Epistemic Privilege, Standpoint Epistemology, and the Human Sciences

1. The human sciences, or those sciences which pertain to the practices of everyday life, are often accused of being either too objective or too subjective. It is difficult to articulate exactly what implications scientific research has on everyday life, and the extent to which everyday life brings itself to bear on these kinds of scientific research. In this essay, I seek to defend standpoint epistemology as formulated by Sandra Harding as a form of normative naturalism, one which emphasizes the political nature of scientific knowledge without denying that there is a world which bounds our claims that we can know objectively. In order to draw out the details, I will examine not only specifically feminist perspectives on these matters (drawing primarily on the traditions of standpoint epistemology and intersectionality), but also standpoint epistemology’s philosophical predecessors, examples from the history of science and technology, and criticisms of standpoint epistemology in order to shed some light on my claims.

2. Standpoint epistemology can be understood as a dialectical account of subject naturalism applied to the philosophy of science. It is *dialectical* because subjects and objects are understood as constituted *discursively*; we come to know the world in the same way we come to know ourselves. It is *naturalist* because it assumes that the world is essentially knowable and subjects are ‘in the world’.¹ And it is a philosophy of science because it is concerned with the production of scientific knowledge. In Harding’s words,

> [F]or standpoint theories, the grounds for knowledge are fully saturated with history and social life rather than abstracted from them. Standpoint knowledge projects do not claim to originate in purportedly universal human problematics: they do not claim

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¹ For more on the relationship between standpoint epistemology and subject naturalism, see Rebecca Kukla’s essay “Naturalizing Objectivity.”
to perform the “God-trick.” However, the fact that feminist knowledge claims are socially situated does not in practice distinguish them from any other knowledge claims that have been made inside or outside the history of Western thought and the disciplines today… All thought by humans starts off from socially determinate lives.²

Harding’s point is not that knowledge claims are dependent on the social position of the knower, but rather that knowledge claims ought to be evaluated by examining the relationship between knower and known. It is not that the social position of the knower plays no part in how a subject arrives at a given knowledge claim, but that one cannot evaluate truth as inherent to a given subject position. This kind of methodology leads to what Harding terms ‘strong objectivity’, so called because it reveals the intersubjective political edifice upon which scientific knowledge rests.³ Harding’s criticism of logical empiricism, therefore, is that any account of the scientific production of knowledge must also contain an account of the normative practices through which objects of knowledge are constituted.⁴

3. To paraphrase philosopher C. I. Lewis, the object of the human sciences is not the buzzing, blooming sensation of an infant upon awakening, one of mere impressions and sensations, but rather is the thick description of everyday life, replete with the language of intentionality. In other words, the entities which populate the social sciences, such as beliefs or desires, are not ontologically reducible to physical objects, nor distinct from discourse about everyday life. Feminist researchers take this quite seriously: in her essay “Feminist Methods in Social Research,” Shulamit Reinharz outlines a specific kind of interview in which female sociologists let their informants guide the interview practices. By using female researchers,

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³ For this essay, I’m borrowing Leslie McCall’s definition of a methodology as a “… coherent set of ideas about the philosophy, methods, and data that underlie the research process and the production of knowledge.” From “The Complexity of Intersectionality,” 1774.
⁴ There is an intriguing connection between Harding’s standpoint epistemology and Martin Heidegger’s essay “The Question Concerning Technology,” which explores the way that technology reveals the way in which the world appears while obscuring the apparatus that allows the world to appear. (In Heidegger’s parlance, science is conceptually dependent upon technology.) This relationship, however, deserves its own essay.
the informants are at ease navigating the much broader set of questions posed by the interviewers.\(^5\) This proves particularly valuable when discussing ‘women’s issues’, which are under-represented in sociological work. Even when women’s issues are discussed in the literature, oftentimes the power relationships between male sociologists and female informants goes unexamined, which distorts the facts gathered. Feminist methodologies accord the subjects of their inquiry as capable of producing scientifc knowledge, rather than as objects which are explored via specific research models.

4. Anthropology has traditionally had a complex relationship with theories of objectivity: as Clifford Geertz wrote, anthropology is “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.”\(^6\) Pushing Geertz’s statement further, the influential essay collection Writing Culture diagnosed the crisis of representation brought about by postmodern theories of power and knowledge.\(^7\) But while the theorists in Writing Culture may meet Harding’s criteria of self-reflexivity, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod rightly criticizes the editors both for only including one woman in the anthology, and for relegating women and colonial subjects (we can add other marginalized people to the list) to the category of Other. Just as Kant divided the world into appearances and things in themselves, then banished the in-itself beyond all possible knowledge, the reflexive anthropologists examined the underpinnings of how the Other is constituted as an object of representation, relegating their actual existence beyond Western knowledge. Abu-Lughod took a different tack, examining the historical and cultural discourses that generated the feminine and colonial Other. Her standpoint methodology of the ‘halfie’ uses anthropologists who are multiply marked as both of Western culture (white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, cisgender, etc.) and as Other to Western culture to use their multiple identities to bridge the gap between the ethnographic subject and the community which the anthropologist is writing for.

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\(^6\) Quoted in Lila Abi-Lughod, “Can There Be A Feminist Ethnography?” 9.

\(^7\) The label ‘postmodern’ is oft-abused in academic discourse, but here I am specifically referring to work influenced by the early Michel Foucault and the Jean-Francois Lyotard of “The Postmodern Condition.”
5. The main criticism of feminist standpoint epistemology concerns how various standpoints are justified. Feminist philosopher Helen Longino is one such critic. While she lauds standpoint epistemologists for their ability to identify how social factors play a role in scientific discovery, she criticizes them for not being able to differentiate between competing knowledge claims from different minor standpoints. In her words,

Women occupy many social locations in a racially and economically stratified society. If genuine or better knowledge depends on the correct or a more correct standpoint, social theory is needed to ascertain which of these locations is the epistemologically privileged one. But in a standpoint epistemology, a standpoint is needed to justify such a theory. What is that standpoint and how do we identify it? If no single standpoint is privileged, then either the standpoint theorist must embrace multiple and incompatible knowledge positions or offer some means of transforming or integrating multiple perspectives into one. Both of these moves require either the abandonment or the supplementation of standpoint as an epistemic criterion.\(^8\)

If Longino is correct, embracing one marginalized standpoint over another requires an additional criteria. But in order to provide the criteria, one must be able to take the “God’s eye view” that Harding criticizes. Therefore, the inherent “epistemic privilege” of marginalized subjects must be abandoned, unless one is to return to the patriarchal transcendent subject. Longino ties this problem in standpoint epistemology to its

\(^8\)“Subjects, Power, and Knowledge,” 109.
philosophical predecessor, Marxism. According to her, Marxism has struggled to identify which proletariat is supposed to create true knowledge, to perceive the world accurately.\(^9\)

Rather than return to the God’s Eye view, Longino draws upon various anti-realist philosophies of science (primarily Kuhnian historicism and Duhem’s argument for the underdetermination of theory choice) to endorse scientific knowledge as a set of theoretical models. On this account, scientific research programmes are *models* which pick out localized phenomena. As models begin in metaphor, different discursive norms inform how models pick out empirical phenomena. Metaphors are semantic phenomena, and thus susceptible to sexism, militarism, racism, etc. For instance, Donna Haraway’s analysis of the shift from production/consumption metaphors to information processing metaphors in organism structure/function during WWII outlines how shifts in military technology influence biological models. Since these models are *local*, they’re inherently pluralist, thus allowing for different marginalized groups to create theoretical models to serve their own communities.\(^10\) As such, one of the jobs of the feminist scientist is to critically examine the discursive underpinnings of the theoretical model in order to expunge problematic elements.

6. Longino’s theory of models is derived from Mary Hesse’s book *Models and Analogies in Science*. The first section of the book stands out as relevant to this essay: a consideration of how models can be used to produce scientific knowledge. The book begins with an imaginary dialogue between two different philosophies of science in the early 20th century, with the purpose of refining what the relevant features of a model are. Hesse identifies three forms of analogy: positive, negative, and neutral. The positive analogies are what’s identical between the model and the phenomena: for instance, the relationship between billiard balls bouncing off of each other as a model for the noble gases have identity between motion and impact.

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\(^9\) As Longino never cites any Marxists, it’s unclear to me who exactly has ever held these beliefs about Marxism. Marxists even have a name for this sort of theory: vulgar Marxism.

\(^10\) For Longino, *local* designates the manner in which a model concerns itself solely with particular phenomena. For instance, a biological model of predator-prey relationships would merely concern itself with an ecosystem, not with the anatomy of particular predators or prey.
The negative analogy is that billiard balls are different material than noble gases. However, I think it’s the neutral analogy between model and phenomena that Longino is interested. The neutral analogy are features of a model which may be useful in establishing unidentified properties of the phenomena under investigation by assuming that properties of the model may in fact belong to the entities under investigation. One might, for instance, posit that gas atoms bounce off each other in a manner similar to billiard balls, even if it had not been verified yet. It is this neutral analogies that allow for patriarchal views to slip in, via the gendered nature of language.

As noted above, Haraway is one of the theorists Longino uses to support her case. However, I don’t think that Longino’s reading of Haraway is fidelitous to Haraway’s aims. In the essay Longino cites, “Sex, Mind and Profit,” Haraway begins by writing “By constructing the category nature, natural science imposes limits on history and self-formation. So science is part of the struggle over the nature of our lives.” Right off the bat, it seems clear that Haraway isn’t interested in criticizing the problematic extension of the neutral analogies generated in either the models of primatology or sociobiology (the subjects of the essay), but rather in how both primatology and sociobiology first define nature in terms of the structure of patriarchal capitalism, then use nature to ground normative impulses about how society ought to be organized. If models are metaphorical, as Longino says, then Haraway rejects the very premise of a model as an appropriate epistemic tool in engaging in scientific research.

Longino writes that adequacy, her criteria for the validity of scientific inquiry, must be understood as “...a matter of correspondence of the objects, processes, and relations described in the propositions with the objects, processes, and relations in the domain of the natural world that the theory purports to explain.” Yet it is precisely this givenness of the natural world that Haraway is criticizing in her essay! Admittedly, it might be a little unclear in this essay that the target of Haraway’s account is the way in which the natural world is constituted as given, rather than particular theories which exemplify these problems. In her later essay

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11 “The Biological Enterprise: Sex, Mind, and Profit from Human Engineering to Sociobiology,” 43.
12 op cit, 115
“Cyborgs to Companion Species,” Haraway writes of scientific inquiry as a process of “Whiteheadian concrescence.” Rather than a correspondence between known entities and yet-to-be-revealed entities, Haraway is interested in how ontological difference precedes stable entities. Rather than writing again of her most famous example of the concrescence of different naturecultures, the cyborg, Haraway offers an evolutionary account of how humans and dogs co-evolved. Drawing on recent trends in molecular biology, archaeology, zooarchaeology, and animal behavior, Haraway argues that dogs functionally domesticated themselves by eating at human garbage and fecal dumps. Humans that didn’t immediately see these wolves as rivals (contra Darwinist rhetoric about the survival of the fittest) could put them to work by using them as guards or fellow hunters. One might even offer a story (or an ironic myth) that humans developed agriculture, and properly became humans as we now understand the term, as a result of their interaction with these wolves. Rather than humans domesticating wolves, each produced the other as objects through the way they grew together (the biological definition of concrescence).

8. Taken by itself, this story might be made to fit into Longino’s empiricism by excising the metaphysical implications of Haraway’s story, if it were not the rhetorical move of the opening pages. At the beginning of the essay, Haraway muses on her symbiogenic relationship with her dogs, essay full of half-finished thoughts, which mirrors her metaphysical commitments. I don’t take her to be arguing that it’s impossible to write a more concrete essay (see her previously cited essay), but rather that even truth-as-consensus is flawed, as each new scientific project is always already in construction between different knowledge projects. Haraway writes

    Companion species take shape in interaction. They more than change each other; they co-constitute each other, at least partly… the ontology of companion species makes room for odd bedfellows--machines; molecules’ scientists; hunter-gatherers;
garbage dumps; puppies; fox farmers; and randy bitches of all breeds, genders, and species.\textsuperscript{13}

It’s true that scientific knowledge reveals this ontological mud, but in another sense, the epistemology of science, the “logic of discovery”, is part and parcel of the “logic of justification.” While Harding and Haraway have theoretical differences, they both identify themselves with the project of standpoint epistemology; that is, they both see epistemology as necessary to pursue the metaphysical projects that unify science and society.\textsuperscript{14}

9. Longino’s accusation of epistemic privilege mistakes the kind of argument Harding is making. Epistemic privilege, as Longino understands it, requires some additional metaphysical fact in virtue of which it is true. Contemporary analytic metaphysics calls this a “truth-maker,” a metaphysical relationship which explains what makes a statement true.\textsuperscript{15} But I don’t think that Harding is pursuing this sort of metaphysical realism. Rather, Harding is interested in the epistemology \textit{cum} metaphysics of the German Idealist tradition exemplified by G. W. F. Hegel.\textsuperscript{16} When Harding writes that “Strong objectivity requires that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge,” it’s hard not to see Hegel’s idealism looming in the background.\textsuperscript{17} When a marginalized group engages in a particular scientific

\textsuperscript{13} “Cyborgs to Companion Species: Reconfiguring Kinship in Technoscience,” 307.
\textsuperscript{14} The ontology of models, and their role in scientific theory, has seen some criticism in the philosophy of biology. While I haven’t fully explored the issue here, I’m skeptical of their universal applicability in scientific practice. In a Wittgenstinian manner, I don’t believe that the word is particularly useful outside of its specific application in certain scientific practices. For instance, it’s unclear that studies in animal behavior which rely on model organisms are theoretical models in the sense used by Hesse or Longino. For more, see Michael Weisberg, “Who Is a Modeler?”; Nikolas Rose and Joelle Abi-Rached “What’s Wrong With Their Mice?”; and Arnon Levy and Adrian Currie, “Model Organisms are Not (Theoretical) Models”.
\textsuperscript{15} The neologism was coined by Kevin Mulligan, Peter Simons and Barry Smith in their article “Truth-Makers,” which explores the ontological entities which makes statements true about the world.
\textsuperscript{16} In “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology,” Harding references Hegel three times, at 442, 447, and 451.
\textsuperscript{17} In the preface to \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, Hegel writes that “Further, the living Substance is being which is in truth \textit{Subject}, or, what is the same, is in truth actual only in so far as it is the movement of positing itself, or is the mediation of its self-othering with itself. This Substance is, as Subject, pure, simple negativity, and is for this very reason the bifurcation of the simple; it is the doubling which sets up opposition, and then again the negation of this indifferent diversity and of its antithesis [the immediate simplicity]. Only this self-restoring sameness, or this reflection in otherness within itself--not an \textit{original} or \textit{immediate} unity as such--is the True (10).” This quote is not only a wonderful example of Hegel’s torturous prose; it also shows that both the
project that has a relationship to their experience (for instance, a sociological account of women’s issues or the gender of particular biological metaphors), they articulate the manner in which their experience contradicts (or negates, to use the Hegelian term) the facts that mischaracterizes their experience. Then, a proper standpoint methodology would take both the contradicting experience and contradicted facts, identify why the facts were flawed in terms of the contradicting experience, and offer a new solution. One classic example is W. E. B. DuBois’ sociological analysis of The Souls of Black Folk, which reacts against much of the work on the failure of the postwar Reconstruction in the South by articulating the cause of the failure from the perspective of black Southerners.

The charge of “epistemic privilege” is a straw man. There need be no truth-maker for claims made by marginalized groups, because standpoint epistemology does not blindly endorse the claims made by marginalized communities, but rather takes those problems as their starting point in order to better understand the relationship between how such facts are generated, and the world that those facts are true of. In other words, metaphysics (the general structure of the world) is determined by epistemology (what we know about the world) via the sublation (aufhebung) of contradictory facts.

10. In her book Science as Social Knowledge, Longino writes that

One does not simply declare oneself a biologist but learns the traditions, questions, mathematical and observational techniques, “the sense of what to do next,” from someone who has herself or himself been through a comparable initiation and then practiced. One “enters into a world” and learns how to live in that world from those who already live there.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{18} Science as Social Knowledge, 67.
Longino’s point in this chapter is well taken: scientists are produced by particular practices, and scientific knowledge must go through particular cultural practices in order to be recognized as such. But the advantage standpoint epistemology has over Longino’s scientific community is that individuals or communities outside of the scientific community proper can contribute to scientific knowledge. In *Foldit*, a computer game where players can manipulate ribbons to twist them into representations of protein molecules, gamers and scientists combine different modes of understanding to investigate the structure and properties of protein molecules. In his essay on the cultural practices of molecular biology, Tim Seiber states “…expert discourse is immaterial to the work of *Foldit* players, who employ spatial reasoning -- and not the logic and information inherent to complex understandings of molecular biology -- in their puzzle solution.”19

Longino’s image of science may involve social practices, but it is still deeply indebted to a particular image of science prominent in Western culture, one which requires particular processes of legitimation in order to be taken seriously as a scientist. Not only is this false, it’s also politically dangerous. If the institutions which produce legitimation are tainted by capitalism, sexism, and racism (as they are), then Longino’s scientific community silences voices at the margins who may have a real political stake in different scientific projects.20 The standpoint epistemologist, on the other hand, shows how turning our attention to the problems of marginalized communities actually makes for better science.

Works Cited


20 The adjunctification of higher education is one way in which Western hegemony maintains its power over knowledge production. For an in-depth treatment of these issues, see Yasmin Nair’s article in *Current Affairs* “The Dangerous Academic Is An Extinct Species.”


