groups has been pointed out in one form or another since the early 1970s. The perspective from women's everyday activity is scientifically preferable to the perspective available only from the "ruling" activities of men in the dominant groups. Dorothy Smith has developed this argument most comprehensively: women have been assigned the kinds of work that men in the ruling groups do not want to do, and "women's work" relieves these men of the need to take care of their bodies or of the local places where they exist, freeing them to immerse themselves in the world of abstract concepts. The labor of women "articulates" and shapes these men's concepts of the world into those appropriate for administrative work.¹¹ Moreover, the more successfully women perform "women's work," the more invisible it becomes to men. Men who are relieved of the need to maintain their own bodies and the local places where they exist come to see as real only what corresponds to their abstracted mental world. This is why men see "women's work" not as real human activity – self-chosen and consciously willed (even within the constraints of a male-dominated social order) – but only as natural activity, a kind of instinctual labor such as bees and ants perform. Women are thus excluded from men's conceptions of culture and history.

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(6) Women's perspective comes from mediating ideological dualisms: nature versus culture. Other standpoint theorists have stressed the ways in which women's activities mediate the divisions and separations in contemporary Western cultures between nature and culture and such manifestations of this polarity as intellectual work, on the one hand, and manual or emotional work, on the other hand. For example, as Nancy Hartsock has noted,

women's labor, like that of the male worker, is contact with material necessity. Their contribution to subsistence, like that of the male worker, involves them in a world in which the relation to nature and to concrete human requirements is central, both in the form of interaction with natural substances whose quality, rather than quantity, is important to the production of meals, clothing, etc., and in the form of close attention to the natural changes in these substances. Women's labor both for wages and even more in household production involves a unification of mind and body for the purpose of transforming natural substances into socially defined goods. This too is true of the labor of the male worker.¹²

But there are important differences between the perspectives available from the activities of the male worker and of women. Women's "double-day" means that a greater proportion of their lives is spent in this kind of work. Furthermore, "women also produce/reproduce men (and other women) on both a daily and long-term basis." This work requires a different kind of "production process" – transforming "natural objects" into cultural ones – from men's typical kinds of labor: "The female experience of bearing and rearing children involves a unity of mind and body more profound than is possible in the worker's instrumental activity." Women's work processes children, food, all bodies, balky machines, and social relations. It makes possible men's retreat to and appropriation of "abstract masculinity."¹³

Starting our research from women's activities in these gender divisions of labor enables us to understand how and why social and cultural phenomena have taken the forms in which they appear to us. Women's transformation of natural objects into cultural ones remains invisible, as a social activity, to men. More objective research requires restoring to our vision as necessary human social activity these "lost" processes and their relation to the activities centered in men's discourses.

(7) Women, and especially women researchers, are "outsiders within." Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has developed feminist standpoint theory to explain the important contributions that African American feminist scholars can make to sociology – and, I would add, to our understanding of nature and social life more generally: "As outsiders within, Black feminist scholars may be one of many distinct groups of marginal intellectuals whose standpoints promise to enrich sociological discourse. Bringing this group, as well as those who share an outsider within status *vis-à-vis* sociology, into the center of analysis may reveal views of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches."¹⁴ It is not enough to be only on the "outside" – to be immersed only in "women's work" or in "black women's work" – because the relations between this work and "ruling work" are not visible from only one side of this division of human activity. Instead, it is when one works on both sides that there emerges the possibility of seeing the relation between dominant activities and beliefs and those that arise on the "outside." bell hooks captures this point in the title of her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*.¹⁵ The strangers and outsiders discussed in the older anthropological and sociological writings were, consciously or not, assumed to be members of the dominant or "center" culture who were observing the residents in the dominated or marginalized cultures. No one expected the "natives" to write books about the anthropologists or sociologists (let alone be expected to sit on their tenure and promotion committees). Yet "studying up" and "studying oneself" as an "outsider within" offer resources for decreasing the

partiality and distortion of research additional to those available to researchers who restrict their work to “studying down.”

Dorothy Smith develops this ground when she points out in a geological metaphor that for women sociologists (may I add “women researchers” more generally?) a “line of fault” opens up between their experiences of their lives and the dominant conceptual schemes, and that it is this disjuncture along which much of the major work in the women’s movement has focused, especially centering on issues about women’s bodies and violence against women. So objectivity is increased by thinking out of the gap between the lives of “outsiders” and the lives of “insiders” and their favored conceptual schemes.

(8) This is the right time in history. A final reason for the greater adequacy of research that begins with women’s lives is suggested by parallels between feminist standpoint theories and Marxist discussions of the “standpoint of the proletariat.”¹⁶ It was not possible to see the class system of bourgeoisie and proletariat until the mid-nineteenth century, Engels argued. Utopian socialists such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owens could see the unnecessary misery and excessive wealth created at opposite ends of this emerging class system at the turn of the nineteenth century, but they could not identify in capitalism the mechanism that was producing these two classes from the peasants, artisans, merchants, and aristocrats that preceded them. The problem was not that the utopians were lacking in intellectual brilliance or that they were victims of false social myths; the reason they could not produce an adequate causal account was that the class system had not yet appeared in forms that made such explanations possible: “The great thinkers of the Eighteenth Century could, no more than their predecessors, go beyond the limits imposed upon them by their epoch,” observed Engels. Only with the emergence of a “conflict between productive forces and modes of production”—a conflict that “exists, in fact, objectively, outside us, independently of the will and actions even of the men that have brought it on” — could the class structure of earlier societies be detected for the first time. “Modern socialism is nothing but the reflex, in thought, of this conflict in fact; its ideal reflection in the minds, first, of the class directly suffering under it, the working class.”¹⁷

Similarly, the sex/gender system appeared as a possible object of knowledge only with various recent changes in the situation of women and men — changes created by shifts in the economy, by the so-called sexual revolution, by the increased entrance of women into higher education, by the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and by other identifiable economic, political, and social phenomena. The cumulative result is that the social order generates conflicting demands on and expectations for women in each and every class. Looking at nature and social relations from the perspective of these conflicts in the sex/gender system — in our lives and in other women’s lives — has enabled feminist researchers to provide empirically and theoretically better accounts than can be generated from the perspective of the dominant ideology, which cannot see these conflicts and contradictions as clues to the possibility of better explanations of nature and social life.¹⁸

Comments

Several comments are in order before I proceed to evaluate standpoint epistemology as I did feminist empiricism. First, note that none of the foregoing claims suggests that the biological differences between women and men provide the resources for feminist analyses. Nor do these accounts appeal to women's intuition.

Second, the eight claims should be understood not as competing but as complementary ways to describe these resources. Nor should they be thought to constitute a complete list of the resources to be gained by basing research in women's lives. Feminist thinkers have identified others. For example, literary critics write of what happens when "the Other" gazes back insolently at "the self" who is the assuredly invisible agent or author of Western thought, instead of dropping her gaze demurely as "Others" are supposed to do. Women stand in the position of "the Other" to men of the dominant groups. Psychoanalytic theorists offer resources here, too, when they point out a woman is the first model for "the Other" from which the infant comes to separate its "self." And we could discuss whether the perspective from women's lives is as conducive as the perspective from the lives of men in the dominant group to assumptions that the world is "out there," ready for reflecting in our mirrorlike minds, or whether it is not more easily apparent that language is never a transparent medium and that the world-as-object-of-knowledge is and will always remain socially constructed.

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Third, I must stress that these standpoint approaches enable one to appropriate and redefine objectivity. In a hierarchically organized society, objectivity cannot be defined as requiring (or even desiring) value neutrality.

Virtues

Standpoint epistemologies are most convincing to thinkers who are used to investigating the relationship between patterns of thought and the historical conditions that make such patterns reasonable. Consequently, many historians, political theorists, and sociologists of knowledge can find these explanations of why feminist research can generate improved research results more plausible than feminist empiricism.

The diversity of the resources that in other forms are familiar in the social sciences, and that feminists can call on in defending the greater objectivity attainable by starting research from women's lives, is another great advantage. It is hard to imagine how to defeat this entire collection of arguments – and the others to be found in feminist research – since they are grounded in a variety of relatively conventional understandings in the social sciences.

Moreover, the standpoint theories, like feminist empiricism, can claim historical precedents. Many (though not necessarily all) of the grounds identified above are used by the new histories of science to explain the emergence of modern science.¹⁹ Scientific method itself was created by a "new kind of person" in the early modern era. Feudalism's economic order separated hand and head labor so severely that neither serfs nor aristocrats could get the necessary combination of a trained intellect and willingness to get one's hands dirty that are necessary for experimental method. One can also point to pre-Newtonian science's involvement in political struggles against the aristocracy.

Or one can focus on the “fit” of Ptolemaic astronomy’s conceptual scheme with the hierarchical social structure of the Catholic Church and feudal society while, in contrast, the Copernican astronomy mirrored the more democratic social order that was emerging. Or one can note the way the problematics of the new physics were “for” the rise of the new merchant classes: it was not that Newton set out to “conspire” with these classes; rather, his new physics solved problems that had to be solved if transportation, mining, and warfare were to be more efficient.²⁰ So the feminist empiricists’ appeals to historical precedent can be made in a different way by the standpoint theorists.

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Strong objectivity and socially situated knowledge

In the preceding section I argued that a feminist standpoint theory can direct the production of less partial and less distorted beliefs. This kind of scientific process will not merely acknowledge the social-situatedness – the historicity – of the very best beliefs any culture has arrived at or could in principle “discover” but will use this fact as a resource for generating those beliefs.²¹ Nevertheless, it still might be thought that this association of objectivity with socially situated knowledge is an impossible combination. Has feminist standpoint theory really abandoned objectivity and embraced relativism? Or, alternatively, has it remained too firmly entrenched in a destructive objectivism that increasingly is criticized from many quarters?

The declining status of “objectivism”

Scientists and science theorists working in many different disciplinary and policy projects have objected to the conventional notion of a value-free, impartial, dispassionate objectivity that is supposed to guide scientific research and without which, according to conventional thought, one cannot separate justified belief from mere opinion, or real knowledge from mere claims to knowledge. From the perspective of this conventional notion of objectivity – sometimes referred to as “objectivism” – it has appeared that if one gives up this concept, the only alternative is not just a cultural relativism (the sociological assertion that what is thought to be a reasonable claim in one society or subculture is not thought to be so in another) but, worse, a judgmental or epistemological relativism that denies the possibility of any reasonable standards for adjudicating between competing claims. Some fear that to give up the possibility of one universally and eternally valid standard of judgment is perhaps even to be left with no way to argue rationally against the possibility that *each person’s* judgment about the regularities of nature and their underlying causal tendencies must be regarded as equally valid. The reduction of the critic’s position to such an absurdity provides a powerful incentive to question no further the conventional idea that objectivity requires value-neutrality. From the perspective of objectivism, judgmental relativism appears to be the only alternative.

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My concern is to state as clearly as possible how issues of objectivity and relativism appear from the perspective of a feminist standpoint theory.

Feminist critics of science and the standpoint theorists especially have been interpreted as supporting either an excessive commitment to value-free objectivity or, alternatively, the abandonment of objectivity in favor of relativism. Because there are clear commitments within feminism to tell less partial and distorted stories about women, men, nature, and social relations, some critics have assumed that feminism must be committed to value-neutral objectivity. Like other feminists, however, the standpoint theorists have also criticized conventional sciences for their arrogance in assuming that they could tell one true story about a world that is out there, ready-made for their reporting, without listening to women's accounts or being aware that accounts of nature and social relations have been constructed within men's control of gender relations. Moreover, feminist thought and politics as a whole are continually revising the ways they bring women's voices and the perspectives from women's lives to knowledge-seeking, and they are full of conflicts between the claims made by different groups of feminists. How could feminists in good conscience do anything but abandon any agenda to legitimate one over another of these perspectives? Many feminists in literature, the arts, and the humanities are even more resistant than those in the natural and social sciences to claims that feminist images or representations of the world hold any special epistemological or scientific status. Such policing of thought is exactly what they have objected to in criticizing the authority of their disciplinary canons on the grounds that such authority has had the effect of stifling the voices of marginalized groups. In ignoring these views, feminist epistemologists who are concerned with natural or social science agendas appear to support an epistemological divide between the sciences and humanities, a divide that feminism has elsewhere criticized.

The arguments of this book move away from the fruitless and depressing choice between value-neutral objectivity and judgmental relativism. The last chapter stressed the greater objectivity that can be and has been claimed to result from grounding research in women's lives. This chapter draws on some assumptions underlying the analyses of earlier chapters in order to argue that the conventional notion of objectivity against which feminist criticisms have been raised should be regarded as excessively weak. A feminist standpoint epistemology requires strengthened standards of objectivity. The standpoint epistemologies call for recognition of a historical or sociological or cultural relativism – but not for a judgmental or epistemological relativism. They call for the acknowledgment that all human beliefs – including our best scientific beliefs – are socially situated, but they also require a critical evaluation to determine which social situations tend to generate the most objective knowledge claims. They require, as judgmental relativism does not, a scientific account of the relationships between historically located belief and maximally objective belief. So they demand what I shall call *strong objectivity* in contrast to the weak objectivity of objectivism and its mirror-linked twin, judgmental relativism. This may appear to be circular reasoning – to call for scientifically examining the social location of scientific claims – but if so, it is at least not viciously circular.²²

This chapter also considers two possible objections to the argument presented, one that may arise from scientists and philosophers of science, and another that may arise among feminists themselves.

Objectivism's weak conception of objectivity

The term "objectivism" is useful for the purposes of my argument because its echoes of "scientism" draw attention to ways in which the research prescriptions called for by a value-free objectivity only mimic the purported style of the most successful scientific practices without managing to produce their effects. Objectivism results only in semi-science when it turns away from the task of critically identifying all those broad, historical social desires, interests, and values that have shaped the agendas, contents, and results of the sciences much as they shape the rest of human affairs. Objectivism encourages only a partial and distorted explanation of why the great moments in the history of the natural and social sciences have occurred.

Let me be more precise in identifying the weaknesses of this notion. It has been conceptualized both too narrowly and too broadly to be able to accomplish the goals that its defenders claim it is intended to satisfy. Taken at face value it is ineffectively conceptualized, but this is what makes the sciences that adopt weak standards of objectivity so effective socially: objectivist justifications of science are useful to dominant groups that, consciously or not, do not really intend to "play fair" anyway. Its internally contradictory character gives it a kind of flexibility and adaptability that would be unavailable to a coherently characterized notion.

Consider, first, how objectivism operationalizes too narrowly the notion of maximizing objectivity. The conception of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination from the results of research, yet it has been operationalized to identify and eliminate only those social values and interests that differ among the researchers and critics who are regarded by the scientific community as competent to make such judgments. If the community of "qualified" researchers and critics systematically excludes, for example, all African Americans and women of all races, and if the larger culture is stratified by race and gender and lacks powerful critiques of this stratification, it is not plausible to imagine that racist and sexist interests and values would be identified within a community of scientists composed entirely of people who benefit — intentionally or not — from institutional racism and sexism.

This kind of blindness is advanced by the conventional belief that the truly scientific part of knowledge-seeking — the part controlled by methods of research — is only in the context of justification. The context of discovery, where problems are identified as appropriate for scientific investigation, hypotheses are formulated, key concepts are defined — this part of the scientific process is thought to be unexaminable within science by rational methods. Thus "real science" is restricted to those processes controllable by methodological rules. The methods of science — or, rather, of the special sciences — are restricted to procedures for the testing of already formulated hypotheses. Untouched by these careful methods are those values and interests entrenched in the very statement of what problem is to be researched and in the concepts favored in the hypotheses that are to be tested. Recent histories of science are full of cases in which broad social assumptions stood little chance of identification or elimination through the very best research procedures of the day.²³ Thus objectivism operationalizes the notion of objectivity in much too narrow a way to permit the achievement of the value-free research that is supposed to be its outcome.

But objectivism also conceptualizes the desired value-neutrality of objectivity too broadly. Objectivists claim that objectivity requires the elimination of all social values

and interests from the research process and the results of research. It is clear, however, that not all social values and interests have the same bad effects upon the results of research. Some have systematically generated less partial and distorted beliefs than others – or than purportedly value-free research – as earlier chapters have argued.

Nor is this so outlandish an understanding of the history of science as objectivists frequently intimate. Setting the scene for his study of nineteenth-century biological determinism, Stephen Jay Gould says:

I do not intend to contrast evil determinists who stray from the path of scientific objectivity with enlightened antideterminists who approach data with an open mind and therefore see truth. Rather, I criticize the myth that science itself is an objective enterprise, done properly only when scientists can shake the constraints of their culture and view the world as it really is. . . . Science, since people must do it, is a socially embedded activity. It progresses by hunch, vision, and intuition. Much of its change through time does not record a closer approach to absolute truth, but the alteration of cultural contexts that influence it so strongly.²⁴

Other historians agree with Gould.²⁵ Modern science has again and again been reconstructed by a set of interests and values – distinctively Western, bourgeois, and patriarchal – which were originally formulated by a new social group that intentionally used the new sciences in their struggles against the Catholic Church and feudal state. These interests and values had both positive and negative consequences for the development of the sciences.²⁶ Political and social interests are not “add-ons” to an otherwise transcendental science that is inherently indifferent to human society; scientific beliefs, practices, institutions, histories, and problematics are constituted in and through contemporary political and social projects, and always have been. It would be far more startling to discover a kind of human knowledge-seeking whose products could – alone among all human products – defy historical “gravity” and fly off the earth, escaping entirely their historical location. Such a cultural phenomenon would be cause for scientific alarm; it would appear to defy principles of “material” causality upon which the possibility of scientific activity itself is based.²⁷

Of course, people in different societies arrive at many of the same empirical claims. Farmers, toolmakers, and child tenders in every culture must arrive at similar “facts” about nature and social relations if their work is to succeed. Many of the observations collected by medieval European astronomers are preserved in the data used by astronomers today. But what “facts” these data refer to, what further research they point to, what theoretical statements they support and how such theories are to be applied, what such data signify in terms of human social relations and relations to nature – all these parts of the sciences can differ wildly, as the contrast between medieval and contemporary astronomy illustrates.

[. . .]

The best as well as the worst of the history of the natural sciences has been shaped by – or, more accurately, constructed through and within – political desires, interests, and values. Consequently, there appear to be no grounds left from which to defend the claim that the objectivity of research is advanced by the elimination of all political values and interests from the research process. Instead, the sciences need to legitimate *within scientific research*, as part of practicing science, critical examination of historical values

and interests that may be so shared within the scientific community, so invested in by the very constitution of this or that field of study, that they will not show up as a cultural bias between experimenters or between research communities. What objectivism cannot conceptualize is the need for critical examination of the “intentionality of nature” – meaning not that nature is no different from humans (in having intentions, desires, interests, and values or in constructing its own meaningful “way of life,” and so on) but that nature-as-the-object-of-human-knowledge never comes to us “naked”; it comes only as already constituted in social thought.²⁸ Nature-as-object-of-study simulates in this respect an intentional being. This idea helps counter the intuitively seductive idea that scientific claims are and should be an epiphenomenon of nature. It is the development of strategies to generate just such critical examination that the notion of strong objectivity calls for.

Not everyone will welcome such a project; even those who share these criticisms of objectivism may think the call for strong objectivity too idealistic, too utopian, not realistic enough. But is it more unrealistic than trying to explain the regularities of nature and their underlying causal tendencies scientifically but refusing to examine *all* their causes? And even if the ideal of identifying all the causes of human beliefs is rarely if ever achievable, why not hold it as a desirable standard? Anti-liter laws improve social life even if they are not always obeyed.²⁹

Weak objectivity, then, is a contradictory notion, and its contradictory character is largely responsible for its usefulness and its widespread appeal to dominant groups. It offers hope that scientists and science institutions, themselves admittedly historically located, can produce claims that will be regarded as objectively valid without their having to examine critically their own historical commitments, from which – intentionally or not – they actively construct their scientific research. It permits scientists and science institutions to be unconcerned with the origins or consequences of their problematics and practices, or with the social values and interests that these problematics and practices support. It offers the possibility of enacting what Francis Bacon promised: “The course I propose for the discovery of sciences is such as leaves but little to the acuteness and strength of wits, but places all wits and understandings nearly on a level.” His “way of discovering sciences goes far to level men’s wits, and leaves but little to individual excellence; because it performs everything by surest rules and demonstrations.”³⁰

For those powerful forces in society that want to appropriate science and knowledge for their own purposes, it is extremely valuable to be able to support the idea that ignoring the constitution of science within political desires, values, and interests will somehow increase the reliability of accounts of nature and social life. The ideal of the disinterested rational scientist advances the self-interest of both social elites and, ironically, scientists who seek status and power. Reporting on various field studies of scientific work, Steve Fuller points out that Machiavellian judgments

simulate those of the fabled “rational” scientist, since in order for the Machiavellian to maximize his advantage he must be ready to switch research programs when he detects a change in the balance of credibility – which is, after all, what philosophers of science would typically have the rational scientist do. To put the point more strikingly, it would seem that as the scientist’s motivation approximates total *self-interestedness* (such that he is always able to distance his own

interests from those of any social group which supports what may turn out to be a research program with diminishing credibility), his behavior approximates total *disinterestedness*. And so we can imagine the ultimate Machiavellian scientist pursuing a line of research frowned upon by most groups in the society – perhaps determining the racial component in intelligence is an example – simply because he knows of its potential for influencing the course of future research and hence for enhancing his credibility as a scientist.³¹

The history of science shows that research directed by maximally liberatory social interests and values tends to be better equipped to identify partial claims and distorting assumptions, even though the credibility of the scientists who do it may not be enhanced during the short run. After all, antiliberatory interests and values are invested in the natural inferiority of just the groups of humans who, if given real equal access (not just the formally equal access that is liberalism's goal) to public voice, would most strongly contest claims about their purported natural inferiority. Antiliberatory interests and values silence and destroy the most likely sources of evidence against their own claims. That is what makes them rational for elites.

Strong objectivity: a competency concept

At this point, what I mean by a concept of strong objectivity should be clear. In an important sense, our cultures have agendas and make assumptions that we as individuals cannot easily detect. Theoretically unmediated experience, that aspect of a group's or an individual's experience in which cultural influences cannot be detected, functions as part of the evidence for scientific claims. Cultural agendas and assumptions are part of the background assumptions and auxiliary hypotheses that philosophers have identified. If the goal is to make available for critical scrutiny all the evidence marshaled for or against a scientific hypothesis, then this evidence too requires critical examination within scientific research processes. In other words, we can think of strong objectivity as extending the notion of scientific research to include systematic examination of such powerful background beliefs. It must do so in order to be competent at maximizing objectivity.

The strong objectivity that standpoint theory requires is like the "strong programme" in the sociology of knowledge in that it directs us to provide *symmetrical* accounts of both "good" and "bad" belief formation and legitimation.³² We must be able to identify the social causes of good beliefs, not just of the bad ones to which the conventional "sociology of error" and objectivism restrict causal accounts. However, in contrast to the "strong programme," standpoint theory requires causal analyses not just of the micro processes in the laboratory but also of the macro tendencies in the social order, which shape scientific practices. Moreover, a concern with macro tendencies permits a more robust notion of reflexivity than is currently available in the sociology of knowledge or the philosophy of science. In trying to identify the social causes of good beliefs, we will be led also to examine critically the kinds of bad beliefs that shape our own thought and behaviors, not just the thought and behavior of others.

[. . .]

It is important to remember that in a certain sense there are no "women" or "men" in the world – there is no "gender" – but only women, men, and gender constructed

through particular historical struggles over just which races, classes, sexualities, cultures, religious groups, and so forth, will have access to resources and power. Moreover, standpoint theories of knowledge, whether or not they are articulated as such, have been advanced by thinkers concerned not only with gender and class hierarchy (recall that standpoint theory originated in class analyses) but also with other "Others."³³ To make sense of any actual woman's life or the gender relations in any culture, analyses must begin in real, historic women's lives, and these will be women of particular races, classes, cultures, and sexualities. The historical particularity of women's lives is a problem for narcissistic or arrogant accounts that attempt, consciously or not, to conduct a cultural monologue. But it is a resource for those who think that our understandings and explanations are improved by what we could call an intellectual participatory democracy.

The notion of strong objectivity welds together the strengths of weak objectivity and those of the "weak subjectivity" that is its correlate, but excludes the features that make them only weak. To enact or operationalize the directive of strong objectivity is to value the Other's perspective and to pass over in thought into the social condition that creates it – not in order to stay there, to "go native" or merge the self with the Other, but in order to look back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical, objectifying location. One can think of the subjectivism that objectivism conceptualizes as its sole alternative as only a "premodern" alternative to objectivism; it provides only a premodern solution to the problem we have here and now at the moment of postmodern criticisms of modernity's objectivism. Strong objectivity rejects attempts to resuscitate those organic, occult, "participating consciousness" relationships between self and Other which are characteristic of the premodern world.³⁴ Strong objectivity requires that we investigate the relation between subject and object rather than deny the existence of, or seek unilateral control over, this relation.

Historical relativism versus judgmental relativism

It is not that historical relativism is in itself a bad thing. A respect for historical (or sociological or cultural) relativism is always useful in starting one's thinking. Different social groups tend to have different patterns of practice and belief and different standards for judging them; these practices, beliefs, and standards can be explained by different historical interests, values, and agendas. Appreciation of these empirical regularities is especially important at this moment of unusually deep and extensive social change, when even preconceived schemes used in liberatory projects are likely to exclude less-well-positioned voices and to distort emerging ways of thinking that do not fit easily into older schemes. Listening carefully to different voices and attending thoughtfully to others' values and interests can enlarge our vision and begin to correct for inevitable ethnocentrism. (The dominant values, interests, and voices are not among these "different" ones; they are the powerful tide against which "difference" must swim.)

To acknowledge this historical or sociological fact, as I have already argued, does not commit one to the further epistemological claim that there are therefore no rational or scientific grounds for making judgments between various patterns of belief and their originating social practices, values, and consequences. Many thinkers have pointed out

that judgmental relativism is internally related to objectivism. For example, science historian Donna Haraway argues that judgmental relativism is the other side of the very same coin from “the God trick” required by what I have called weak objectivity. To insist that no judgments at all of cognitive adequacy can legitimately be made amounts to the same thing as to insist that knowledge can be produced only from “no place at all”: that is, by someone who can be every place at once.³⁵

[. . .]

To summarize, then, a strong notion of objectivity requires a commitment to acknowledge the historical character of every belief or set of beliefs – a commitment to cultural, sociological, historical relativism. But it also requires that judgmental or epistemological relativism be rejected. Weak objectivity is located in a conceptual interdependency that includes (weak) subjectivity and judgmental relativism. One cannot simply give up weak objectivity without making adjustments throughout the rest of this epistemological system.

Responding to objections

Two possible objections to the recommendation of a stronger standard for objectivity must be considered here. First, some scientists and philosophers of science may protest that I am attempting to specify standards of objectivity for all the sciences. What could it mean to attempt to specify *general* standards for increasing the objectivity of research? Shouldn't the task of determining what counts as adequate research be settled within each science by its own practitioners? Why should practicing scientists revise their research practices because of what is thought by a philosopher or anyone else who is not an expert in a particular science?

But the issue of this chapter is an epistemological issue – a metascientific one – rather than an issue within any single science. It is more like a directive to operationalize theoretical concepts than like a directive to operationalize in a certain way some particular theoretical notion within physics or biology. The recommended combination of strong objectivity with the acknowledgment of historical relativism would, if adopted, create a culture-wide shift in the kind of epistemology regarded as desirable. Certainly, strategies for enacting commitments to strong objectivity and the acknowledgment of historical relativism would have to be developed within each particular research program; plenty of examples already exist in biology and the social sciences. My position is that the natural sciences are backward in this respect; they are not immune from the reasonableness of these directives, as conventionalists have assumed.

The notion of strong objectivity developed here represents insights that have been emerging from thinkers in a number of disciplines for some decades – not just “wishful thinking” based on no empirical sciences at all. Criticisms of the dominant thought of the West from both inside and outside the West argue that its partiality and distortions are the consequence in large part of starting that thought only from the lives of the dominant groups in the West. Less partiality and less distortion result when thought starts from peasant life, not just aristocratic life; from slaves' lives, not just slaveowners' lives; from the lives of factory workers, not just those of their bosses and managers; from the lives of people who work for wages and have also been assigned responsibility for husband and child care, not just those of persons who are expected to have little

such responsibility. This directive leaves open to be determined within each discipline or research area what a researcher must do to start thought from women's lives or the lives of people in other marginalized groups, and it will be easier – though still difficult – to provide reasonable responses to such a request in history or sociology than in physics or chemistry. But the difficulty of providing an analysis in physics or chemistry does not signify that the question is an absurd one for knowledge-seeking in general, or that there are no reasonable answers for those sciences too.

The second objection may come from feminists themselves. Many would say that the notion of objectivity is so hopelessly tainted by its historical complicity in justifying the service of science to the dominant groups that trying to make it function effectively and progressively in alternative agendas only confuses the matter. If feminists want to breathe new life into such a bedraggled notion as objectivity, why not at least invent an alternative term that does not call up the offenses associated with the idea of value-neutrality, that is not intimately tied to a faulty theory of representation, to a faulty psychic construction of the ideal agent of knowledge, and to regressive political tendencies.

Let us reorganize some points made earlier in order to get the full force of this objection. The goal of producing results of research that are value-free is part of the notion of the ideal mind as a mirror that can reflect a world that is “out there,” ready-made. In this view, value-free objectivity can locate an Archimedean perspective from which the events and processes of the natural world appear in their proper places. Only false beliefs have social causes – human values and interests that blind us to the real regularities and underlying causal tendencies in the world, generating biased results of research. True beliefs have only natural causes: those regularities and underlying causal tendencies that are *there*, plus the power of the eyes to see them and of the mind to reason about them. This theory of representation is a historically situated one: it is characteristic only of certain groups in the modern West. Can the notion of objectivity really be separated from this implausible theory of representation?

Value-free objectivity requires also a faulty theory of the ideal agent – the subject – of science, knowledge, and history. It requires a notion of the self as a fortress that must be defended against polluting influences from its social surroundings. The self whose mind would perfectly reflect the world must create and constantly police the borders of a gulf, a no-man's-land, between himself as the subject and the object of his research, knowledge, or action. Feminists have been among the most pointed critics of this self-versus-Other construct,³⁶ referring to it as “abstract masculinity.”³⁷ Moreover, its implication in Western constructions of the racial Other against which the “white” West would define its admirable projects is also obvious.³⁸ Can the notion of objectivity be useful in efforts to oppose such sexism and racism?

Equally important, the notion of value-free objectivity is morally and politically regressive for reasons additional to those already mentioned. It justifies the construction of science institutions and individual scientists as “fast guns for hire.” It has been used to legitimate and hold up as the highest ideal institutions and individuals that are, insofar as they are scientific, to be studiously unconcerned with the origins or consequences of their activities or with the values and interests that these activities advance. This nonaccidental, determined, energetic lack of concern is supported by science education that excludes training in critical thought and that treats all expressions of social and political concern – the concerns of the torturer and the concerns of the

tortured—as being on the same low level of scientific “rationality.” Scandalous examples of the institutional impotence of the sciences as sciences to speak to the moral and political issues that shape their problematics, consequences, values, and interests have been identified for decades. The construction of a border between scientific method and violations of human and, increasingly, animal rights must be conducted “outside” that method, by government statements about what constitutes acceptable methods of research on human and animal subjects, what constitutes consent to experimentation, the subsequent formation of “ethics committees,” and so on. Can the notion of objectivity be extracted from the morals and politics of “objective science” as a “fast gun for hire”?

These are formidable objections. Nevertheless, the argument of this book is that the notion of objectivity not only can but should be separated from its shameful and damaging history. Research is socially situated, and it can be more objectively conducted without aiming for or claiming to be value-free. The requirements for achieving strong objectivity permit one to abandon notions of perfect, mirrorlike representations of the world, the self as a defended fortress, and the “truly scientific” as disinterested with regard to morals and politics, yet still apply rational standards to sorting less from more partial and distorted belief. Indeed, my argument is that these standards are more rational and more effective at producing maximally objective results than the ones associated with what I have called weak objectivity.

As I have been arguing, objectivity is one of a complex of inextricably linked notions. Science and rationality are two other terms in this network. But it is not necessary to accept the idea that there is only one correct or reasonable way to think about these terms, let alone that the correct way is the one used by dominant groups in the modern West. Not all reason is white, masculinist, modern, heterosexual, Western reason. Not all modes of rigorous empirical knowledge-seeking are what the dominant groups think of as science—to understate the point. The procedures institutionalized in conventional science for distinguishing between how we want the world to be and how it is are not the only or best ways to go about maximizing objectivity. It is important to work and think outside the dominant modes, as the minority movements have done. But it is important, also, to bring the insights developed there into the heart of conventional institutions, to disrupt the dominant practices from within by appropriating notions such as objectivity, reason, and science in ways that stand a chance of compelling reasoned assent while simultaneously shifting and displacing the meanings and referents of the discussion in ways that improve it. It is by thinking and acting as “outsiders within” that feminists and others can transform science and its social relations for those who remain only insiders or outsiders.

Reflexivity revisited

The notion of “strong objectivity” conceptualizes the value of putting the subject or agent of knowledge in the same critical, causal plane as the object of her or his inquiry. It permits us to see the scientific as well as the moral and political advantages of this way of trying to achieve a reciprocal relationship between the agent and object of knowledge. The contrast developed here between weak and strong notions of objectivity permits the parallel construction of weak versus strong notions of reflexivity.

Reflexivity has tended to be seen as a problem in the social sciences – and only there. Observation cannot be as separated from its social consequences as the directives of “weak objectivity,” originating in the natural sciences, have assumed. In social inquiry, observation changes the field observed. Having recognized his complicity in the lives of his objects of study, the researcher is then supposed to devise various strategies to try to democratize the situation, to inform the “natives” of their options, to make them participants in the account of their activities, and so forth.³⁹

Less commonly, reflexivity has been seen as a problem because if the researcher is under the obligation to identify the social causes of the “best” as well as the “worst” beliefs and behaviors of those he studies, then he must also analyze his own beliefs and behaviors in conducting his research project – which have been shaped by the same kinds of social relations that he is interested to identify as causes of the beliefs and behaviors of others. (Here, reflexivity can begin to be conceptualized as a “problem” for the natural sciences, too.) Sociologists of knowledge in the recent “strong programme” school and related tendencies, who emphasize the importance of identifying the social causes of “best belief,” have been aware of this problem from the very beginning but have devised no plausible way of resolving it – primarily because their conception of the social causes of belief in the natural sciences (the subject matter of their analyses) is artificially restricted to the micro processes of the laboratory and research community, explicitly excluding race, gender, and class relations. This restricted notion of what constitutes appropriate subject matter for analyses of the social relations of the sciences is carried into their understanding of their own work. It generates ethnographies of their own and the natural science communities which are complicitous with positivist tendencies in insisting on the isolation of research communities from the larger social, economic, and political currents in their societies. (These accounts are also flawed by their positivist conceptions of the object of natural science study.)⁴⁰

These “weak” notions of reflexivity are disabled by their lack of any mechanism for identifying the cultural values and interests of the researchers, which form part of the evidence for the results of research in both the natural and social sciences. Anthropologists, sociologists, and the like, who work within social communities, frequently appear to desire such a mechanism or standard; but the methodological assumptions of their disciplines, which direct them to embrace either weak objectivity or judgmental relativism, have not permitted them to develop one. That is, individuals express “heartfelt desire” not to harm the subjects they observe, to become aware of their own cultural biases, and so on, but such reflexive goals remain at the level of desire rather than competent enactment. In short, such weak reflexivity has no possible operationalization, or no competency standard, for success.

A notion of strong reflexivity would require that the objects of inquiry be conceptualized as gazing back in all their cultural particularity and that the researcher, through theory and methods, stand behind them, gazing back at his own socially situated research project in all its cultural particularity and its relationships to other projects of his culture – many of which (policy development in international relations, for example, or industrial expansion) can be seen only from locations far away from the scientist’s actual daily work. “Strong reflexivity” requires the development of oppositional theory from the perspective of the lives of those Others (“nature” as already socially constructed, as well as other peoples), since intuitive experience, for reasons

discussed earlier, is frequently not a reliable guide to the regularities of nature and social life and their underlying causal tendencies.

Standpoint theory opens the way to stronger standards of both objectivity and reflexivity. These standards require that research projects use their historical location as a resource for obtaining greater objectivity.

Notes

- 1 See Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), 3 collection of the essays that Smith began to publish in the mid-1970s; Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983); Hilary Rose, "Hand, Brain, and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences," *Signs* 9: 1 (1983).
- 2 Jane Flax, "Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Epistemology and Metaphysics," in Harding and Hintikka, *Discovering Reality*; Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allenheld, 1983), esp. chap. 11; Sandra Harding, "Why Has the Sex-Gender System Become Visible Only Now?" in Harding and Hintikka, *Discovering Reality*; Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), chap. 6.
- 3 Standpoint theory arguments have been made in the context of other liberatory social movements as well (a point to which I return later): see, e.g., Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989); Bettina Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989); Patricia Hill Collins, "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought," *Social Problems* 33 (1986); Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1982); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Edward Said, Foreword to *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), viii.
- 4 I have substituted "distorted" for "perverse," since one person's "perversities" may be another's most highly valued pleasures. "Distorted" appears less amenable to this kind of transvaluation.
- 5 In *The Science Question in Feminism*, I discussed differences between the grounds proposed by four standpoint theorists: Rose, Hartsock, Flax, and Smith. Here I consider additional grounds proposed to justify feminist research.
- 6 Standpoint theories need not commit essentialism. *The Science Question in Feminism* contributed to such a misreading of their "logic"; in this book I contest an essentialist reading.
- 7 Flax, "Political Philosophy." See also Nancy Hirschmann's use of object relations theory to ground a standpoint epistemology in her "Freedom, Recognition, and Obligation: A Feminist Approach to Political Theory," *American Political Science Review* 83: 4 (1989).