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# Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is “Strong Objectivity”?

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*“Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges.”*

—Donna Haraway<sup>1</sup>

## 1. Both Ways

For almost two decades, feminists have engaged in a complex and charged conversation about objectivity. Its topics have included which kinds of knowledge projects have it, which don't, and why they don't; whether the many different feminisms need it, and if so why they do; and if it is possible to get it, how to do so.<sup>2</sup> This conversation has been informed by complex and charged prefeminist writings that tend to get stuck in debates between empiricists and intentionalists, objectivists and interpretationists, and realists and social constructionists (including poststructuralists).<sup>3</sup>

Most of these feminist discussions have *not* arisen from attempts to find new ways either to criticize or carry on the agendas of the disciplines. Frequently they do not take as their problematics the ones familiar within the disciplines. Instead, these conversations have emerged mainly from two different and related concerns. First, what are the causes of the immense proliferation of theoretically and empirically sound results of research in biology and the social sciences that have discovered what is not supposed to exist: rampant sexist and androcentric bias—“politics”!—in the dominant scientific (and popular) descriptions and explanations of nature and social life? To put the point another way, how should one explain the surprising fact that politically guided research projects have been able to produce less partial and distorted results of research than those supposedly guided by the goal of value-neutrality? Second, how can feminists create re-

search that is *for* women in the sense that it provides less partial and distorted answers to questions that arise from women's lives and are not only about those lives but also about the rest of nature and social relations? The two concerns are related because recommendations for future scientific practices should be informed by the best accounts of past scientific successes. That is, how one answers the second question depends on what one thinks is the best answer to the first one.

Many feminists, like thinkers in the other new social liberation movements, now hold that it is not only desirable but also possible to have that apparent contradiction in terms—socially situated knowledge. In conventional accounts, socially situated beliefs only get to count as opinions. In order to achieve the status of knowledge, beliefs are supposed to break free of—to transcend—their original ties to local, historical interests, values, and agendas. However, as Donna Haraway has put the point, it turns out to be possible “to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world. . . .”<sup>4</sup>

The standpoint epistemologists—and especially the feminists who have most fully articulated this kind of theory of knowledge—have claimed to provide a fundamental map or “logic” for how to do this: “start thought from marginalized lives” and “take everyday life as problematic.”<sup>5</sup> However, these maps are easy to misread if one doesn't understand the principles used to construct them. Critics of standpoint writings have tended to refuse the invitation to “have it both ways” by accepting the idea of real knowledge that is socially situated. Instead they have assimilated standpoint claims either to objectivism or some kind of conventional foundationalism or to ethnocentrism, relativism, or phenomenological approaches in philosophy and the social sciences.

Here I shall try to make clear how it really is a misreading to assimilate standpoint epistemologies to those older ones and that such misreadings distort or make invisible the distinctive resources that they offer. I shall do so by contrasting the grounds for knowledge and the kinds of subjects/agents of knowledge recommended by standpoint theories with those favored by the older epistemologies. Then I shall show why it is reasonable to think that the socially situated grounds and subjects of standpoint epistemologies require and generate stronger standards for objectivity than do those that turn away from providing systematic methods for locating knowledge in history. The problem with the conventional conception of objectivity is not that it is too rigorous or too “objectifying,” as some have argued, but

that it is *not rigorous or objectifying enough*; it is too weak to accomplish even the goals for which it has been designed, let alone the more difficult projects called for by feminisms and other new social movements.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Feminist Standpoint versus Spontaneous Feminist Empiricist Epistemologies

Not all feminists who try to explain the past and learn lessons for the future of feminist research in biology and the social sciences are standpoint theorists. The distinctiveness of feminist standpoint approaches can be emphasized by contrasting them with what I shall call “spontaneous feminist empiricist epistemology.”<sup>7</sup>

By now, two forms of feminist empiricism have been articulated: the original “spontaneous” feminist empiricism and a recent philosophical version. Originally, feminist empiricism arose as the “spontaneous consciousness” of feminist researchers in biology and the social sciences who were trying to explain what was and what wasn’t different about their research process in comparison with the standard procedures in their field.<sup>8</sup> They thought that they were just doing more carefully and rigorously what any good scientist should do; the problem they saw was one of “bad science.” Hence they did not give a special name to their philosophy of science; I gave it the name “feminist empiricism” in *The Science Question in Feminism* to contrast feminist standpoint theory with the insistence of empiricism’s proponents that sexism and androcentrism could be eliminated from the results of research if scientists would just follow more rigorously and carefully the existing methods and norms of research—which, for practicing scientists, are fundamentally empiricist ones.

Recently, philosophers Helen Longino and Lynn Hankinson Nelson have developed sophisticated and valuable feminist empiricist philosophies of science (Longino calls hers “contextual empiricism”) that differ in significant respects from what most prefeminist empiricists and probably most spontaneous feminist empiricists would think of as empiricism.<sup>9</sup> This is no accident, because Longino and Nelson both intend to revise empiricism, as feminists in other fields have fruitfully revised other theoretical approaches—indeed, as feminist standpoint theorists revise the theory from which they begin. Longino and Nelson incorporate into their epistemologies elements that also appear in the standpoint accounts (many would say that they have been most forcefully articulated in such accounts)—such as the inescapable but also sometimes positive influence of social values and interests in the content of science—that would be anathema to even the spontaneous

feminist empiricists of the late 1970s and early 1980s as well as to their many successors today. These philosophical feminist empiricisms are constructed in opposition partly to feminist standpoint theories, partly to radical feminist arguments that exalt the feminine and essentialize “woman’s experience” (which they have sometimes attributed to standpoint theorists), and partly to the prefeminist empiricists.

It would be an interesting and valuable project to contrast in greater detail these important philosophical feminist empiricisms with both spontaneous feminist empiricism and with feminist standpoint theory. But I have a different goal in this essay: to show how strongly feminist reflections on scientific knowledge challenge the dominant prefeminist epistemology and philosophy of science that are held by all of those people inside and outside science who are still wondering just what are the insights about science and knowledge that feminists have to offer. In my view, this challenge is made most strongly by feminist standpoint epistemology.

One can understand spontaneous feminist empiricism and feminist standpoint theory to be making competing arguments on two topics—scientific method and history—in order to explain in their different ways the causes of sexist and androcentric results of scientific research.<sup>10</sup> As already indicated, spontaneous feminist empiricists think that insufficient care and rigor in following existing methods and norms is the cause of sexist and androcentric results of research, and it is in these terms that they try to produce plausible accounts of the successes of empirically and theoretically more adequate results of research. Standpoint theorists think that this is only part of the problem. They point out that retroactively, and with the help of the insights of the women’s movement, one can see these sexist or androcentric practices in the disciplines. However, the methods and norms in the disciplines are too weak to permit researchers *systematically* to identify and eliminate from the results of research those social values, interests, and agendas that are shared by the entire scientific community or virtually all of it. Objectivity has not been “operationalized” in such a way that scientific method can detect sexist and androcentric assumptions that are “the dominant beliefs of an age”—that is, that are collectively (versus only individually) held. As far as scientific method goes (and feminist empiricist defenses of it), it is entirely serendipitous when cultural beliefs that are assumed by most members of a scientific community are challenged by a piece of scientific research. Standpoint theory tries to address this problem by producing stronger standards for “good method,” ones that can guide more competent efforts to maximize objectivity.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to history, spontaneous feminist empiricists argue that movements of social liberation such as the women's movement function much like the little boy who is the hero of the folk tale about the Emperor and his clothes. Such movements "make it possible for people to see the world in an enlarged perspective because they remove the covers and blinders that obscure knowledge and observation."<sup>12</sup> Feminist standpoint theorists agree with this assessment, but argue that researchers can do more than just wait around until social movements happen and then wait around some more until their effects happen to reach inside the processes of producing maximally objective, causal accounts of nature and social relations. Knowledge projects can find active ways incorporated into their principles of "good method" to use history as a resource by socially situating knowledge projects in the scientifically and epistemologically most favorable historical locations. History can become the systematic provider of scientific and epistemological resources rather than an obstacle to or the "accidental" benefactor of projects to generate knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

It is spontaneous feminist empiricism's great strength that it explains the production of sexist and nonsexist results of research with only a minimal challenge to the fundamental logic of research as this is understood in scientific fields and to the logic of explanation as this is understood in the dominant philosophies of science. Spontaneous feminist empiricists try to fit feminist projects into prevailing standards of "good science" and "good philosophy." This conservatism makes it possible for many people to grasp the importance of feminist research in biology and the social sciences without feeling disloyal to the methods and norms of their research traditions. Spontaneous feminist empiricism appears to call for even greater rigor in using these methods and following these norms. However, this conservatism is also this philosophy's weakness; this theory of knowledge refuses fully to address the limitations of the dominant conceptions of method and explanation and the ways the conceptions constrain and distort results of research and thought about this research even when these dominant conceptions are most rigorously respected. Nevertheless, its radical nature should not be underestimated. It argues persuasively that the sciences have been blind to their own sexist and androcentric research practices and results. And it thereby clears space for the next question: are the existing logics of research and explanation really so innocent in the commission of this "crime" as empiricism insists, or are they part of its cause?<sup>14</sup>

The intellectual history of feminist standpoint theory is conventionally traced to Hegel's reflections on what can be known about the master/slave relationship from the standpoint of the slave's life versus

that of the master's life and to the way Marx, Engels, and Lukacs subsequently developed this insight into the "standpoint of the proletariat" from which have been produced marxist theories of how class society operates.<sup>15</sup> In the 1970s, several feminist thinkers independently began reflecting on how the marxist analysis could be transformed to explain how the structural relationship between women and men had consequences for the production of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> However, it should be noted that even though standpoint arguments are most fully articulated as such in feminist writings, they appear in the scientific projects of all of the new social movements.<sup>17</sup> A *social* history of standpoint theory would focus on what happens when marginalized peoples begin to gain public voice. In societies where scientific rationality and objectivity are claimed to be highly valued by dominant groups, marginalized peoples and those who listen attentively to them will point out that from the perspective of marginal lives, the dominant accounts are less than maximally objective. Knowledge claims are always socially situated, and the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs leaves their social situation a scientifically and epistemologically disadvantaged one for generating knowledge. Moreover, these accounts end up legitimating exploitative "practical politics" even when those who produce them have good intentions.

The starting point of standpoint theory—and its claim that is most often misread—is that in societies stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, or some other such politics shaping the very structure of a society, the *activities* of those at the top both organize and set limits on what persons who perform such activities can understand about themselves and the world around them. "There are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible."<sup>18</sup> In contrast, the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought—for *everyone's* research and scholarship—from which humans' relations with each other and the natural world can become visible. This is because the experience and lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them, provide particularly significant *problems to be explained* or research agendas. These experiences and lives have been devalued or ignored as a source of objectivity-maximizing questions—the answers to which are not necessarily to be found in those experiences or lives but elsewhere in the beliefs and activities of people at the center who make policies and engage in social practices that shape marginal lives.<sup>19</sup> So one's social situation enables and

sets limits on what one can know; some social situations—critically unexamined dominant ones—are more limiting than others in this respect, and what makes these situations more limiting is their inability to generate the most critical questions about received belief.<sup>20</sup>

It is this sense in which Dorothy Smith argues that women's experience is the "grounds" of feminist knowledge and that such knowledge should change the discipline of sociology.<sup>21</sup> Women's lives (our many different lives and different experiences!) can provide the starting point for asking new, critical questions about not only those women's lives but also about men's lives and, most importantly, the causal relations between them.<sup>22</sup> For example, she points out that if we start thinking from women's lives, we (anyone) can see that women are assigned the work that men do not want to do for themselves, especially the care of everyone's bodies—the bodies of men, babies, children, old people, the sick, and their own bodies. And they are assigned responsibility for the local places where those bodies exist as they clean and care for their own and others' houses and work places.<sup>23</sup> This kind of "women's work" frees men in the ruling groups to immerse themselves in the world of abstract concepts. The more successful women are at this concrete work, the more invisible it becomes to men as distinctively social labor. Caring for bodies and the places bodies exist disappears into "nature," as, for example, in sociobiological claims about the naturalness of "altruistic" behavior for females and its unnaturalness for males or in the systematic reticence of many prefeminist marxists actually to analyze who does what in everyday sexual, emotional, and domestic work, and to integrate such analyses into their accounts of "working class labor." Smith argues that we should not be surprised that men have trouble seeing women's activities as part of distinctively human culture and history once we notice how invisible the social character of this work is from the perspective of their activities. She points out that if we start from women's lives, we can generate questions about why it is that it is primarily women who are assigned such activities and what the consequences are for the economy, the state, the family, the educational system, and other social institutions of assigning body and emotional work to one group and "head" work to another.<sup>24</sup> These questions lead to less partial and distorted understandings of women's worlds, men's worlds, and the causal relations between them than do the questions originating only in that part of human activity that men in the dominant groups reserve for themselves—the abstract mental work of managing and administering.

Standpoint epistemology sets the relationship between knowledge and politics at the center of its account in the sense that it tries to

provide causal accounts—to explain—the effects that different kinds of politics have on the production of knowledge. Of course, empiricism also is concerned with the effects politics has on the production of knowledge, but prefeminist empiricism conceptualizes politics as entirely bad. Empiricism tries to purify science of all such bad politics by adherence to what it takes to be rigorous methods for the testing of hypotheses. From the perspective of standpoint epistemology, this is *far too weak a strategy* to maximize the objectivity of the results of research that empiricists desire. Thought that begins from the lives of the oppressed has no chance to get its critical questions voiced or heard within such an empiricist conception of the way to produce knowledge. Prefeminist empiricists can only perceive such questions as the intrusion of politics into science, which therefore deteriorates the objectivity of the results of research. Spontaneous feminist empiricism, for all its considerable virtues, nevertheless contains distorting traces of these assumptions, and they block the ability of this theory of science to develop maximally strong criteria for systematic ways to maximize objectivity.

Thus the standpoint claims that all knowledge attempts are socially situated and that some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions of the scientific world view and the Western thought that takes science as its model of how to produce knowledge. It sets out a rigorous “logic of discovery” intended to maximize the objectivity of the results of research and thereby to produce knowledge that can be *for* marginalized people (and those who would know what the marginalized can know) rather than *for* the use only of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people.

### 3. What Are the Grounds for Knowledge Claims?

Standpoint theories argue for “starting off thought” from the lives of marginalized peoples; beginning in those determinate, objective locations in any social order will generate illuminating critical questions that do not arise in thought that begins from dominant group lives. Starting off research from women’s lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women’s lives but also of men’s lives and of the whole social order. Women’s lives and experiences provide the “grounds” for this knowledge, though these clearly do not provide foundations for knowledge in the conventional philosophical sense. These grounds are the site, the activities, from which scientific questions arise. The epistemologically advantaged starting



points for research do not guarantee that the researcher can maximize objectivity in her account; these grounds provide only a necessary—not a sufficient—starting point for maximizing objectivity. It is useful to contrast standpoint grounds for knowledge with four other kinds: the “God-trick,” ethnocentrism, relativism, and the unique abilities of the oppressed to produce knowledge.

*Standpoint Theories versus the “God-Trick”*

First, for standpoint theories, the grounds for knowledge are fully saturated with history and social life rather than abstracted from it. Standpoint knowledge projects do not claim to originate in purportedly universal human problematics; they do not claim to perform the “God-trick.”<sup>25</sup> However, the fact that feminist knowledge claims are socially situated does not in practice distinguish them from any other knowledge claims that have ever been made inside or outside the history of Western thought and the disciplines today; all bear the fingerprints of the communities that produce them. All thought by humans starts off from socially determinate lives. As Dorothy Smith puts the point, “women’s perspective, as I have analyzed it here, discredits sociology’s claim to constitute an objective knowledge independent of the sociologists’s situation. Its conceptual procedures, methods, and relevances are seen to organize its subject matter from a determinate position in society.”<sup>26</sup>

It is a delusion—and a historically identifiable one—to think that human thought could completely erase the fingerprints that reveal its production process. Conventional conceptions of scientific method enable scientists to be relatively good at eliminating those social interests and values from the results of research that differ *within* the scientific community, because whenever experiments are repeated by different observers, differences in the social values of individual observers (or groups of them from different research teams) that have shaped the results of their research will stand out from the sameness of the phenomena that other researchers (or teams of them) report.<sup>27</sup> But scientific method provides no rules, procedures, or techniques for even identifying, let alone eliminating, social concerns and interests that are shared by all (or virtually all) of the observers, nor does it encourage seeking out observers whose social beliefs vary in order to increase the effectiveness of scientific method. Thus culturewide assumptions *that have not been criticized within the scientific research process* are transported into the results of research, making visible the historicity of specific scientific claims to people at other times, other places, or in other groups in the very same social order. We

could say that standpoint theories not only acknowledge the social situatedness that is the inescapable lot of all knowledge-seeking projects but also, more importantly, transform it into a systematically available scientific resource.

### *Standpoint Theories versus Ethnocentrism*

Universalists have traditionally been able to imagine only ethnocentrism and relativism as possible alternatives to “the view from nowhere” that they assert grounds universal claims, so they think standpoint epistemologies must be supporting (or doomed to) one or the other of these positions. Is there any reasonable sense in which the ground for knowledge claimed by feminist standpoint theory is ethnocentric?

Ethnocentrism is the belief in the inherent superiority of one’s own ethnic group or culture.<sup>28</sup> Do feminist standpoint theorists argue that the lives of *their own group or culture* is *superior* as a grounds for knowledge?<sup>29</sup> At first glance, one might think that this is the case if one notices that it is primarily women who have argued for starting thought from women’s lives. However, there are several reasons why it would be a mistake to conclude from this fact that feminist standpoint theory is ethnocentric.

First, standpoint theorists themselves all explicitly argue that marginal lives that are not their own provide better grounds for certain kinds of knowledge. Thus the claim by women that women’s lives provide a better starting point for thought about gender systems is not the same as the claim that *their own* lives are the best such starting points. They are not denying that their own lives can provide important resources for such projects, but they are arguing that other, different (and sometimes oppositional) women’s lives also provide such resources. For example, women who are not prostitutes and have not been raped have argued that starting thought from women’s experiences and activities in such events reveals that the state is male because it looks at women’s lives here just as men (but not women) do. Dorothy Smith writes of the value of starting to think about a certain social situation she describes from the perspective of Native Canadian lives.<sup>30</sup> Bettina Aptheker has argued that starting thought from the everyday lives of women who are holocaust survivors, Chicana canner workers, older lesbians, African-American women in slavery, Japanese-American concentration camp survivors, and others who have had lives different from hers increases our ability to understand a great deal about the distorted way the dominant groups conceptualize politics, resistance, community, and other key history and so-

cial science notions.<sup>31</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, an African-American sociologist, has argued that starting thought from the lives of poor and in some cases illiterate African-American women reveals important truths about the lives of intellectuals, both African-American and European-American, as well as about those women.<sup>32</sup> Many theorists who are not mothers (as well as many who are) have argued that starting thought in mother-work generates important questions about the social order. Of course some women no doubt do argue that their own lives provide the one and only best starting point for all knowledge projects, but this is not what standpoint theory holds. Thus, although it is not an accident that so many women have argued for feminist standpoint approaches, neither is it evidence that standpoint claims are committed to ethnocentrism.

Second, and relatedly, thinkers with “center” identities have also argued that marginalized lives are better places from which to start asking causal and critical questions about the social order. After all, Hegel was not a slave, though he argued that the master/slave relationship could better be understood from the perspective of slaves’ activities. Marx, Engels, and Lukacs were not engaged in the kind of labor that they argued provided the starting point for developing their theories about class society. There are men who have argued for the scientific and epistemic advantages of starting thought from women’s lives, European-Americans who understand that much can be learned about their lives as well as African-American lives if they start their thought from the latter, and so on.<sup>33</sup>

Third, women’s lives are shaped by the rules of femininity or womanliness; in this sense they “express feminine culture.” Perhaps the critic of standpoint theories thinks feminists are defending femininity and thus “their own culture.” But all feminist analyses, including feminist standpoint writings, are in principle ambivalent about the value of femininity and womanliness. Feminists criticize femininity on the grounds that it is fundamentally defined by and therefore part of the conceptual project of exalting masculinity; it is the “other” against which men define themselves as admirably and uniquely human. Feminist thought does not try to substitute loyalty to femininity for the loyalty to masculinity it criticizes in conventional thought. Instead, it criticizes all gender loyalties as capable of producing only partial and distorted results of research. However, it must do this while also arguing that women’s lives have been inappropriately devalued. Feminist thought is forced to “speak as” and on behalf of the very notion it criticizes and tries to dismantle—women. In the contradictory nature of this project lies both its greatest challenge and a source of its great creativity. It is because the conditions of women’s lives

are worse than their brothers' in so many cases that women's lives provide better places from which to start asking questions about a social order that tolerates and in so many respects even values highly the bad conditions for women's lives (women's double-day of work, the epidemic of violence against women, women's cultural obligation to be "beautiful," and so on).<sup>34</sup> Thus research processes that problematize how gender practices shape behavior and belief—that interrogate and criticize both masculinity and femininity—stand a better chance of avoiding such biasing gender loyalties.

Fourth, there are many feminisms, and these can be understood to be starting off their analyses from the lives of different historical groups of women. Liberal feminism initially started off its analyses from the lives of women in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European and U.S. educated classes; Marxist feminism, from the lives of wage-working women in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industrializing or "modernizing" societies; Third World feminism, from the lives of late twentieth-century women of Third World descent—and these different Third World lives produce different feminisms. Standpoint theory argues that each of these groups of women's lives is a good place to start in order to explain certain aspects of the social order. There is no single, ideal woman's life from which standpoint theories recommend that thought start. Instead, one must turn to all of the lives that are marginalized in different ways by the operative systems of social stratification. The different feminisms inform each other; we can learn from all of them and change our patterns of belief.

Last, one can note that from the perspective of marginalized lives, it is the dominant claims that we should in fact regard as ethnocentric. It is relatively easy to see that overtly racist, sexist, classist, and heterosexist claims have the effect of insisting that the dominant culture is superior. But it is also the case that claims to have produced universally valid beliefs—principles of ethics, of human nature, epistemologies, and philosophies of science—are ethnocentric. Only members of the powerful groups in societies stratified by race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality could imagine that their standards for knowledge and the claims resulting from adherence to such standards should be found preferable by all rational creatures, past, present, and future. This is what the work of Smith, Hartsock, and the others discussed earlier shows. Moreover, standpoint theory itself is a historical emergent. There are good reasons why it has not emerged at other times in history; no doubt it will be replaced by more useful epistemologies in the future—the fate of all human products.<sup>35</sup>

*Standpoint Theory versus Relativism, Perspectivalism, and Pluralism*

If there is no single, transcendental standard for deciding between competing knowledge claims, then it is said that there can be only local historical ones, each valid in its own lights but having no claims against others. The literature on cognitive relativism is by now huge, and here is not the place to review it.<sup>36</sup> However, standpoint theory does not advocate—nor is it doomed to—relativism. It argues against the idea that all social situations provide equally useful resources for learning about the world and against the idea that they all set equally strong limits on knowledge. Contrary to what universalists think, standpoint theory is not committed to such a claim as a consequence of rejecting universalism. Standpoint theory provides arguments for the claim that some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start off knowledge projects, and those arguments must be defeated if the charge of relativism is to gain plausibility.<sup>37</sup>

Judgmental (or epistemological) relativism is anathema to any scientific project, and feminist ones are no exception.<sup>38</sup> It is not equally true as its denial that women's uteruses wander around in their bodies when they take math courses, that only Man the Hunter made important contributions to distinctively human history, that women are biologically programmed to succeed at mothering and fail at equal participation in governing society, that women's preferred modes of moral reasoning are inferior to men's, that targets of rape and battering must bear the responsibility for what happens to them, that the sexual molestation and other physical abuses children report are only their fantasies, and so on—as various sexist and androcentric scientific theories have claimed. Feminist and prefeminist claims are usually not complementary but conflicting, just as the claim that the earth is flat conflicts with the claim that it is round. *Sociological* relativism permits us to acknowledge that different people hold different beliefs, but what is at issue in rethinking objectivity is the different matter of *judgmental* or epistemological relativism. Standpoint theories neither hold nor are doomed to it.

Both moral and cognitive forms of judgmental relativism have determinate histories; they appear as intellectual problems at certain times in history in only some cultures and only for certain groups of people. Relativism is not fundamentally a problem that emerges from feminist or any other thought that starts in marginalized lives; it is one that emerges from the thought of the dominant groups. Judgmental relativism is sometimes the most that dominant groups can stand to grant to their critics—"OK, your claims are valid for you, but

mine are valid for me.”<sup>39</sup> Recognizing the importance of thinking about who such a problem belongs to—identifying its social location—is one of the advantages of standpoint theory.

*Standpoint Theory versus the Unique Abilities of the Oppressed to Produce Knowledge*

This is another way of formulating the charge that standpoint theories, in contrast to conventional theories of knowledge, are ethnocentric. However, in this form the position has tempted many feminists, as it has members of other liberatory knowledge projects.<sup>40</sup> We can think of this claim as supporting “identity science” projects—the knowledge projects that support and are supported by “identity politics.” In the words of the Combahee River Collective’s critique of liberal and marxist thought (feminist as well as prefeminist) that failed to socially situate anti-oppression claims: “Focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression.”<sup>41</sup> (They were tired of hearing about how they should be concerned to improve others’ lives and how others were going to improve theirs.)

To pursue the issue further, we will turn to examine just who is the “subject of knowledge” for standpoint theories. But we can prepare for that discussion by recollecting yet again that Hegel was not a slave, though he grasped the critical understanding of the relations between master and slave that became available only if he started off his thought from the slave’s activities, and that Marx, Engels and Lukacs were not proletarians. Two questions are raised by these examples: What is the role for marginalized experience in the standpoint projects of members of dominant groups? And what are the special resources, but also limits, that the lives of people in dominant groups provide in generating the more objective knowledge claims standpoint theories call for? We shall begin to address these issues in the next section.

To conclude this one, marginalized lives provide the scientific problems and the research agendas—not the solutions—for standpoint theories. Starting off thought from these lives provides fresh and more critical questions about how the social order works than does starting off thought from the unexamined lives of members of dominant groups. Most natural and social scientists (and philosophers!) are themselves members of these dominant groups, whether by birth or through upward mobility into scientific and professional/managerial careers. Those who are paid to teach and conduct research receive a

disproportionate share of the benefits of that very nature and social order that they are trying to explain. Thinking from marginal lives leads one to question the adequacy of the conceptual frameworks that the natural and social sciences have designed to explain (for themselves) themselves and the world around them. This is the sense in which marginal lives ground knowledge for standpoint approaches.

#### **4. New Subjects of Knowledge**

For empiricist epistemology, the subject or agent of knowledge—that which “knows” the “best beliefs” of the day—is supposed to have a number of distinctive characteristics. First, this subject of knowledge is culturally and historically disembodied or invisible because knowledge is by definition universal. “Science says . . . ,” we are told. Whose science, we can ask? The drug and cigarette companies? The Surgeon General’s? The National Institute of Health’s? The science of the critics of the NIH’s racism and sexism? Empiricism insists that scientific knowledge has no particular historical subject. Second, in this respect, the subject of scientific knowledge is different in kind from the objects whose properties scientific knowledge describes and explains, because the latter are determinate in space and time. Third, though the subject of knowledge for empiricists is transhistorical, knowledge is initially produced (“discovered”) by individuals and groups of individuals (reflected in the practice of scientific awards and honors), not by culturally specific societies or subgroups in a society such as a certain class or gender or race. Fourth, the subject is homogeneous and unitary, because knowledge must be consistent and coherent. If the subject of knowledge were permitted to be multiple and heterogeneous, then the knowledge produced by such subjects would be multiple and contradictory and thus inconsistent and incoherent.

The subjects of knowledge for standpoint theories contrast in all four respects. First, they are embodied and visible, because the lives from which thought has started are always present and visible in the results of that thought. This is true even though the way scientific method is operationalized usually succeeds in removing all personal or individual fingerprints from the results of research. But personal fingerprints are not the problem standpoint theory is intended to address. The thought of an age is *of an age*, and the delusion that one’s thought can escape historical locatedness is just one of the thoughts that is typical of dominant groups in these and other ages. The “scientific world view” is, in fact, a view of (dominant groups in) modern, Western societies, as the histories of science proudly point out. Standpoint theories simply disagree with the further ahistorical and inco-

herent claim that the content of “modern and Western” scientific thought is also, paradoxically, not shaped by its historical location.

Second, the fact that subjects of knowledge are embodied and socially located has the consequence that they are not fundamentally different from objects of knowledge. We should assume causal symmetry in the sense that the same kinds of social forces that shape objects of knowledge also shape (but do not determine) knowers and their scientific projects.

This may appear to be true only for the objects of social science knowledge, not for the objects that the natural sciences study. After all, trees, rocks, planetary orbits, and electrons do not constitute themselves as historical actors. What they are does not depend on what they think they are; they do not think or carry on any of the other activities that distinguish human communities from other constituents of the world around us. However, this distinction turns out to be irrelevant to the point here because, in fact, scientists never can study the trees, rocks, planetary orbits, or electrons that are “out there” and untouched by human concerns. Instead, they are destined to study something different (but hopefully systematically related to what is “out there”): *nature as an object of knowledge*. Trees, rocks, planetary orbits, and electrons always appear to natural scientists only as they are already socially constituted in some of the ways that humans and their social groups are already socially constituted for the social scientist. Such objects are already effectively “removed from pure nature” into social life—they are social objects—by, first of all, the contemporary general cultural meanings that these objects have for everyone, including the entire scientific community.<sup>42</sup> They also become socially constituted objects of knowledge through the shapes and meanings these objects gain for scientists because of earlier generations of scientific discussion about them. Scientists never observe nature apart from such traditions; even when they criticize some aspects of them they must assume others in order to carry on the criticism. They could not do science if they did not both borrow from and also criticize these traditions. Their assumptions about what they see are always shaped by “conversations” they carry on with scientists of the past. Finally, their own interactions with such objects also culturally constitute them; to treat a piece of nature with respect, violence, degradation, curiosity, or indifference is to participate in culturally constituting such an object of knowledge. In these respects, nature as an object of knowledge simulates social life, and the processes of science themselves are a significant contributor to this phenomenon. Thus the subject and object of knowledge for the natural sciences are also not significantly different in kind. Whatever kinds



of social forces shape the subjects are also thereby shaping their objects of knowledge.

Third, consequently, communities and not primarily individuals produce knowledge. For one thing, what I believe that I thought through all by myself (in my mind), which I know, only gets transformed from my personal belief to knowledge when it is socially legitimated. Just as importantly, my society ends up assuming all the claims I make that neither I nor my society critically interrogate. It assumes the eurocentric, androcentric, heterosexist, and bourgeois beliefs that I do not critically examine as part of my scientific research and that, consequently, shape my thought and appear as part of my knowledge claims. These are some of the kinds of features that subsequent ages (and Others today) will say make my thought characteristic of my age, or society, community, race, class, gender, or sexuality. The best scientific thought of today is no different in this respect from the thought of Galileo or Darwin; in all can be found not only brilliant thoughts first expressed by individuals and then legitimated by communities but also assumptions we now regard as false that were distinctive to a particular historical era and not identified as part of the "evidence" that scientists actually used to select the results of research.<sup>43</sup>

Fourth, the subjects/agents of knowledge for feminist standpoint theory are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent, not unitary, homogeneous, and coherent as they are for empiricist epistemology.<sup>44</sup> Feminist knowledge has started off from women's lives, but it has started off from many different women's lives; there is no typical or essential woman's life from which feminisms start their thought. Moreover, these different women's lives are in important respects opposed to each other. Feminist knowledge has arisen from European and African women, from economically privileged and poor women, from lesbians and heterosexuals, from Protestant, Jewish, and Islamic women. Racism and imperialism, local and international structures of capitalist economies, institutionalized homophobia and compulsory heterosexuality, and the political conflicts between ethnic and religious cultures produce multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory feminist accounts. Nevertheless, thought that starts off from each of these different kinds of lives can generate less partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life.

However, the subject/agent of feminist knowledge is multiple, heterogeneous, and frequently contradictory in a second way that mirrors the situation for women as a class. It is the thinker whose consciousness is bifurcated, the outsider within, the marginal person now located at the center,<sup>45</sup> the person who is committed to two agendas

that are by their nature at least partially in conflict—the liberal feminist, socialist feminist, Sandinista feminist, Islamic feminist, or feminist scientist—who has generated feminist sciences and new knowledge. It is starting off thought from a contradictory social position that generates feminist knowledge. So the logic of the directive to “start thought from women’s lives” requires that one start one’s thought from multiple lives that are in many ways in conflict with each other, each of which itself has multiple and contradictory commitments. This may appear an overwhelming requirement—or even an impossible one—because Western thought has required the fiction that we have and thus think from unitary and coherent lives. But the challenge of learning to think from the perspective of more than one life when those lives are in conflict with each other is familiar to anthropologists, historians, conflict negotiators, domestic workers, wives, mothers—indeed, to most of us in many everyday contexts.

Both empiricist philosophy and marxism could maintain the fiction that unitary and coherent subjects of knowledge were to be preferred only by defining one socially distinctive group of people as the ideal knowers and arguing that all others lacked the characteristics that made this group ideal. Thus, the liberal philosophy associated with empiricism insisted that it was the possession of reason that enabled humans to know the world the way it is and then defined as not fully rational women, Africans, the working class, the Irish, Jews, other peoples from Mediterranean cultures, and so on. It was said that no individuals in these groups were capable of the dispassionate, disinterested exercise of individual moral and cognitive reason that was the necessary condition for becoming the ideal subject of knowledge. Similarly, traditional marxism argued that only the industrial proletariat possessed the characteristics for the ideal subject of marxist political economy. Peasants’, slaves’ and women’s work, as well as bourgeois activities, made these people’s lives inferior starting points for generating knowledge of the political economy.<sup>46</sup> In contrast, the logic of standpoint theory leads to the refusal to essentialize its subjects of knowledge.

This logic of multiple subjects leads to the recognition that the subject of liberatory feminist knowledge must also be, in an important if controversial sense, the subject of every other liberatory knowledge project. This is true in the collective sense of “subject of knowledge,” because lesbian, poor, and racially marginalized women are all women, and therefore all feminists will have to grasp how gender, race, class, and sexuality are used to construct each other. It will have to do so if feminism is to be liberatory for marginalized women, but also if it is to avoid deluding dominant group women about their/our

own situations. If this were not so, there would be no way to distinguish between feminism and the narrow self-interest of dominant group women—just as conventional androcentric thought permits no criterion for distinguishing between “best beliefs” and those that serve the self-interest of men as men. (Bourgeois thought permits no criterion for identifying specifically bourgeois self-interest; racist thought, for identifying racist self-interest; and so on.)

But the subject of every other liberatory movement must also learn how gender, race, class, and sexuality are used to construct each other in order to accomplish their goals. That is, analyses of class relations must look at their agendas from the perspective of women’s lives, too. Women, too, hold class positions, and they are not identical to their brothers’. Moreover, as many critics have pointed out, agendas of the left need to deal with the fact that bosses regularly and all too successfully attempt to divide the working class against itself by manipulating gender hostilities. If women are forced to tolerate lower wages and double-days of work, employers can fire men and hire women to make more profit. Antiracist movements must look at their issues from the perspective of the lives of women of color, and so forth. Everything that feminist thought must know must also inform the thought of every other liberatory movement, and vice versa. It is not just the women in those other movements who must know the world from the perspective of women’s lives. Everyone must do so if the movements are to succeed at their own goals. Most importantly, this requires that women be active directors of the agendas of these movements. But it also requires that men in those movements be able to generate original feminist knowledge from the perspective of women’s lives as, for example, John Stuart Mill, Marx and Engels, Frederick Douglass, and later male feminists have done.<sup>47</sup>

However, if every other liberatory movement must generate feminist knowledge, it cannot be that women are the unique generators of feminist knowledge. Women can not claim this ability to be uniquely theirs, and men must not be permitted to claim that because they are not women, they are not obligated to produce fully feminist analyses. Men, too, must contribute distinctive forms of specifically feminist knowledge from their particular social situation. Men’s thought, too, will begin first from women’s lives in all the ways that feminist theory, with its rich and contradictory tendencies, has helped us all—women as well as men—to understand how to do. It will start there in order to gain the maximally objective theoretical frameworks within which men can begin to describe and explain their own and women’s lives in less partial and distorted ways. This is necessary if men are to produce more than the male supremacist “folk belief”

about themselves and the world they live in to which female feminists object. Women have had to learn how to substitute the generation of feminist thought for the “gender nativism” androcentric cultures encourage in them, too. Female feminists are made, not born. Men, too must learn to take historic responsibility for the social position from which they speak.

Patricia Hill Collins has stressed the importance to the development of Black feminist thought of genuine dialogue across differences, and of the importance of making coalitions with other groups if that dialogue is to happen.

While Black feminist thought may originate with Black feminist intellectuals, it cannot flourish isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups. The dilemma is that Black women intellectuals must place our own experiences and consciousness at the center of any serious efforts to develop Black feminist thought yet not have that thought become separatist and exclusionary. . . .

By advocating, refining, and disseminating Black feminist thought, other groups—such as Black men, white women, white men, and other people of color—further its development. Black women can produce an attenuated version of Black feminist thought separated from other groups. Other groups cannot produce Black feminist thought without African-American women. Such groups can, however, develop self-defined knowledge reflecting their own standpoints. But the full actualization of Black feminist thought requires a collaborative enterprise with Black women at the center of a community based on coalitions among autonomous groups.<sup>48</sup>

It seems to me that Collins has provided a powerful analysis of the social relations necessary for the development of less partial and distorted belief by any knowledge community.

Far from licensing European-Americans to appropriate African-American thought or men to appropriate women’s thought, this approach challenges members of dominant groups to make themselves “fit” to engage in collaborative, democratic, community enterprises with marginal peoples. Such a project requires learning to listen attentively to marginalized people; it requires educating oneself about their histories, achievements, preferred social relations, and hopes for the future; it requires putting one’s body on the line for “their” causes until they feel like “our” causes; it requires critical examination of the dominant institutional beliefs and practices that systematically disadvantage them; it requires critical self-examination to discover how one unwittingly participates in generating disadvantage to them . . . and more. Fortunately, there are plenty of models available

to us not only today but also through an examination of the history of members of dominant groups who learned to think from the lives of marginalized people and to act on what they learned. We can choose which historical lineage to claim as our own.

To conclude this section, we could say that since standpoint analyses explain how and why the subject of knowledge always appears in scientific accounts of nature and social life as part of the object of knowledge of those accounts, standpoint approaches have had to learn to use the social situatedness of subjects of knowledge systematically as a resource for maximizing objectivity. They have made the move from declaiming as a problem or acknowledging as an inevitable fact to theorizing as a *systematically accessible* resource for maximizing objectivity the inescapable social situatedness of knowledge claims.

## **5. Standards for Maximizing Objectivity**

We are now in a position to draw out of this discussion of the innovative grounds and subject of knowledge for feminist standpoint theories the stronger standards for maximizing objectivity that such theories both require and generate. Strong objectivity requires that the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge. Thus, strong objectivity requires what we can think of as “strong reflexivity.” This is because culturewide (or nearly culturewide) beliefs function as evidence at every stage in scientific inquiry: in the selection of problems, the formation of hypotheses, the design of research (including the organization of research communities), the collection of data, the interpretation and sorting of data, decisions about when to stop research, the way results of research are reported, and so on. The subject of knowledge—the individual and the historically located social community whose unexamined beliefs its members are likely to hold “unknowingly,” so to speak—must be considered as part of the object of knowledge from the perspective of scientific method. All of the kinds of objectivity-maximizing procedures focused on the nature and/or social relations that are the direct object of observation and reflection must also be focused on the observers and reflectors—scientists and the larger society whose assumptions they share. But a maximally critical study of scientists and their communities can be done only from the perspective of those whose lives have been marginalized by such communities. Thus, strong objectivity requires that scientists and their communities be integrated into democracy-advancing projects for scientific and epistemological reasons as well as moral and political ones.

From the perspective of such standpoint arguments, empiricism’s

standards appear weak; empiricism advances only the “objectivism” that has been so widely criticized from many quarters.<sup>49</sup> Objectivism impoverishes its attempts at maximizing objectivity when it turns away from the task of critically identifying all of those broad, historical social desires, interests, and values that have shaped the agendas, contents, and results of the sciences much as they shape the rest of human affairs.

Consider, first, how objectivism too narrowly operationalizes the notion of maximizing objectivity.<sup>50</sup> The conception of value-free, impartial, dispassionate research is supposed to direct the identification of all social values and their elimination from the results of research, yet it has been operationalized to identify and eliminate only those social values and interests that differ among the researchers and critics who are regarded by the scientific community as competent to make such judgments. If the community of “qualified” researchers and critics systematically excludes, for example, all African-Americans and women of all races and if the larger culture is stratified by race and gender and lacks powerful critiques of this stratification, it is not plausible to imagine that racist and sexist interests and values would be identified within a community of scientists composed entirely of people who benefit—intentionally or not—from institutionalized racism and sexism. This kind of blindness is advanced by the conventional belief that the truly scientific part of knowledge seeking—the part controlled by methods of research—occurs only in the context of justification. The context of discovery, in which problems are identified as appropriate for scientific investigation, hypotheses are formulated, key concepts are defined—this part of the scientific process is thought to be unexaminable within science by rational methods. Thus “real science” is restricted to those processes controllable by methodological rules. The methods of science—or rather, of the special sciences—are restricted to procedures for the testing of already formulated hypotheses. Untouched by these methods are those values and interests entrenched in the very statement of what problem is to be researched and in the concepts favored in the hypotheses that are to be tested. Recent histories of science are full of cases in which broad social assumptions stood little chance of identification or elimination through the very best research procedures of the day.<sup>51</sup> Thus objectivism operationalizes the notion of objectivity in much too narrow a way to permit the achievement of the value-free research that is supposed to be its outcome.

But objectivism also conceptualizes the desired value-neutrality of objectivity too broadly. Objectivists claim that objectivity requires the elimination of *all* social values and interests from the research process

and the results of research. It is clear, however, that not all social values and interests have the same bad effects upon the results of research. Democracy-advancing values have systematically generated less partial and distorted beliefs than others.<sup>52</sup>

Objectivism's rather weak standards for maximizing objectivity make objectivity a mystifying notion, and its mystificatory character is largely responsible for its usefulness and its widespread appeal to dominant groups. It offers hope that scientists and science institutions, themselves admittedly historically located, can produce claims that will be regarded as objectively valid without having to examine critically their own historical commitments from which—intentionally or not—they actively construct their scientific research. It permits scientists and science institutions to be unconcerned with the origins or consequences of their problematics and practices or with the social values and interests that these problematics and practices support. It offers the false hope of enacting what Francis Bacon erroneously promised for the method of modern science: "The course I propose for the discovery of sciences is such as leaves but little to the acuteness and strength of wits, but places all wits and understandings nearly on a level." His "way of discovering science goes far to level men's wits, and leaves but little to individual excellence, because it performs everything by surest rules and demonstrations."<sup>53</sup> In contrast, standpoint approaches requires the strong objectivity that can take the subject as well as the object of knowledge to be a necessary object of critical, causal—scientific!—social explanations. This program of strong reflexivity is a resource for objectivity, in contrast to the obstacle that *de facto* reflexivity has posed to weak objectivity.

Some feminists and thinkers from other liberatory knowledge projects have thought that the very notion of objectivity should be abandoned. They say that it is hopelessly tainted by its use in racist, imperialist, bourgeois, homophobic, and androcentric scientific projects. Moreover, it is tied to a theory of representation and concept of the self or subject that insists on a rigid barrier between subject and object of knowledge—between self and Other—which feminism and other new social movements label as distinctively androcentric or eurocentric. Finally, the conventional notion of objectivity institutionalizes a certain kind of lawlessness at the heart of science, we could say, by refusing to theorize any criteria internal to scientific goals for distinguishing between scientific method, on the one hand, and such morally repugnant acts as torture or ecological destruction, on the other. Scientists and scientific institutions disapprove of, engage in political activism against, and set up special committees to screen scientific projects for such bad consequences, but these remain

ad hoc measures, extrinsic to the conventional “logic” of scientific research.

However, there is not just one legitimate way to conceptualize objectivity, any more than there is only one way to conceptualize freedom, democracy, or science. The notion of objectivity has valuable political and intellectual histories; as it is transformed into “strong objectivity” by the logic of standpoint epistemologies, it retains central features of the older conception. In particular, might should not make right in the realm of knowledge production any more than in matters of ethics. Understanding ourselves and the world around us requires understanding what others think of us and our beliefs and actions, not just what we think of ourselves and them.<sup>54</sup> Finally, the appeal to objectivity is an issue not only between feminist and prefeminist science and knowledge projects but also within each feminist and other emancipatory research agenda. There are many feminisms, some of which result in claims that distort the racial, class, sexuality, and gender relationships in society. Which ones generate less or more partial and distorted accounts of nature and social life? The notion of objectivity is useful in providing a way to think about the gap that should exist between how any individual or group wants the world to be and how in fact it is.<sup>55</sup>

## 6. An Objection Considered

“Why not just keep the old notion of objectivity as requiring value-neutrality and argue instead that the problem feminism raises is how to get it, not that the concept itself should be changed? Why not argue that it is the notion of scientific method that should be transformed, not objectivity?”

This alternative position is attractive for several reasons. For one thing, clearly feminist standpoint theorists no less than other feminists want to root out sexist and androcentric bias from the results of research. They want results of research that are not “loyal to gender”—feminine or masculine. In this sense, don’t they want to maximize value-neutrality—that is, old-fashioned objectivity—in the results of research?

Moreover, in important respects an epistemology and a method for doing research in the broadest sense of the term have the same consequences or, at least, are deeply implicated in each other. What would be the point of a theory of knowledge that did not make prescriptions for how to go about getting knowledge or of a prescription for getting knowledge that did not arise from a theory about how knowledge can be and has been produced? So why not appropriate and transform



what the sciences think of as scientific method, but leave the notion of objectivity intact? Why not argue that the standpoint theories have finally completed the quest for a “logic of discovery” begun and then abandoned by philosophers some decades ago? They are calling for an “operationalization” of scientific method that includes the context of discovery and the social practices of justification in the appropriate domain of its rules and recommended procedures.<sup>56</sup> Scientific method must be understood to begin back in the context of discovery, in which scientific “problems” are identified and bold hypotheses conjectured. Then “starting from marginalized lives” becomes part of the method of maximizing value-neutral objectivity. This possibility could gain support from the fact that some standpoint theorists consistently talk about their work interchangeably as an epistemology and a method for doing research.<sup>57</sup>

Attractive as this alternative is, I think it is not attractive enough to convince that only method and not also the concept of objectivity should be reconceptualized. For one thing, this strategy makes it look reasonable to think it possible to gain value-neutrality in the results of research. It implies that human ideas can somehow escape their location in human history. But this no longer appears plausible in the new social studies of science.

Second, and relatedly, this strategy leads away from the project of analyzing how our beliefs regarded as true as well as those regarded as false have social causes and thus, once again, to the assumption of a crucial difference between subjects and objects of knowledge. It would leave those results of research that are judged by the scientific community to be maximally objective to appear to have no social causes, to be the result only of nature’s impressions on our finally well-polished, glassy-mirror minds. Objects of knowledge then become, once again, dissimilar for the subjects of knowledge. Subjects of real knowledge, unlike subjects of mere opinion, are disembodied and socially invisible, whereas their natural and social objects of knowledge are firmly located in social history. Thus the “strong method” approach detached from “strong objectivity” leaves the opposition between subjects and objects firmly in place—an opposition that both distorts reality and has a long history of use in exploiting marginalized peoples. The “strong objectivity” approach locates this very assumed difference between subject and object of knowledge in social history; it calls for a scientific account of this assumption, too.

Third, this strategy leaves reflexivity merely a perpetual problem rather than also the resource into which standpoint theorists have transformed it. Observers do change the world that they observe, but refusing to strengthen the notion of objectivity leaves reflexivity always

threatening objectivity rather than also as a resource for maximizing it.

Finally, it is at least paradoxical and most certainly likely to be confusing that the “strong method only” approach must activate in the process of producing knowledge those very values, interests, and politics that it regards as anathema in the results of research. It is at least odd to direct would-be knowers to go out and reorganize social life—as one must do to commit such forbidden (and difficult) acts as starting thought from marginal lives—in order to achieve value-neutrality in the results of research. Standpoint approaches want to eliminate dominant group interests and values from the results of research as well as the interests and values of *successfully colonized* minorities—loyalty to femininity as well as to masculinity is to be eliminated through feminist research. But that does not make the results of such research value-neutral. It will still be the thought of this era, making various distinctive assumptions that later generations and others today will point out to us.

On balance, these disadvantages outweigh the advantages of the “strong method only” approach.

Can the new social movements “have it both ways”? Can they have knowledge that is fully socially situated? We can conclude by putting the question another way: if they cannot, what hope is there for anyone else to maximize the objectivity of *their* beliefs?

## Notes

1. “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, 3 (1988): 581. Reprinted and revised in Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (New York: Routledge, 1991). I thank Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

2. Important works here include Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism & Culture* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Elizabeth Fee, “Women’s Nature and Scientific Objectivity,” in *Woman’s Nature: Rationalizations of Inequality*, ed. Marion Lowe and Ruth Hubbard (New York: Pergamon Press, 1981); Donna Haraway, *op. cit.* and *Primate Visions: Gender,*

*Race and Nature in the World of Modern Science* (New York: Routledge, 1989); Ruth Hubbard, *The Politics of Women's Biology* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990); Evelyn Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Helen Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1990); and Lynn Hankinson Nelson, *Who Knows: From Quine to a Feminist Empiricism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990). These are just some of the important works on the topic; many other authors have made contributions to the discussion. I have addressed these issues in *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986) and *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking From Women's Lives* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); see also the essays in Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka, ed., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and the Philosophy of Science* (Dordrecht: Reidel 1983). An interesting parallel discussion occurs in the feminist jurisprudence literature in the course of critiques of conventional conceptions of what "the rational man" would do, "the objective observer" would see, and "the impartial judge" would reason; see, for example many of the essays in the special issue of the *Journal of Legal Education on Women in Legal Education—Pedagogy, Law, Theory, and Practice* 39, 1–2 (1988), ed. Carrie Menkel-Meadow, Martha Minow, and David Vernon; and Katharine T. Bartlett, "Feminist Legal Methods," *Harvard Law Review* 103, 4 (1990).

3. This literature is by now huge. For a sampling of its concerns, see Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983); Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, eds., *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982); Michael Krausz and Jack Meiland, eds., *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); and Stanley Aronowitz, *Science and Power: Discourse and Ideology in Modern Society* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

4. Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," loc. cit., 579. In the phrase "a critical practice for recognizing our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings," she also raises here the troubling issue of reflexivity, to which I shall return.

5. Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987) and *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990); Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in Harding and Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality*; Hilary Rose, "Hand, Brain and Heart: A Feminist Epistemology of the Natural Sciences," *Signs* 9, 1 (1983); and my discussion of these writings in chapter 6 of *The Science Question in Feminism*. Alison Jaggar also developed an influential account of standpoint epistemology in chapter 11 of *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Allenheld, 1983). For more recent developments of standpoint theory see Patricia Hill Collins, chapters 10 and 11 of *Black Feminist Thought: Knowl-*

edge, *Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990) and chapters 5, 6, 7, and 11 of my *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*

6. Chapter 6 of *Whose Science?*, “‘Strong Objectivity’ and Socially Situated Knowledge,” addresses some of the issues I raise here. However, here I develop further the differences between the “grounds” and the subject of knowledge for standpoint theory and for other epistemologies. This is partly an archeology of standpoint theory—bringing to full light the obscured aspects of its logic—and partly a reformulation of some of its claims.

7. Scientists sometimes confuse the philosophy of science called “empiricism” with the idea that it is a good thing to collect information about the empirical world. All philosophies of science recommend the latter. Empiricism is that account of such practices associated paradigmatically with Locke, Berkeley and Hume and claiming that sensory experience is the only or fundamental source of knowledge. It contrasts with theological accounts that were characteristic of European science of the Middle Ages, with rationalism, and with Marxist philosophy of science. However, from the perspective of standpoint theory, it also shares key features with one or another of these three philosophies. For example, it borrows the monologic voice that seems proper if one assumes the necessity of a unitary and coherent subject of knowledge, as do all three.

8. Roy Bhaskar writes that although positivism mystifies the processes of science, nevertheless it has a certain degree of necessity in that it reflects the spontaneous consciousness of the lab bench—the tenets of positivism reflect how it feels like science is done when one is actually gathering observations of nature. Similarly, from the perspective of standpoint approaches, the “spontaneous” feminist empiricism I discuss here mystifies the processes of feminist research, although it has a certain necessity in that it just felt to these feminist empirical workers like what it was that they were doing as their work overturned the results of supposedly value-free prefeminist research. See Roy Bhaskar, “Philosophies as Ideologies of Science: A Contribution to the Critique of Positivism,” in *Reclaiming Reality* (New York: Verso, 1989). Not all forms of empiricism are reasonably thought of as positivist, of course, but the most prevalent contemporary forms are. The philosophical feminist empiricism noted below is not positivist.

9. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge*; Nelson, *Who Knows*.

10. There are many standpoint theorists and many spontaneous feminist empiricists. I present here ideal types of these two theories of knowledge. I have contrasted these two theories in a number of earlier writings, most recently on p. 111–37 of *Whose Science: Whose Knowledge?* The following passage draws especially on pp. 111–20.

11. Dorothy Smith was right, I now think, to insist (in effect) that standpoint theory appropriates and transforms the notion of scientific method, not just of epistemology; see her comments on a paper of mine in *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Feminism* 88, 3 (1989). It is interesting to

note that by 1989, even the National Academy of Science—no rabble-rousing antiscience critic!—argues that the methods of science should be understood to include “the judgments scientists make about the interpretation or reliability of data . . . , the decisions scientists make about which problems to pursue or when to conclude an investigation,” and even “the ways scientists work with each other and exchange information” [*On Being a Scientist* (Washington D.C.: National Academy Press, 1989), 5–6].

12. Marcia Millman and Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “Editor’s Introduction” to *Another Voice: Feminist Perspectives on Social Life and Social Science* (New York: Anchor Books, 1975), vii. [Reprinted in S. Harding, ed., *Feminism and Methodology*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.)]

13. This description seems to imply that scientists are somehow outside of the history they are using—for example, capable of determining which are, in fact, the scientifically and epistemologically most favorable historical locations. This is not so, of course, and that is why the reflexivity project Haraway refers to is so important.

14. “Of course here and there will be found careless or poorly trained scientists, but no *real* scientist, no *good* scientist, would produce sexist or androcentric results of research.” This line of argument has the consequence that there have been no real or good scientists except for feminists! See “What Is Feminist Science?,” chapter 12 of *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, for discussions of this and other attempts to resist the idea that feminist science is exactly good science but that refusing to acknowledge the feminist component in good science obscures what makes it good.

15. Frederic Jameson has argued that the feminist standpoint theorists are the only contemporary thinkers fully to appreciate the Marxist epistemology. See “*History and Class Consciousness* as an ‘Unfinished Project,’” *Rethinking Marxism* 1 (1988): 49–72. It should be noted that empiricist explanations of Marxist accounts are common: “Marx had this puzzle. . . . He made a bold conjecture and then attempted to falsify it. . . . The facts supported his account and resolved the puzzle.” These make the accounts plausible to empiricists but fail to engage both with Marx’s own different epistemology and with the additional “puzzle” of the historical causes of the emergence of his account, to which Marxist epistemology draws attention.

16. See note 6.

17. Cf., for example, Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Samir Amin, *Eurocentrism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1989); Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” *Feminist Issues* 1, 1 (1980); Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: The Crossing Press, 1983); and Charles Mills, “Alternative Epistemologies,” *Social Theory and Practice* 14, 3 (1988).

18. Hartsock, “The Feminist Standpoint,” 159. Hartsock’s use of the term “real relations” may suggest to some readers that she and other standpoint theorists are hopelessly mired in an epistemology and metaphysics that have

been discredited by social constructionists. This judgment fails to appreciate the way standpoint theories reject *both* pure realist and pure social constructionist epistemologies and metaphysics. Donna Haraway is particularly good on this issue. (See her "Situated Knowledges," cited in note 1.)

19. We shall return later to the point that, for standpoint theorists, reports of marginalized experience or lives or phenomenologies of the "lived world" of marginalized peoples are not the *answers* to questions arising either inside or outside those lives, though they are necessary to asking the best questions.

20. For an exploration of a number of different ways in which marginal lives can generate more critical questions, see chapter 5, "What is Feminist Epistemology?" in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*

21. See, for example, *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge*, 54.

22. The image of knowledge seeking as a journey—"starting off thought from women's lives"—is a useful corrective to misunderstandings that more easily arise from the visual metaphor—"thinking from the perspective of women's lives." The journey metaphor appears often in writings by Hartsock, Smith, and others.

23. Some women are assigned more of this work than others, but even wealthy and aristocratic women with plenty of servants are left significantly responsible for such work in ways their brothers are not.

24. Of course body work and emotional work also require head work—contrary to the long history of sexist, racist, and class-biased views. See, for example, Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking* (New York: Beacon Press, 1989). And the kind of head work required in administrative and managerial work—what Smith means by "ruling"—also involves distinctive body and emotional work, though it is not acknowledged as such. Think of how much of early childhood education of middle-class children is really about internalizing a certain kind of (gender-specific) regulation of bodies and emotions.

25. This is Donna Haraway's phrase in "Situated Knowledges" cited in note 1.

26. Smith, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," in *Feminism and Methodology*, 91.

27. I idealize the history of science here as is indicated by recent studies of fraud, carelessness, and unconscious bias that is not detected. See, for example, Stephen Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981); L. Kamin, *The Science and Politics of IQ* (Potomac, Md.: Erlbaum, 1974); and William Broad and Nicholas Wade, *Betrayers of the Truth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982). The issue here can appear to be one about the sins of individuals, which it is. But far more importantly, it is an issue about both the unwillingness and impotence of scientific institutions to police their own practices. They *must* do so, for any other alternative is less effective. But science institutions will not want to or be competent to do so until they are more integrated into democratic social projects.

28. Richard Rorty is unusual in arguing that because social situatedness is indeed the lot of all human knowledge projects, we might as well embrace our ethnocentrism while pursuing the conversations of mankind. His defense of ethnocentrism is a defense of a kind of fatalism about the impossibility of people ever transcending their social situation; in a significant sense this comes down to and converges with the standard definition of ethnocentrism centered in my argument here. (I thank Linda Alcoff for helping me to clarify this point.) He does not imagine that one can effectively change one's "social situation" by, for example, participating in a feminist political movement, reading and producing feminist analyses, and so on. From the perspective of his argument, it is mysterious how any woman (or man) ever becomes a feminist because our "social situation" is initially to be constrained by patriarchal institutions, ideologies, and the like. How *did* John Stuart Mill or Simone de Beauvoir ever come to think such thoughts as they did? See his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

29. Of course a gender is not an ethnicity. Yet historians and anthropologists write of women's cultures, so perhaps it does not stretch the meaning of ethnicity too far to think of women's cultures this way. Certainly some of the critics of standpoint theory have done so.

30. "Women's Perspective," cited in note 26.

31. Bettina Aptheker, *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989).

32. *Black Feminist Thought*, cited in note 6.,

33. The preceding citations contain many examples of such cases.

34. "So many," but not all. African-American and Latina writers have argued that in U.S. society, at least, a poor African-American and Latino man cannot be regarded as better off than his sister in many important respects.

35. What are the material limits of standpoint theories? Retroactively, we can see that they require the context of scientific culture; that is, they center claims about greater objectivity, the possibility and desirability of progress, the value of causal accounts for social projects, and so on. They also appear to require that the barriers between dominant and dominated be not absolutely rigid; there must be some degree of social mobility. Some marginal people must be able to observe what those at the center do, some marginal voices must be able to catch the attention of those at the center, and some people at the center must be intimate enough with the lives of the marginalized to be able to think how social life works from the perspective of their lives. A totalitarian system would be unlikely to breed standpoint theories. So a historical move to antiscientific or to totalitarian systems would make standpoint theories less useful. No doubt there are other historical changes that would limit the resources standpoint theories can provide.

36. See the citations in note 3.

37. All of the feminist standpoint theorists and science writers insist on distinguishing their positions from relativist ones. I have discussed the issue of relativism in several places, most recently in chapters 6 and 7 of *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*

38. See S. P. Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism," *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 2, 2 (1989); and Donna Haraway's "Situated Knowledges" for especially illuminating discussions of why relativism can look attractive to many thinkers at this moment in history, but why it should nevertheless be resisted.

39. Mary G. Belenky and her colleagues point out that the phrase "It's my opinion . . ." has different meanings for the young men and women they have studied. For men this phrase means "I've got a right to my opinion," but for women it means "It's just my opinion." Mary G. Belenky, B. M. Clinchy, N. R. Goldeberger, and J. M. Tarule, *Women's Ways of Knowing: the Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

40. Critics of standpoint theories usually attribute this position to standpoint theorists. Within the array of feminist theoretical approaches, the claim that only women can produce knowledge is most often made by Radical Feminists.

41. The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (Latham, N.Y.: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 212.

42. For example, mechanistic models of the universe had different meanings for Galileo's critics than they have had for modern astronomers or, later, for contemporary ecologists, as Carolyn Merchant and other historians of science point out. See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980). To take another case, "wild animals" and, more generally, "nature" are defined differently by Japanese, Indian, and Anglo-American primatologists, as Donna Haraway points out in *Primate Visions* (cited in note 2). The cultural character of nature as an object of knowledge has been a consistent theme in Haraway's work.

43. Longino and Nelson's arguments are particularly telling against the individualism of empiricism. See Nelson's "Who Knows," chapter 6 in *Who Knows*, and Longino's discussion of how the underdetermination of theories by their evidence insures that "background beliefs" will function as if they were evidence in many chapters of *Science as Social Knowledge* (cited in note 2) but especially in chapters 8, 9, and 10.

44. See Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988) for a particularly pointed critique of essentialist tendencies in feminist writings. Most of the rest of this section appears also in "Subjectivity, Experience and Knowledge: An Epistemology from/for Rainbow Coalition Politics," forthcoming in *Questions of*



*Authority: The Politics of Discourse and Epistemology in Feminist Thought*, ed. Judith Roof and Robyn Weigman. I have also discussed these points in several other places.

45. These ways of describing this kind of subject of knowledge appear in the writings of, respectively, Smith ("Women's Perspective"), Collins (*Black Feminist Thought*) and Bell Hooks, *Feminist Theory From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press, 1983).

46. Consequently, a main strategy of the public agenda politics of the new social movements has been to insist that women, or peoples of African descent, or the poor, and so on do indeed possess the kinds of reason that qualify them as "rational men"; that women's, industrial, or peasant labor makes these groups also the "working men" from whose laboring lives can be generated less partial and distorted understandings of local and international economies.

47. I do not say these thinkers are perfect feminists—they are not, and no one is. But here and there one can see them generating original feminist knowledge as they think from the perspective of women's lives as women have taught them to do.

48. Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 35–36. Chapters 1, 2, 10, and 11 of this book offer a particular rich and stimulating development of standpoint theory.

49. See the citations in note 3. The term "objectivism" has been used to identify the objectionable notion by Bernstein, Keller, and Bordo (see earlier citations), among others.

50. The following arguments are excerpted from pp. 143–48 in my *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*

51. See note 27.

52. Many Americans—even (especially?) highly educated ones—hold fundamentally totalitarian notions of what democracy is, associating it with mob rule or some at least mildly irrelevant principle of representation but never with genuine community dialogue. (A physicist asked me if by democracy I really meant that national physics projects should be managed by, say, fifty-two people, one selected randomly from each state! This made me think of the wisdom of William Buckley, Jr.'s desire to be governed by the first 100 people in the Boston phone book rather than the governors we have.) A good starting point for thinking about how to advance democracy is John Dewey's proposal: those who will bear the consequence of a decision should have a proportionate share in making it.

53. Quoted in Werner Van den Daele, "The Social Construction of Science," in *The Social Production of Scientific Knowledge*, ed. E. Mendelsohn, P. Weingart, and R. Whitley (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1977), 34.

54. David Mura puts the point this way in "Strangers in the Village," in *The Graywolf Annual Five: Multi-cultural Literacy* ed. Rick Simonson and Scott Walker (St. Paul: Graywolf Press, 1988), 152.

55. These arguments for retaining the notion of objectivity draw on ones I have made several times before, most recently in *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* p. 157–61.

56. The National Academy of Sciences recommends such an expansion, as indicated earlier.

57. For example, Smith and Hartsock, cited in note. 5.