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## Feminist Standpoint Theory

### §1. Introduction.

In this paper I will present feminist standpoint theory in epistemology. First, I will give a brief description of feminist epistemology itself. Secondly, I will give an explication of feminist standpoint theory. Lastly, I will explore some of the positive and negative aspects of the theory.

### §2. A Sketch of Feminist Epistemology<sup>1</sup>.

Feminist epistemology is not female ways of knowing but a naturalized social epistemology<sup>2</sup> that studies the influences of norms and conceptions of gender, gender interest, and gender experiences on knowledge. Feminist epistemology also considers the impacts (negative and positive) gender categories have on knowers.

Feminist epistemology attacks traditional epistemology but it is not anti-epistemological. Instead, Feminist epistemology reduces traditional epistemology to a psychological or sociological phenomena. There are two essential aims of feminist epistemology (Anderson p.51):

First, feminist epistemology explains feminist critiques of science which reveal sexism and androcentrism in theoretical inquiry. Feminist epistemologists ask, “how is a theory or practice sexist?”, “How is sexism expressed in theory?”, and “What bearing does sexism have on the theory?”

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<sup>1</sup> This section uses *Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense* by, Elizabeth Anderson from the philosophical journal *Hypatia* as its reference.

<sup>2</sup> Naturalized epistemology includes sociological and psychological considerations within theories of knowledge. (see Quine *Epistemology Naturalized* 1969).

Secondly, Feminist epistemologists defend feminist scientific practices. This defense reaches beyond the liberation of women but encompasses the liberation of all marginalized people.

The goals of feminist epistemology can be met within a naturalized, social epistemology, which retains commitments to modest empiricism<sup>3</sup> and to rational inquiry (*ibid.* p.51). In feminist epistemology rational inquiry is a social enterprise (*ibid.* p.53). Science becomes an inclusive community of situated knowers who interconnectedly rely on each other rather than solely on themselves or those like them.

This community of situated knowers introduces the concept of standpoint epistemology. Once many standpoint scientific theories are present, the objective aspects of empirical evidence are exposed and the individualistic standpoint implications will be recognizable. This is important in two distinct ways.

First, it will enable researchers to further detach the ‘self’ from the scientific research. Biased research would become transparent in the sense that many standpoints would reveal the objective in the subjective. In picking through the subjective implications of many standpoint theories one could begin to see the objective from within.

Secondly, the research will attain a more full-bodied aspect impossible to render from a single standpoint. Traditionally scientific research was predominantly done on white male patients. Standpoint theory in scientific practices would consider a broader grouping of ethnicities and genders. The inclusion of a broader range of research subjects in itself renders a better scientific model.

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson wants to redefine modest empiricism as a methodological approach, rejecting *a priori* commitments to what the content and models of theories must be. (Anderson p.52). In simpler terms, this version of modest empiricism wants to get away from the view that non-empirical research can be considered as valid knowledge.

Feminist epistemology and naturalized epistemology as a whole rely on this standpoint perspective to investigate how knowledge changes as views change from standpoint to standpoint (*ibid* p.54). The feminist epistemologist considers the implications of both the psychological and sociological factors of knowers.

### §3. Feminist Standpoint Epistemology.

“A standpoint is a socioeconomic position from which social reality can be understood and from which emancipatory action can be undertaken.”<sup>4</sup> Feminist standpoint epistemology incorporates the Marxist idea that different social groups have different epistemological standpoints.

In the Marxist theory, the dominant social class has the power of epistemological privilege to bestow what is considered as knowledge and what is not. This view’s appropriation within feminist critique considers the marginalized epistemological standpoints as equally important to the centralized dominant epistemology.

A marginalized standpoint is not only important because it can view the dominant group from angles which it has become too bloated to see but it also in can view many different standpoints and critique them. When this is done one can step back and see what facts appear in repetition. When these situated facts form a pattern of this type the patterns themselves could be seen as knowledge.

Feminist standpoint theory is especially relevant in the scientific method. Many case studies in the sciences ranging from the field of pharmacology to sociology have fallen subject to being viewed by one singular epistemological standpoint, namely that of the dominant class. Scientific tests done solely on the dominant class are generalized and misapplied to the people in

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<sup>4</sup> From Feminist Social Thought: A Reader edited by, Diana Tietjens Meyers p. 461

the margins. Sociological studies have been done from the standpoint of dominant class through their subjective standpoint filter and thusly generalized into an allegedly objective empirical theory.

Anthropological studies are a paradigm example of such instances. Traditionally, anthropological studies were conducted by the dominant social class traveling into an environment to study the ‘primitives’ in their ‘native environments’. The idea that ‘cultured’ peoples go ‘into the field’ to study indigenous people from another country presupposes that the people are ‘primitive’ and in some sense lesser than the dominant social class. This further asserts that their ‘objective’ world view is the correct epistemological standpoint. These ‘primitives’ are merely an interesting zoo exhibit rather than beings of equal intelligence who are capable of adding to the knowledge held by all people rather than that only of an isolated minority group who, out of delusion, considers itself as the ‘right’.

One’s epistemological standpoint lends them authority when doing research in any field of the sciences as well. The marginalized person or group’s standpoint does not have the same epistemic access as the dominant group’s standpoint. The dominant group imposes, with force, their epistemological standpoint upon the marginalized group’s epistemological standpoint. The marginalized standpoint is devalued and the imperialistic dominant standpoint falsely appoints itself as ‘the correct epistemological model’.

One pattern already becomes prevalent here. The idea that there is a ‘dominant epistemological standpoint’ presupposes that all epistemology is standpoint epistemology. One must be careful in making assertions that border on relativism when making such claims. However, it is the case that all epistemology is perspectival, and furthermore it has also historically been the case that, ‘the correct epistemological model’ is that of the dominant

epistemological standpoint. The relativistic aspect still holds in the sense that, ‘the correct epistemological model’ is a socially constructed model.

‘The correct epistemological model’ may render correct results in areas of science giving the dominant standpoint the false appearance of ‘progress’ however, once marginalized epistemological standpoints are incorporated into ‘the correct epistemological model’ a higher level of objectivity can become possible through the discourse created by the many valid epistemological standpoints which arise and become valued.

Historically, a single dominant standpoint has been considered. Only one standpoint has been the paradigm case for what constitutes knowledge. The dominant class has acted like a parent claiming, “its that way because I say so.” Taking this singular epistemological standpoint renders a subjective single standpoint epistemology. Namely, the dominant standpoint epistemology of the current age. Taking into account many epistemological standpoints renders a multidimensional viewpoint with the possibility of empirical results beyond the ‘paradigm’ cases of the dominant class.

Considering one standpoint as the ‘epistemological authority’ in essence excludes the majority of epistemological standpoints. A pluralistic epistemology is inclusive of not only the dominant epistemological authority but also of many other marginalized standpoints. In this sense, the negative aspects of the narrow vision the dominant epistemological authority are eradicated and the plurality of many standpoints can pull away from the hindrances that plague considering only one single standpoint. Instead of the false notion of there existing one correct epistemological model there will be many epistemological models in which correctness can hopefully be extracted from.

#### §4. The Historical.

In the world empirical events occur which are perceived by many perceivers at any given moment. Each of these perceivers view the event through the filter of their subjective consciousness. Furthermore, they perceive these events by socially constructed categories in which they derive their ‘identity’ from such as class, gender, nationality, sexuality, and so forth. Each perceiver has a different filter through which they interpret the events as they unfold empirically. Considering one standpoint as the paradigm case is like taking one of these perspectival perceptions of an event and considering it as ‘the objective’ perception.

“Imagine that a single individual had written up an exhaustive description of a sedated elephant as observed from one spot for one hour and then, with delighted self-satisfaction, had heralded that achievement as a complete, accurate and profound account of The Elephant.”<sup>5</sup>

Historical accounts of these events are recorded and put forth as objective however, in retrospect, the rhetoric of the age bleeds through the ‘objective’. The dominant class writes history from their standpoint and the marginalized standpoint is considered ‘alternative history’. The dominant class considers their own standpoint history to be ‘objective’ whereas, the marginalized historical perspective is deemed a ‘subjective interpretation’ of the objective events which have been erroneously imposed upon the marginalized perspectives by the dominant classes. The dominant class considers their self appointed authoritarian perspective to be universally valid and accurate in recording the historical events as they happened in the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Women knowledge, and Reality second edition edited by, ann garry and marilyn pearsall. *The Possibility of Feminist Theory* by, Marilyn Frye p.34.

This view exposes the impossibility of the purely objective. Historical events are recorded by an individual who perceived the event through their standpoint. If this standpoint is in accordance with the dominant standpoint (i.e. overlapping socially constructed identity clauses) then the individual's history is considered knowledge of the event. In contrast, if the event is recorded in opposition to the standpoint of the dominant standpoint, it is not considered knowledge of the event but, at best, an interpretation, or an alternative historical account 'as told by some radical'.

The closest a historical account can get to objectivity is to consider the many different standpoint perspectives of a single event and to deconstruct each account to derive the patterns that emerge. The impossibility of the truly objective arises when one realizes that the deconstruction is done from a standpoint in itself and then reconstructed from a standpoint. The importance of a plurality of different standpoints still exists however.

#### **§5. Against relativism.**

Considering many standpoints rather than one paradigm standpoint has been attacked on the grounds that it opens the way for relativistic results. This idea is partially refuted when one considers that the previously held 'objective' paradigm was no more than an imposed dictatorship. The margin standpoints were previously devalued and the dominant standpoint was the imposed 'correct' position and therefore the 'correct epistemological model'. This radically subjective standpoint leads us no better off than a radically relativistic standpoint.

However, feminist standpoint theory does not lead to any such radically relativistic end. In fact, the collection of many standpoints work towards a more robust empirical representation of epistemology. The many different perspectival representations of a single phenomenon, such

as a historical event can be critically evaluated to derive what patterns arise out of the accounts of the phenomena as it happened. This does not lead to the valuation of all theories in all cases. Furthermore, it does not lead to the valuation of all conclusions. Instead, it views many different standpoints in attempt to create a more robust account of a phenomenon.

The taking in of many different standpoints gives an opportunity for the entirely polemical or plainly false standpoints to be seen as transparent rather than hidden behind a curtain of authoritarian imposed false 'objectivity'. With many accounts one can see the repetitious nature of knowledge and the non-repetitious nature of biases.

The Anglo American standpoint history depicting the appropriation of Native American land still taught in public school systems in America today shows how 'diplomatic' and 'caring' the Anglo American immigrants were towards their fellow Native Americans with false imagery of 'thanksgiving' dinners.

The Native American (or any 'other than Anglo American') historical accounts tell quite a different story depicting the Native Americans, and their entire culture, which was systematically destroyed as the Anglo Americans falsely claimed the land and imposed a genocide on the native people of the land ultimately corralling any survivors into typically desolate wastelands called 'reservations'.

What can these different historical accounts tell us in 500 more years? The historians of the future times will take the different accounts of history and deconstruct the rhetoric so the actual events can become clearer. If in all other accounts of the destruction of the Native American way of life is portrayed, what will this say of the current American story?

## **§6. Against objectivity.**

The implication of standpoint theory leads to many epistemologies to be accounted for, and in doing so, no one epistemology is considered as the objective paradigm. The idea of an objective epistemology was a fictional concept from the beginning. All epistemological systems are in essence perspectival.

There is no purely objective epistemology, and there is no infallible knowledge. There are epistemological standpoints, and knowledge is pulled from these standpoints only by considering the viewpoints of many different modes that arrive at same or similar conclusions. Absolute truth does not exist and was created by a system which excluded the majority keeping in place a dominant repressive class structure.

Validity in scientific method is created by the reproduction of results over many testings of a single hypothesis. To consider a single epistemological standpoint as universally valid is to test a hypothesis over and over again by the same standpoint in the same conditions. For science to proceed, many standpoints must be introduced into the scientific community as valid modes to verification of a single scientific hypothesis. This method is not contra to the scientific method but rather, it works in through the existing scientific method.

### **§7. The subjective in the objective.**

Feminist standpoint theory does not lead us into relativistic epistemological ends. Nor does feminist standpoint theory lead us to a truly objective viewpoint. Instead, the theory takes the epistemological power out of the hands of the ruling class and gives validity to perspectives that have been suppressed by the dominant class. Feminist standpoint theory creates a structure where many perspectives attempt to create an objective viewpoint by taking the perspectives of the classically marginalized groups with the dominant group to deconstruct the standpoint

accounts in attempt to derive the factual content of the perspectives from the patterns that emerge.

## **§8. Conclusion.**

This paper is more of an explosion of typed thinking after reading the following texts:

1. Chapters 5 and 6 of Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? By, Sandra Harding
2. Chapter 8 of the Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy edited by, Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby, *Feminism in Epistemology: Pluralism Without Postmodernism* by Miranda Fricker
3. Chapter 3 of Women, Knowledge, and Reality edited by, ann garry and marilyn pearsall, *The Possibility of Feminist Theory* by, Marilyn Frye
4. Feminist Social Thought: A Reader edited by, Diana Tietjens Meyers.
5. On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life by, Fredrich Nietzsche (Hackett edition edited by Peter Preuss)

I didn't start this paper to directly explicate any of the above texts. I just read them, thought about standpoint theory, and then wrote all of this as a sketch of my thoughts while working through the texts. The content uses and incorporates the theories in the readings to what my interpretation is of them. In revising this paper I would like to integrate some textual support to some of the claims given and add sections with exegesis on each of the above-mentioned essays. I can't really consider this paper as finished but more as a conceptual draft of something I think could be expanded into a larger publishable work.