

STANDPOINT THEORIES RECONSIDERED

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Friedrich Nietzsche once remarked that “only that which has no history is definable” (1998, II sect. 13). Standpoint theories do have a history, at least back to the work of Dorothy Smith (1974, 1984), Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1990) and Nancy Hartsock (1983), and arguably further to second wave feminism more generally, or even to Marx and Hegel. Their collective identity as standpoint theories has itself been contested amid subsequent criticisms, responses, and revisions. Yet the contested history of standpoint theories is surely an indispensable resource for feminist epistemology. The importance of that history would not diminish even if it overturned characteristic concepts and tenets of standpoint theories. I shall therefore address two questions. First, what lessons from the history of standpoint theories do I think should guide subsequent feminist work on knowledge and science? Second, to what extent should feminist epistemology or science studies still be conceived as a version of standpoint theory?

The first lesson suggested by standpoint theories has not been sufficiently emphasized in the literature. Standpoint theories remind us why a naturalistic conception of knowing is so important. Knowledge claims and their justification are part of the world we seek to understand. They arise in specific circumstances, and have real consequences. They are not merely representations in an idealized logical space, but events within a causal nexus. It matters politically as well as epistemically which concepts are intelligible, which claims are heard and understood by whom, which features of the world are perceptually salient, and which reasons are understood to be relevant and forceful, as well as which conclusions credible.

Recognition that standpoint theories are naturalistic has been impeded by narrow and reductive conceptions of nature and naturalism prominent within philosophy. If naturalism refers

to a conception of nature from God's point of view, in the language of physics or orthodox neo-Darwinist evolutionary biology (or some eventual successor to them), then of course it becomes hard to understand standpoint theories as naturalistic.¹ But a richer, more resourceful and worldly naturalism is indispensable for understanding the issues highlighted by standpoint theorists. Indeed, all of my subsequent points depend upon this one. We need a more inclusive naturalism if we want to understand how knowledge claims are formulated, accepted, and used, how the institutions and agents who participate in knowledge-making are reshaped in the course of inquiry, and how the world itself is transformed through efforts to make it knowable in specific ways. It is no accident that standpoint theories originated within the social sciences rather than philosophy: they mark an effort to understand knowledge and inquiry as integral aspects of the world we seek to understand.

A second crucial lesson to be taken from standpoint theories is that the world is not an epistemically homogeneous space of reasons and normative authority. I thereby endorse a central and controversial theme of standpoint theories, although I do not yet address whether we should express that theme in terms of standpoints or perspectives. Even in more neutral terminology, however, the claim needs to be formulated carefully to avoid misunderstanding, from at least two opposing directions. Different inquirers obviously have different perceptual and practical histories, giving them different access to evidence and different abilities to recognize their common inferential entitlements. Yet as Rebecca Kukla (2006) has recently shown, such differences do not yet challenge more traditional conceptions of epistemic warrant as the same for all knowers. The need for an epistemic division of labor is not yet a differentiated space of epistemic reasons.

On the other hand, claims to differentiated warrants are self-defeating if they entail that

knowers belong to self-enclosed, mutually inaccessible epistemic worlds, and thus cannot make recognizable claims upon one another. To avoid these opposing errors, we need to understand how epistemic warrants can be non-homogeneous, without being inaccessible. Here are some examples. The same features of the world may not be salient to different knowers, even when exposed to them. Knowers may not have the same repertoire of concepts to articulate those features inferentially. Moreover, they may have different stakes in inquiry that affect the relevant standards of evidence. Yet such differences provide occasions for conversation and education, rather than mutual incomprehension. Perceptual salience, conceptual articulation, and relations between epistemic standards and different stakes in inquiry can be learned and communicated.

Learnable differences in epistemic warrant arise from different interactions with relevant aspects of the world. Kukla notes that many critics of standpoint theories on this point conflate the objective accountability of knowledge claims with procedural or aperspectival standards of justification. Susan Hekman's influential paper "Truth and Method" is a good example: for Hekman, any talk of objective accountability "necessarily presupposes a shared discourse—a metanarrative, even—that establishes standards by which these judgments can be validated" (2004, 223). Classical epistemology endorses that assumption: we only have access to the world through representations, and the principles or standards that legitimate those representations. Standpoint theories rightly took a different approach: knowledge claims occur as part of practical and perceptual interaction with one another in shared surroundings. We judge our knowledge claims and principles of justification by what they enable us to see, to say, and to do, not the other way around. Standpoint theories situate knowledge and epistemic warrant within the world, amid our interactions with other agents, rather than in an abstracted space of representations.

A third lesson from the history of standpoint theories follows from this commitment to understand knowledge and inquiry within the world. The concept of power is indispensable to understanding knowledge as worldly. Standpoint theorists began by recognizing how power relations help shape both the world we seek to understand, and our efforts to understand it. The exercise of power, and the maintenance of relatively stable alignments of power relations, affects which aspects of the world are visible, to whom, and under what circumstances, and what kinds of education and political action are needed to change those patterns of visibility and recognition.²

Some epistemologists seek to block any intelligible role for power by sharply separating the normativity of reasons bearing upon judgments from the causal imposition of force upon reasoners. But power is not the same as force. Indeed, the concept of power is best understood as having the expressive role of articulating connections between the causal capacities of agents and institutions and the normative significance of their performances and dispositions.³ We need to understand how such causal capacities reconfigure the meaning and intelligibility of the situations in which they are deployed, and what is thereby at issue and at stake for agents and knowers in those situations. Emphasizing the role of power in knowledge, of course, also takes us beyond understanding power solely in terms of constraint. The history of standpoint theories makes this point especially clear, since standpoint theories did not merely highlight the critique of ideology; they also emphasized new and constructive ways to disclose aspects of the world. For example, the empowering role of second-wave feminism and other social movements was indispensable both to allow gender and sexuality to become visible and intelligible within epistemology, and also to show their limits in their diffraction through other modes of difference.⁴

The history of standpoint theories also highlights, as a fourth point, the multiple dimensions of epistemic normativity. It is not enough to assess which claims are true or false, and justified or unjustified. Scientists, activists, and other knowers also consider which claims are significant or interesting; which inquiries are important or relevant; which concepts are sufficiently clear, perspicuous, and mutually coherent; which possible objections are plausible and worth taking seriously, where the burden of proof lies; and which tools are informative, elegant or robust. Often, choices have to be made among competing norms, and these tradeoffs are themselves open to assessment. Yet judgments of truth and falsity often turn on what happens along these other dimensions of assessment. As Elisabeth Lloyd's (1995) classic paper on "Objectivity and the Double Standard for Feminist Epistemologies" reminds us, multiplying the dimensions of epistemic assessment has to be central to feminist epistemology, if only because opponents and critics have often worked to prevent feminists' questions from even being asked or their concepts from being employed.

The final lesson I take from standpoint theories is more contested, and has a complexity that I can only begin to indicate here. Standpoint theories helped bring issues of identity and difference to the forefront in feminist epistemology. Yet the ensuing debates also problematized how to construe locations in a non-homogeneous epistemic space. Consider some examples. Should we understand epistemic positioning in terms of knowers' subjection by large-scale macro-social structures and processes, or of identities taken up by agents seeking empowerment and differentiation from limiting, homogenizing roles? Are the multiple dimensions of difference additive, exclusive, connective, diffractive, or just endlessly multiplying? Do knowers find themselves in epistemic standpoints, or are standpoints only achieved through effort, dialogue and insight? Do judgments from appropriate standpoints carry epistemic privilege, or a

merely defeasible presumption of significance? Does emphasis upon epistemic standpoints promote political solidarity or fragmentation? I readily endorse some important responses to these questions, such as Alison Wylie's (2003) rejection of essentialism and automatic privilege, Karen Barad's (2007) rethinking of the optics of difference in terms of diffraction rather than reflection, the widespread recognition of standpoints as achievements or projects, and the accommodation of both structure and agency within any adequate notion of a "standpoint." Yet such contributions, important as they are, do not fully resolve this tangle of issues. As a resource for feminist epistemology and science studies, the debates over identity and difference have more successfully indicated pitfalls to avoid rather than constructive directions to pursue.

I trace these difficulties in significant part to the underlying visual and spatial metaphors of standpoints or perspectives. I therefore turn to the second part of my talk: should central concepts and tenets from standpoint theory remain part of feminist epistemology and science studies, in light of their history? The central metaphor of standpoint theories, that knowers view the world from different perspectives or standpoints, invokes very traditional epistemological assumptions. It suggests a separation between knowers and known, a spectatorial conception of knowing, a contrast of the unity of the object to the multiplicity of standpoints, and a static and perhaps mostly retrospective understanding of epistemic normativity. These themes have a long and venerable history in epistemology. Yet some of the best recent work in feminist epistemology and science studies challenges or rejects them. Hence, I shall indicate how some feminist scholarship is already moving beyond these traditional epistemological tropes, and thus beyond standpoint theories. I will mention four interrelated themes, which offer successively more far-reaching challenges to the traditional assumptions embedded within standpoint theories. These themes gradually move from a static toward a dynamic understanding of epistemic

normativity.

I begin with a subtle shift in emphasis, that shows up differently in work by Catherine Elgin, Rebecca Kukla, Karen Barad and myself. All of us replace more traditional talk about what knowers can see, recognize, or understand from different locations, with talk of what different phenomena show. Meaningful differences in knowledge and understanding are not features of knowers or their epistemic location, but patterns in the world that show themselves differently in different contexts. This development parallels the naturalistic shift away from “internal” accountability to knowers’ epistemic standards or procedures, toward accountability to relevant aspects of the world that inquiry might disclose. In Elgin’s version of this theme, experiments and artworks can exemplify as well as instantiate their properties. Exemplification is not confined to such deliberately symbolic productions as experiments or novels, however. We can ask in the same way, for example, how certain patterns of behavior in the workplace came to exemplify as well as instantiate sexual harassment. Exemplification depends upon context, background assumptions, and interpretation, but it is a differentially discernible feature of the world rather than a difference in knowers’ standpoints or perspectives.

Karen Barad (2007) introduces my second theme, by treating knowers as themselves integral to the phenomena to be known. She begins by emphasizing that knowing is always a consequential activity. Instead of discussing that activity in terms of knowers’ interactions with objects around them, however, she talks about phenomena as intra-active. Neither objects nor knowing subjects have inherent boundaries, identities, or locations. Only within specific patterns of intra-action are there boundaries that divide prosthetically embodied “agencies of observation” from objects manifest to them in specific ways. Knowers do not occupy a standpoint, but instead participate in phenomena. Since realizing some phenomena forecloses

others, and in doing so mobilizes resources and imposes constraints, Barad's treatment challenges any supposedly inherent boundaries between epistemic and ethical or political normativity. Accountability for ethical and political consequences is always integral to knowledge, while political projects are always epistemically accountable to the phenomena they help constitute.

My own work parallels Barad's in this respect by emphasizing scientific practices rather than scientific knowledge. Scientific practices are reproducible patterns of causal intra-action, but those patterns also articulate the world in ways that are semantically and epistemically normative. Barad and I both emphasize that conceptual articulation is integral to these practices or phenomena. Instead of thinking about concepts in terms of discursive spontaneity constrained by perceptual and practical interaction⁵, we insist that concepts are only intelligible and communicable within intra-action. The phenomena in which we participate, and for which we bear some responsibility, articulate the world conceptually.

Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's recent ethnography of the global connections that shape the science, politics, and ecology of Indonesia's rainforests takes a third step beyond the traditional epistemological tropes. Most philosophers will not recognize Tsing's book as a work of epistemology or even science studies, but that is a very good reason to call it to their attention (and challenge their disciplinary categorizations) by including it among possible successors to standpoint theories. Tsing talks about movements of concepts, information, and reasoning alongside flows of capital, people's migration, and ecological transformation. In place of the familiar visual metaphors of standpoints, perspectives, and visibility, or even the tactile metaphors of grasping and being in touch, her central trope is "friction." She emphasizes the dual role of friction in both enabling and constraining or redirecting motion:

Speaking of friction is a reminder of the importance of interaction in defining movement, cultural form and agency. Friction is not just about slowing things down. ... Friction makes global connection powerful and effective. Meanwhile, without even trying, friction gets in the way of the smooth operation of global power. Difference can disrupt, causing everyday malfunctions as well as unexpected cataclysms. Friction refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine. (Tsing 2005, 6)

Tsing seeks to get beyond traditional conflicts between normative universality and cultural particularity by emphasizing how friction allows universal concepts and norms to get a grip on particular situations:

Universalism is implicated in both imperial schemes to control the world and liberatory mobilizations for justice and empowerment. ... The concept of friction acknowledges this duality ... at the heart of our understanding of “modern” global interconnections ... under the aegis of Enlightenment universals. Friction gives purchase to universals, allowing them to spread as frameworks for the practice of power. But engaged universals are never fully successful in being everywhere the same because of this same friction. (Tsing 2005, 10).

Tsing’s account helps us understand conceptual articulation and epistemic and political normativity in motion.

My final theme extends this to an epistemic dynamics through a critical response to Kukla’s important paper on objectivity and perspective. I have been citing Kukla with approval. She concludes, however, by defending both perspectival differences in the disclosure of epistemic warrant, and aperspectival objectivity as a regulative ideal:

We need to transform... the [aperspectival] ideal of [democratically accessible warrant],

from a necessary condition placed on counting any actual judgment as objective, to a regulative principle governing our rational attempts to work towards a maximally complete and accurate grasp of the character of the empirical world. (Kukla 2006, 93)

Kukla is surely right to insist that inquirers must be able to hold one another mutually accountable within and to the world. But her appeal to a “maximally complete and accurate grasp” of the world suggests that the dynamics of epistemic intra-action might reach equilibrium, or that equilibrium is its implicit telos. In How Scientific Practices Matter I instead defend what I would now call a non-equilibrium epistemic dynamics. As prosthetically embodied knowers, we share a situation that confronts us with issues in which we all have various epistemic and political stakes. Any specific resolution of those issues, however, always transforms that situation, presenting us with new issues and reconfigured stakes, amidst a re-alignment of power relations. These issues and stakes can have a genuine normative grip upon situated knowers, without needing to project an eventual convergence in epistemic equilibrium. Kukla’s treatment of aperspectival objectivity as a regulative ideal is thus a last vestige of the traditional conception of knowledge as representing the world from an unworldly standpoint. The work of Elgin, Kukla herself, Barad, Tsing, myself, and others instead conceive knowing and epistemic normativity as inextricably caught up within ongoing intra-action and articulation of the world. Such a dynamic conception of knowing seeks a better footing within the world rather than a more adequate standpoint on it.

Let me nevertheless conclude by reiterating the first part of my talk. If feminist science studies and epistemology should now move beyond standpoint theories, as I suggest, we do not thereby leave them behind. The issues and possibilities emerging from the debates over standpoint theories remain a crucial resource that allow such alternative conceptions to be salient

and important.

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NOTES

- ¹. For an account of why such conceptions of nature and naturalism are in conflict with the most basic commitments and concerns that motivate naturalism, see Rouse 2002.
- ². For discussion of power in terms of social and material “alignments,” see Wartenberg 1990, ch. 7-8, and Rouse 1996, ch. 7.
- ³. For discussion of the expressive role of (broadly) logical vocabulary, see Brandom 1994, ch. 2. For treatment of the concept of power as having a (logically) expressive role in this sense, see Rouse 2002, ch. 5-6.
- ⁴. On “diffraction” as an optical metaphor for knowledge that contrasts to reflection, see Haraway 1997 and Barad 2007.
- ⁵. McDowell (1994) is a prominent example of a conception of conceptual understanding as an empirically responsive discursive spontaneity.