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How Materialism Makes Standpoint Theory Objective

In this paper I will argue for a specific type of epistemology (what has been called “standpoint theory”¹) that is most conducive to objectivity. First, I will give evidence for a view of the world in which experience determines our beliefs.² Second, I will argue that, given this view of the world, standpoint theory is the most compatible with it. And finally, I will argue that, because of the compatibility, standpoint theory is the epistemology that is most conducive to objectivity.

The view under which experience determines our beliefs is called “materialism.”³ Instead of attempting to give a conclusive argument for this view, I will simply provide reasons for believing it. Before doing that, however, it is important to get a glimpse of the general view. On this view, humans are born into the world with certain needs, e.g., food, shelter, clothing, etc. The satisfaction of these needs requires various amounts of human activity. Our engagement in the requisite human activity, in time, creates new needs, which can only be satisfied through other human activity, which creates new needs, and so on. For example, the satisfaction of hunger through hunting creates the need for a better weapon. Thus, humans are born in the world forced to interact with the world, i.e., forced to have experiences. It is through these experiences that our beliefs are determined.

This view seems to be validated in many ways. Consider an infant first learning the idea that objects continue to exist even when they go out of sight. At first, as soon as, e.g., a red ball leaves an infant’s sight, she believes it is gone; she has no experience to the contrary; as far as she knows the only objects that exist are those that she can see. It isn’t until she has enough

¹ What I describe as standpoint theory may not precisely be *traditional* standpoint theory, but it is close enough.

² “Belief” is to be understood in the most general sense as possible to include values, knowledge, preferences, etc.

³ This view is courtesy of Karl Marx.

experiences of objects leaving her sight and then returning into her sight, that she begins to understand the duration of existence. Suppose the child watches a red ball roll along the carpet, get obstructed by a trashcan, and then roll past the trashcan and back into sight. Having a significant number of visual experiences like the former is the only way to form the belief of durational existence. Suppose a child's experience was such that the only things she ever saw were objects that, once they left her sight, never returned. If this were the case, then it is not clear at all how the child could generate the concept of durational existence; i.e., there is no information from her experience that supports such a concept. This is a strong reason to believe that our beliefs are determined by our experiences.

Similarly, suppose an unindustrialized society surrounded a river where the temperature never dropped below 10C. Suppose further that the people of this society never ventured beyond a five-mile radius. Under such circumstances, the only experience these people can have of water is when it is in its liquid state.⁴ Thus, they have no way of believing that water has the capacity to freeze into a solid;⁵ i.e., they lack sufficient experience to engender the belief that water can freeze. Once again, this is a clear case of experience determining belief.

Additionally, we can make sense of experience determining more complex beliefs, like values. Consider the following example: Suppose Shep grows up in a small town, within a family with very little money. After high school he gets a job at the local bread factory with the rest of his family—mom, dad and sister. In this town there is not one person of color; Shep, along with everyone else in the town, has only had contact with white people. Recently, many people from a neighboring country, let's say Mexico, in an effort to provide better lives for their families, have risked their own lives, successfully crossed the border, and arrived in the U.S.

⁴ I suppose we could include the gaseous state, too if they had knowledge of fire and had an instrument to boil the water.

⁵ I guess we would have to suppose further that they've never seen any material solidify from a liquid state.

Because of their illegal status, their inability to speak fluent English, and their desperation to get something to eat, they are willing to work in the bread factory for an extremely reduced pay. The bread company hires these workers and fires Shep and his family. The Mexican workers inform people back home about their success at the bread factory and more Mexican workers risk their lives to attempt to improve the lives of their families. Suppose eventually this leads to half the original members of the town being unemployed. Shep, his whole family, and all his friends' families lose their houses as well. Finally, suppose, as an act of desperate anger and frustration, Shep develops a deep hatred for these Mexican workers that risked their lives to work in the U.S.

Because of the high degree of devastation, the only contact with Mexicans being under these unfortunate circumstances, and a complete ignorance to the desperate living conditions these Mexican workers face in their hometowns, it seems likely that Shep may extend his hatred for these *particular* Mexican workers to *all* Mexican workers. This seems to be the case, because Shep has had no experience to provide him with information that runs counter to this belief.⁶ In other words, the only way Shep can begin to reject this racist belief is if he has experiences that provide information to the contrary.

Again, these examples are not intended to establish conclusively that our experience determines our beliefs. Rather, they are included simply to provide, simultaneously, support for, and a description of the view.

At this point I will argue that, standpoint theory is the epistemology that is most compatible with materialism. Before we see that argument, however, we must understand standpoint theory in a general way.

⁶ This is not meant, in anyway, to yield moral justification for the belief; this is intended merely to be a description of how such a belief may arise.

What we need to understand about standpoint theory is the role beliefs⁷ play in the emergence of scientific theories. According to standpoint theory, beliefs can influence scientific theories in many ways, for example: (i) the beliefs of a researcher can influence the researcher's interpretation of the data; (ii) the beliefs of a researcher can influence the type of research being performed, e.g., the purpose of the research and the subjects of research; (iii) the beliefs of the subject of research may alter the data a subject provides. Because of the various impact people's beliefs can have on scientific theories, standpoint theorists argue that we must take these various beliefs into account. We must clarify what it would mean to *take them into account*.

Let's consider an example to understand this point. Suppose a white male researcher is interested in what type of food people like to eat in the after midnight hours of the early morning. Suppose the motivation for this research is a food company's desire to start a new product line. Suppose further that the only subjects of the research are white males, ages 20-25, of middle-class background. Finally, suppose the overwhelmingly common type of food is a donut.⁸

In this example we clearly see the ways in which people's beliefs influence, in this case, the research. First, the only reason this type of research occurred was because a company sought a new food product; this is a case in which beliefs influence the purpose of the research. Second, the fact that the researcher was a white male had an impact on every subject being a white male as well; this is an example of the researcher's beliefs influencing the subjects of the research. Third, that all the subjects were white males of similar age and economic background may have impacted their desired food-type.

According to standpoint theory, the above research is problematic for failing to take into account the ways in which the various beliefs can affect the research. Thus, to take into account

⁷ Again, "belief" must be understood in the most general way.

⁸ This example is intentionally extreme.

the beliefs is simply to recognize the following: (i) that the type of research was determined by some companies interests; (ii) the dramatic limitation within the perspectives of the same race, same gender, same class subjects; (iii) the ways in which the limited perspectives may have influenced the results.

Thus, in short, standpoint theory assumes that people's beliefs can have an impact on scientific theories in a myriad of ways. And, because of this, within research, we should heed this assumption and attempt to identify the ways in which people's beliefs may have actually affected the research. Moreover, we should try to avoid research that limits the applicability of the findings; e.g., in the former example, we should avoid subjects of entirely the same class, race and gender.

Let's now assume that materialism is true—i.e., our beliefs are determined by our experiences. If this is the case, then for any type of research (whether it be physiological or historical), the experiences of all the various people involved in the research—e.g., the researchers, subjects, analyzers, etc.—will determine the theoretical outcome. This should make sense if we assume that the theoretical outcome is merely a collaborative collection of beliefs; i.e., the degree to which the theoretical outcome is simply beliefs (which seems to be the highest degree possible) is the degree to which experience determines that outcome.

It is important to point out that the mere determination of belief by experience does not necessarily imply a problem for every belief. Consider the previous example in which people of a society are incapable of the belief that water has the capacity to solidify. In this example it should be obvious that not only does experience determine the belief, but also the determination is problematic. The determination is problematic because the belief is determined in such a way

that it comes out false; i.e., the experience determines the belief in such a way that it is incapable of grasping the truth.

This type of determination—i.e., *problematic determination*—need not always be the case, however. Suppose 30 miles north of this society, at the mountain peak, the temperature averages -4C in the winter months. Here, the river freezes in the winter. Thus, any society living in this region will be incapable of believing that water cannot solidify. In other words, their experience determines their beliefs in such a way that it cannot be false.⁹ Likewise, there can be cases in which certain experience is irrelevant to certain beliefs. For example, the experience of living in a climate that never drops below 10C is irrelevant to the belief as to whether an object is an apple or a stone.

Thus, in the case of research, though experience will always determine the theoretical outcome, it may not be a problematic determination. The point is, however, to identify the type of determination and whether it is problematic. In order to identify such a determination, it is necessary to take into account the experience of the relevant person—e.g., the researcher, subject, analyzer, etc. Once we account for that experience, we can establish the ways in which it can determine the person's beliefs; in other words, we can establish what it is about their experience that makes them believe what they believe. And finally, with this latter information we can establish whether the determination is problematic.

Prima facie, it may seem extremely difficult, if not impossible, to “take into account the experience of the relevant person.” If it were necessary to consider all the experience of a person, then this would definitely be the case. But, fortunately it is not.

At this point it is helpful to consider an analogy—jury selection. Let's focus on the jury selection of the defense. In jury selection the defense interrogates potential jurors in order to

⁹ Assuming water never loses its capacity to solidify.

determine the jurors' degree of utility. The degree of utility is quantified in terms of the goal of the lawyer. Suppose the defense represents an inner-city youth on trial. Obviously this attorney's goal is to receive a not-guilty verdict or a reduced sentence. Thus, the attorney will select jurors that she believes will be conducive to her goal—i.e., jurors that have the capacity to empathize with the defendant. This selection process, in short, consists of identifying specific experiences of the jurors through interrogation. The attorney has a general idea about what type of experiences an empathetic juror might have had, and will thus inquire accordingly. She won't inquire about favorite colors, trips to the mountains, second grade teachers, or encounters with wild animals. Most likely she will inquire about economic status, family life, knowledge of prisons, etc. These latter questions determine whether the juror has the requisite experiences of someone who can empathize with the defendant.

In short, it is the goal of the attorney—in this case, namely, *defendant empathy*—that determines the relevant experiences to inquire about. Likewise, in critiquing or conducting research, once we identify the goal of the critique or the research, we have determined the relevant experience. For example, suppose the goal of research is to determine the ways in which women are exploited in the workplace. In such a case the following experiences would be relevant to identify: First, we must obtain information about the experience of the broadest range of women possible. Second, of those women who claim no exploitation occurs we may wish to inquire further: e.g., what type of job they have, whether they've had experiences that may produce empowerment, or conversely, submissiveness and, hence potential obliviousness to exploitation, etc. Third, the analyzers of the data must be people who've had sufficient experience to recognize exploitation in the workplace, i.e., necessarily, women. Thus, what

relevant experiences we must take into account are determined by the goals of the relevant research.

Let's summarize: Experience determines belief; thus, since theories are merely a composite of beliefs, experience determines theories as well. Thus it is necessary to identify the experience involved in the formation of theories in order to establish the ways in which the experience determines the theories. An obvious problem with this is that there are an incalculable amount of experiences to pick from. Once we identify a goal for, say, the particular research, however, we thereby diminish the number of relevant experiences, because some experiences are relevant to the goal and some are not.

This requirement of identifying the relevant experiences within research is precisely the emphasis of standpoint theory. Standpoint theory recognizes the necessity of (i) conducting research from the perspective of as many relevant experiences as possible and (ii) identifying the ways in which experience can problematically determine a theory. Thus, standpoint theory is the most compatible with materialism.

Now we will consider why this method of standpoint theory is the most conducive to objectivity. Materialism affects objectivity in the following two ways: (i) the same situations can affect different people in different ways because of their distinct previous experiences; (ii) sometimes experience problematically determines theories (as explained above). Standpoint theory takes both of these into account.

First, because the same situations can affect different individuals in different ways, standpoint theory holds research to standards of broad inclusiveness. In other words, by conducting research from the perspective of as many relevant experiences as possible, we can compensate for the different ways in which different situations affect different people. The basis

for this inclusiveness is the recognition that the foundation of the various affects of different situations on different people is the different experiences of different people. Moreover, not every experience plays an affecting role within different situations, but only some. Thus, standpoint theory attempts to account for these different experiences by including as many different “types” of people as possible. What constitute different types of people are general experiences, like, gender, age, class, ethnicity, etc. In short, the more varied experiences the subjects of research have, the more inclusive is the research of the different types of people of the world, and thus it is more objective.

Second, we have noticed that experience can problematically affect theories. The only solution to this problem is twofold: first, we must identify the various experiences within the research of a theory; second, we must take in to account the ways in which those experiences can affect the theory. Consider an analogy: suppose we wish to measure the mass of a ball, but every time we put the ball on the scale it rolls off. To fix this problem we put the ball on a stand and then place it on the scale. Obviously the stand will increase the mass reading by whatever the mass of the stand is. So, we take into account the mass of the stand and subtract it from the final reading. Likewise, if people’s experiences can alter the theoretical outcome of research, we must (a) take into account the various ways in which experience effect this alteration and (b) thereby remove the alteration.

This last point needs some clarification. Suppose Lurch is an anthropologist. She spends time with an indigenous tribe in New Guinea. Let’s suppose that in her overall assessment of these people she describes them as very angry and intolerable of outsiders. But let’s suppose they treated Lurch in this way only because she was wearing a leather belt and they viewed her as a cruel person.

In this example the anthropologist did not have sufficient experience in her life to engender the belief that her leather belt insulted the tribe. Thus her experience altered the theory in a problematic way. This alteration is avoidable. Once we identify the way in which her experience altered the theory, this identification constitutes the removal of the alteration; we don't have to perform some extra step (like in the case with the scale and the stand). Instead, we merely need to identify the alteration. The reason for this is that we can't *literally* remove the affect in the research, because that research has already taken place. Instead, we take notice of the alteration and treat the theory with skepticism until we perform further research without the alteration. In short, because experience determines belief, objectivity requires us to heed the experiences of people. This is the foundation of standpoint theory.

There is an obvious objection—or more of a potential difficulty—for the former approach. If it is assumed that experience determines belief, then experience determines all beliefs. Thus, in our attempts to heed the way in which experience determines the beliefs of others, our own experiences will determine the way in which we understand the former.

There are several problems with this objection. One we have already mentioned: Though experience determines our beliefs, it's not the case that every determination is a problematic one. Thus, merely pointing out that *our* beliefs about the impact of other people's experiences on their beliefs are determined by *our* experiences is tantamount to restating materialism. It's only an objection if this latter determination—the determination of *our* experiences on *our* beliefs—is a problematic one; moreover, that it is *necessarily* a problematic one. However, there is clearly no argument that the determination is necessarily problematic; some clearly aren't. The reason the objection must claim that the problematic determination is necessary is because a mere problematic determination once in awhile is not a problem for standpoint theory. Naturally,

experience will occasionally negatively affect scientific theories, but the point of standpoint theory is to involve as many different people as possible in order to account for and remove the problematic determinations.

Another problem with this objection is that it seems to miss the point of science. In science we form hypotheses and then attempt to verify them. Some hypotheses get verified others don't. Even with the hypotheses that are verified, sometimes, anomalies are discovered that run counter to the hypothesis, which must then be altered accordingly. The point is, however, that objectivity is clearly possible only through time. Maybe some hypotheses will be incorrect because of the way in which some people's experiences determine their beliefs. This is insufficient, however, to pose a serious problem for science. The proof of the truthfulness of science will be tested through verification. And more importantly, the method of standpoint theory is most conducive to that type of objectivity.¹⁰

In the last analysis, we are determined by our experiences, and we are essentially connected to the development of knowledge—in all branches. Thus, the degree of objectivity in every branch is essentially determined by our experiences. Therefore, to be objective requires us to heed, to the best of our ability, the way in which that determination plays out.

¹⁰ The case is somewhat different for history, however. Here objectivity standards are the same—namely, the methods of standpoint theory—but it is much more difficult to verify. We can't verify, e.g., what really happened to the slaves of Roman societies. All we have to work with are whatever materials survived. So, we will *attempt* to identify the way in which the author's of such materials may have been problematically determined by their experiences. But, it is very difficult to determine how successful we are. There is some degree of verification, namely how well it explains other events, but, in the end, our verification is limited. Nonetheless, this is not a problem peculiar to standpoint theory; rather, it is a problem for history in general.