

Feminist Philosophy of Science: Standpoint Matters

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Abstract

Feminist standpoint theory has a contentious history. It is an explicitly political as well as social epistemology; its central and motivating insight is that those who are subject to structures of domination that marginalize and oppress them may, in fact, have epistemic advantage on a number of crucial dimensions. They may know different things, or know some things better than those who are comparatively privileged by virtue of what they typically experience and the resources they have for understanding their experience. *Feminist* standpoint theorists argue that gender is one dimension of social differentiation that makes such an epistemic difference. Feminist standpoint theory is, then, a form of social epistemology that provides a framework for understanding how a range of systematic biases arise that can compromise even our best, most authoritative knowledge, and for explaining the epistemic advantages afforded by socially marginal standpoints. It is also a normative theory of knowledge production, providing the rationale for social-cognitive norms of deliberative practice that require an active and discerning cultivation of relevant social diversity, not just a “balanced partiality” of individual perspectives within a research community, as a key source of potentially transformative criticism.

Standard critiques of feminist standpoint theory attribute to it two manifestly untenable theses: the presumption that epistemically consequential standpoints must be conceptualized in essentialist terms, and that those who occupy them have automatic and comprehensive epistemic privilege. A world structured by hierarchical, oppressive social divisions thus becomes a world of unbridgeable epistemic solitudes. I argue that neither thesis is tenable and neither is a necessary presupposition of standpoint theory. The anxious nightmare of corrosive relativism need not afflict standpoint theorists any more than it does other varieties of socially naturalized contextualism. I offer a systematic reformulation: standpoint theory is best construed as conceptual framework for investigating the ways in which socially situated experience and interests make a contingent, problem or domain-specific difference to what we know (well), and to the resources we have for critically appraising the processes by which we produce knowledge we can trust, knowledge we count as objective.

Given this reformulation of standpoint theory, I consider two questions: what insights does it offer, and what is the scope of its application. A set of three examples drawn from archaeological sources illustrate several different kinds of epistemic advantage that may arise on the (social) margins. The analysis of these cases makes it clear that the contingent (social, historical) resources of situated knowledge can be epistemically enabling, particularly when they underwrite a critical standpoint on the kinds of epistemic partiality routinely generated by systematic social differentiation. This has important implications for how we conceptualize ideals of objectivity and for how we implement key social/cognitive norms of epistemic integrity. In conclusion, I argue that these lessons apply as much to philosophy as to empirical inquiry.