

# Privileged Standpoints/ Reliable Processes

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*This article attempts to reconcile Sandra Harding's postmodernist standpoint theory with process reliabilism in first-order epistemology and naturalism in metaepistemology. Postmodernist standpoint theory is best understood as consisting of an applied epistemological component and a metaepistemological component. Naturalist metaepistemology and the metaepistemological component of postmodernist standpoint theory have produced complementary views of knowledge as a socially and naturally located phenomenon and have converged on a common concept of objectivity. The applied epistemological claims of postmodernist standpoint theory usefully can be construed as applications of process reliabilist first-order epistemology. Postmodernist standpoint theory, reliabilism, and naturalism thus form a coherent package of views in metaepistemology, first-order epistemology, and applied epistemology.*

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Recollect that ancient lesson from elementary school science classes: "Is that stick in the pond that appears to be bent really bent? Walk around to a different location and see that it now appears straight—as it really is." Then, theories of optics were invoked to explain the causes of the initially distorted appearances.

—Sandra Harding

The purpose of this paper is to bring feminist standpoint theory—I am concerned, in particular, with the postmodernist variety of the theory developed by Sandra Harding (in, for example, Harding 1986, 1991, 1993, 1998)—into contact with the tendency in recent mainstream analytic epistemology in

which process reliabilism (Goldman 1979) is coupled with metaepistemological naturalism of a broadly Quinean stripe (Quine 1969).

This task is complicated by three factors. First, reliabilists and naturalists largely have disregarded both standpoint theory as a whole and differences among the competing varieties of standpoint theory; the standpoint camp, on the infrequent occasions on which it has been discussed by the reliabilist/naturalist camp, usually has been treated as a vaguely defined but undifferentiated monolith. Second, standpoint theorists typically have reciprocated by ignoring the development of the reliabilist/naturalist tendency within the analytic mainstream; though standpoint theorists have engaged in an extended critique of mainstream epistemological theory, they have focused largely on mainstream tendencies that predate and, in the eyes of its partisans, are superseded by the development of reliabilism/naturalism.<sup>1</sup>

Much work on feminist standpoint theory is done outside of the official philosophical institutions, and the operation of these first two factors is thus perhaps in part simply an effect of institutional boundaries between (bureaucratically defined) disciplines. But the barriers between the disciplines are permeable, and these factors no doubt operate also at least in part due to a suspicion on the part of each camp that the other has nothing significant to offer to the camp's own research program, either because (at best) the other camp is concerned with basically different (and possibly unimportant) questions or because (at worst) the theories developed by the other camp are temperamentally antipathetic to (or even formally inconsistent with) the camp's own theories. And indeed—and this is the third factor complicating my task in this paper—from the vantage point of each camp, the theoretical activity of the other initially is all but unintelligible: to standpoint theorists, reliabilist/naturalist theorizing is apt to look like yet more futile analytic hairsplitting; and to mainstream analytic epistemologists, standpoint theorizing tends to take on the aspect of a confusing mishmash of epistemology, intellectual history, and social science.

The upshot is that there is relatively little literature to which to turn for guidance on how to bring the two camps into contact with each other. Of necessity, then, this paper is somewhat sketchy and programmatic.<sup>2</sup> By the same token, however, my argument should be of fairly broad interest: for obvious reasons, it should be of interest both to postmodernist standpoint theorists and to reliabilists/naturalists; and given the centrality of standpoint theory to feminist epistemology and that of reliabilism/naturalism to mainstream analytic epistemology, it should be of interest also to a broad range of other feminist and analytic epistemologists.

## 1. STANDPOINT THEORY AND THE FIELD OF EPISTEMOLOGY

In order to provide a background against which the relationships between postmodernist standpoint theory and reliabilism/naturalism can emerge, I want to begin by carving up the field of epistemology in a certain way. On the picture of the field that I have in mind, it divides naturally into three subfields: metaepistemology, first-order (or normative) epistemology, and applied epistemology.<sup>3</sup>

As I envisage the field, first-order epistemology is devoted to the study of the various epistemic phenomena. Centrally (but not exclusively), this subfield is concerned with the nature of the knowledge relation, with what it is for some epistemic subject *S* to know that some proposition *P* is true.<sup>4</sup> Metaepistemology, in contrast, is concerned with epistemological phenomena, with, that is, epistemological theories, theorists, and theorizing. Of central concern to this subfield are, first, questions about the object-domain of epistemology—roughly: what are the metaphysics of the phenomena studied by epistemologists—and second, questions about epistemological method—roughly: how epistemologists (ought to) conduct their investigations of the epistemological object-domain. Also included under this heading are questions about simplicity, objectivity, and so on, as well as questions about how such desiderata relate to the production of knowledge. Exemplified by work in social epistemology on epistemically optimal organizations of scientific inquiry, applied epistemology, finally, is devoted to the study of particular epistemic problems and techniques; claims in applied epistemology thus can be evaluated only given some more or less definite first-order epistemological theory.

Metaepistemologies and first-order epistemologies are mutually constraining: at minimum, certain metaepistemologies and certain first-order epistemologies are jointly inconsistent. The description in section 3.2 below of the relationship between naturalist metaepistemology and process reliabilist first-order epistemology serves to illustrate the way in which this mutual constraint works. Similarly, first-order epistemologies and applied epistemologies cannot simply be mixed and matched: at minimum, certain first-order epistemologies and certain empirical findings jointly entail certain applied epistemological claims. The description in section 3.2 of the relationship between process reliabilist first-order epistemology and applied epistemological claims about the epistemic virtues of certain standpoints illustrates the way in which commitments in one of the two subfields can constrain work in the other.

A careful review of the core theses of postmodernist standpoint theory demonstrates that some of those theses fall under the heading of metaepistemology and that the remainder fall under that of applied epistemology, and something similar holds for most orientations within feminist epistemology. The extensive body of feminist epistemological theory, then, contains (what is to my mind, anyway) a puzzling lacuna: the feminist literature on epistemology contains

relatively little discussion of the possibility of, the need for, or the potential positive content of a (specifically) feminist first-order epistemology and, in particular, of a feminist account of the nature of the knowledge relation.

Louise Antony, in a discussion of feminist critiques of mainstream epistemology, pinpoints the likely source of this gap in the literature: the general rejection by feminist epistemologists of “S knows that *P*” epistemology,<sup>5</sup> where “S knows that *P*” epistemology is epistemology guided by the assumption that it is possible in principle to discover a set of conditions necessary and sufficient for an arbitrary subject *S*’s knowing the truth of an arbitrary proposition *P*, a set of conditions, in other words, that hold “for any knower, no matter what they’re like, or where they are situated” (2002, 464).<sup>6</sup> The description of first-order epistemology given above, since it builds in the assumption that there is a unique knowledge relation, rules out the possibility of a non-“S knows that *P*” first-order epistemology. Note that even if the assumption that there is a unique knowledge relation turns out to be false, room remains for first-order epistemology (or something near enough), since then there is simply a multiplicity of knowledge relations for first-order epistemologists to investigate. The rejection of “S knows that *P*” epistemology, then, does not by itself license neglect of questions about the nature of knowledge. But I want to suggest that the standard reasons offered against “S knows that *P*” epistemology do not in fact tell against the assumption, and hence that feminist epistemology (like any approach to the field) properly includes first-order epistemology, taken in my narrow sense.

As Antony points out, “S knows that *P*” epistemology might be rejected for either (or both) of two reasons, each of which pertains to embodiment. On the one hand, one might argue that “contrary to the defining assumption of [“S knows that *P*”] epistemology, embodiment *does matter* to what knowledge is, or to how knowers know” (2002, 464). The claim here, I take it, concerns the object-domain of epistemology: there is not a unique knowledge relation; what it is for *S* to know that *P* depends on the particulars of *S*’s embodiment, on *S*’s social or natural location. On the other hand, one might argue that “embodiment matters to the way in which one *theorizes* about knowledge, so that . . . [“S knows that *P*”] epistemology reflects contingent and nonuniversal features of the embodiment of the theorists who espouse it” (2002, 464). I take this to be a claim about epistemological method: embodiment always has meta-level effects on epistemological theorizing, and it has had bad meta-level effects on “S knows that *P*” theorizing in particular. While most feminist theorists have rejected “S knows that *P*” epistemology, Antony continues, most of these have done so for the second of the reasons she lists: feminists usually have argued that the embodiment of “S knows that *P*” epistemologists has had bad meta-level effects on their epistemological theorizing, so that the products of that theorizing are theoretically inadequate in certain specifiable respects.<sup>7</sup>

Now, metaepistemological arguments calling attention to problems with an epistemological method that licenses disregard for the potential impact on their inquiry of the social and natural locations of epistemological inquirers obviously can provide grounds for rejecting certain particular “S knows that *P*” epistemologies: for externalists, at any rate, that a poor method is used in the production of a belief is sufficient on its own to render that belief unjustified. But such arguments do not by themselves provide grounds for rejecting “S knows that *P*” epistemology as such: that sort of epistemology, recall, is simply epistemology guided by the assumption that there is a unique knowledge relation (that there is a unified kind of knowledge, and not merely disjoint “kinds” of knowledge), and to point out that certain attempts to discover the nature of the knowledge relation have been flawed methodologically is not yet to call the legitimacy of the very aim of those attempts into question.

Given that one rejects “S knows that *P*” epistemologies for the second of the reasons listed by Antony, then, the question remains open whether one should also reject “S knows that *P*” epistemology as such; that is, whether one should also endorse the first of the reasons she lists. The claim that embodiment has meta-level effects on epistemological theorizing is consistent with a view on which methodologically better epistemological research—granted the second reason, the method of such research appropriately will take the embodiment of researchers into account—might (in principle) discover the nature of a general knowledge relation, a relation that holds between knowers and propositions “no matter what they’re like, or where they are situated.” Hence there is space for a position that both endorses standard feminist arguments against “S knows that *P*” epistemologies and maintains that the central aim of “S knows that *P*” epistemology is worthy of pursuit, a position according to which differences of embodiment matter methodologically, but not metaphysically. On such a position, methodologically sound first-order epistemological research must somehow take the locatedness of the researchers into account, but the object-domain with which those researchers are concerned still contains a unified phenomenon of knowledge.

My suggestion is that this is the correct position. Since they are independent, one might, of course, endorse both of the reasons listed by Antony for rejecting “S knows that *P*” epistemology. But the first of those reasons is *prima facie* rather implausible: I am aware of no interesting argument to the effect that there is no unified phenomenon of knowledge, that (roughly) there is no sense of “knows” in which all normal humans (as well as many nonhuman animals) can be said to know;<sup>8</sup> I have no positive argument to offer for the existence of such a phenomenon, but the claim that there is provides the most plausible working hypothesis of which I am aware.

I therefore take it for granted in the remainder of this paper that among the aims of epistemology, no matter how the field is approached, ought to be

precisely the central aim of “S knows that *P*” epistemology. And I therefore take it for granted that among the goals of feminist epistemology ought to be precisely the discovery of a set of conditions necessary and sufficient for an arbitrary subject *S*’s knowing the truth of an arbitrary proposition *P*.<sup>9</sup> I take this for granted even while (enthusiastically) signing on to the claim that the social and natural locations of epistemologists have influenced and inevitably will continue to influence the course of epistemological theorizing. And I take it for granted even while (equally enthusiastically) signing on to the stronger claim that the influence of the social and natural locations of “S knows that *P*” epistemologists has so far primarily been theoretically deleterious. The stronger claim implies not that we should abandon the attempt to discover the nature of the knowledge relation, but only that we should, in making that attempt, work somehow to ensure that the inevitable influence of embodiment is theoretically salutary rather than theoretically harmful.

How, then, is embodiment to be taken into account in the methodology of epistemology? My suggestion will not, in the context of this paper, be surprising: the suggestion is simply that epistemological research must become “strongly objective.” Among the chief metaepistemological contributions of postmodernist standpoint theory is the concept of strong objectivity: one of the core theses of postmodernist standpoint theory is that the naïve empiricist concept of objectivity—a concept on which objectivity amounts to a nearly literal open-mindedness, to a robotic, exclusive attention to data<sup>10</sup>—should be replaced with a more robust concept of objectivity, a concept on which objectivity not only is compatible with but even requires certain sorts of biases on the part of the inquirer.<sup>11</sup> Once strong objectivity is made into a virtue of inquiry, locatedness ceases automatically to appear as a hindrance to the production of knowledge, and becomes instead a resource on which inquirers potentially can draw: the “trick” by means of which strong objectivity can be attained, in epistemology as in other fields, involves inquirers’ taking the effects of their own locations into account by means of attention of a certain sort to the relevantly different locations of others.<sup>12</sup>

I have already mentioned one of the main theses of this paper, namely, that the core applied epistemological claims of postmodernist standpoint theory can be understood as applications of process reliabilism, so that, granted postmodernist standpoint theory, process reliabilism becomes plausible as a feminist first-order epistemology. The other main thesis of the paper is that the metaepistemological component of postmodernist standpoint theory is compatible with naturalist metaepistemology.<sup>13</sup> These two theses together amount to a sort of compatibilism about postmodernist feminist standpoint theory and reliabilism/naturalism. The goal of the paper, in other words, is to establish the internal coherence of a certain epistemological package: a

combination of a certain metaepistemology, a certain first-order epistemology, and a certain applied epistemology. I have little that is novel to say in favor of standpoint theory, reliabilism, or naturalized epistemology; the novelty of the paper, instead, derives from the novelty of the proposed package, one which, if my argument succeeds, inherits the support derived by each of its components from largely independent arguments.

Before proceeding any further, I pause to note and dismiss a relatively minor incompatibilist worry. Many naturalists and reliabilists no doubt will balk at the suggestion that their favored theories are even compatible with an avowedly postmodernist theory. And postmodernist standpoint theorists are perhaps equally likely to balk at the suggestion that their favored theory is compatible with reliabilism or naturalism (which have a fairly modernist flavor). Both reactions would, I think, be mistaken, simply because there is nothing particularly postmodernist about the core theses of postmodernist standpoint theory, unless the concept of postmodernism is stretched to such an extent that it is no longer very informative to refer to a position as postmodernist.<sup>14</sup> Considerations of style dictate that I choose some adjective by means of which to distinguish between the variety of standpoint theory developed by Harding and that out of which it developed; I choose to refer to Harding's theory as postmodernist simply because Harding herself sometimes does so, not because I think that her use of the term is particularly apt.

My procedure in the paper is as follows. The remainder of section 1 is devoted to a brief review of the modernist standpoint theory out of which postmodernist standpoint theory developed and alongside which it continues (uneasily) to coexist. An appreciation of the differences between the two varieties of standpoint theory is vital to an appreciation of the feasibility of reconciling postmodernist standpoint theory with reliabilism/naturalism. In section 2, I describe the metaepistemological component of postmodernist standpoint theory and argue that it fits nicely with a standard naturalist metaepistemology. I argue, in particular, that postmodernist standpoint theorists and naturalized epistemologists have produced complementary views of knowledge as a socially and naturally located phenomenon, and that they have converged on similar concepts of objectivity. In section 3, I argue that the applied epistemological component of postmodernist standpoint theory can be interpreted as an application of process reliabilism. Since the compatibility of reliabilism and naturalist metaepistemology is already well established, this establishes that the package consisting of standpoint theory, reliabilism, and naturalized epistemology is internally coherent. I conclude, in section 4, by responding to a key incompatibilist objection: standpoint theorists have wanted to assign a sort of epistemic priority to knowledge that is importantly "for" women (or for other marginalized people), and it might seem that a naturalist conception of

epistemic value rules this sort of priority out. I argue, however, that naturalized epistemology can accommodate a suitably enriched conception of epistemic value (a modification of that developed by Goldman [1999]).

It is standard to include in discussions of feminist standpoint theory a brief gesture in the direction of Lukács (and thereby in that of Marx and Engels and, ultimately, Hegel) (Lukács 1997, 2000). But this ritual gesture serves merely to obscure the profound gap that separates both Lukács's modernist standpoint theory and modernist feminist standpoint theories (for example, that developed in Hartsock 1983a, 1983b, 1998), on the one hand, from postmodernist standpoint theory, on the other. An awareness of the existence and breadth of this gap is crucial to an appreciation of the plausibility of compatibilism.

Frederic Jameson points out that theories in a broadly Lukácsian spirit propose a radical reconceptualization of epistemology, since they "relate a truth claim to the social structure and phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity. Epistemology thus passes over into social phenomenology in a way that cannot but be felt as scandalous . . . by those for whom these levels correspond to distinct disciplines and their strictly differentiated methodologies" (1988, 143). Now, there is in fact no very close connection between "phenomenological experience" and a "truth claim" to be found in Lukács (although such a connection does emerge with modernist feminist standpoint theory), but Jameson clearly is right about the scandalousness of Lukácsian standpoint theory.<sup>15</sup> Modernist standpoint theory is scandalous, I suggest, in virtue of positing a tight, "ontological" connection between a unique privileged standpoint and the theory revealed as true from that standpoint.

For Lukács, in virtue of the specific role of the proletariat as the totalizer of history, only the self-consciousness of the proletariat can provide access to the objective, totalizing tendency of history (Lukács 1997, 199). Simultaneously, because the proletariat with which Lukács is concerned is not the "really existing" class, but a class that is only in the process of becoming, he can say that the proletarian standpoint necessarily provides access to that objective tendency: the proletariat "can never 'in practice' ignore the course of history, forcing on it what are no more than its own desires or knowledge. For it is itself nothing but the contradictions of history that have become conscious" (178). This, rather than any appeal to the "phenomenological consciousness of a specific collectivity," is the source of the scandalousness of the theory: the proletarian standpoint reveals as true a certain theory of history; the truth of this theory cannot otherwise be established; and only the theory can explain the connection between itself and the standpoint.

This scandalous structure is replicated in modernist feminist standpoint theory, which does grant experience a central role in constituting the privileged standpoint. According to Nancy Hartsock, the feminist standpoint is bound up with a certain worldview, the accuracy of which cannot be

established by independent means and which alone explains the connection between itself and the feminist standpoint. Drawing on object-relations theory (Chodorow 1978, 1989), Hartsock posits an ontological connection between the feminist standpoint and the deepest level of social reality, and she is thus prepared “to lay aside important differences among women across race and class boundaries and instead search for central commonalities.” She finds these commonalities in experiences common to women by virtue of their common location in the sexual division of labor, in their “immersion in the world of use—in concrete, many-qualified, changing material processes”: “the vantage point available to women on the basis of their contribution to subsistence represents an intensification and deepening of the materialist world view and consciousness available to producers of commodities in capitalism, an intensification of class consciousness” (Hartsock 1983a, 468–69).

This emphasis on the role of experience in producing the feminist standpoint will turn out to provide one of the key motivations for the move from modernist feminist standpoint theory to postmodernist feminist standpoint theory. In order for the experience of women to produce a unique, privileged standpoint, two conditions must be satisfied: first, there must be some experience that women have in common, and second, this experience itself must somehow provide a (special) route to deep knowledge of social reality. Most feminist theorists have doubted that either condition is met.

With this background on modernist feminist standpoint theory in place, I turn to the postmodernist feminist standpoint theory to which it gives rise. Harding’s theory, while it retains a “family resemblance” to Hartsock’s theory, nevertheless departs radically from the latter, and does so in a manner that renders it far less scandalous.

## 2. COMPATIBILISM I:

### POSTMODERNIST STANDPOINT THEORY AND NATURALIZED EPISTEMOLOGY

Whereas modernist standpoint theory posits a necessary connection between the privileged standpoint and access to the deepest level of social reality, the analogous connections posited by postmodernist standpoint theory are dramatically weaker. According to modernist standpoint theory, the privileged standpoint, like all standpoints, is partial, in that it is partisan or interested. Other standpoints are partial also in a second sense: they are fundamentally limited, in that they cannot be employed to obtain knowledge of the deepest level of social reality. But the particular partisanship of the privileged standpoint means that it is not partial in this second sense: the privileged standpoint is not limited in the same way as are other standpoints, it does provide access to the deepest level of social reality.

According to postmodernist standpoint theory, in contrast, even privileged standpoints are partial in both senses: all standpoints are both partisan and limited. And thus a standpoint no longer can be privileged by virtue of its provision of a unique pathway to knowledge of a certain domain. The connection between a privileged standpoint and the domain with respect to which it is privileged is no longer necessary: standpoints become simply resources on which inquirers can draw in attempts to maximize the objectivity of their inquiries.

Perhaps the most important theoretical contribution of postmodernist standpoint theory is, in fact, a reworked concept of objectivity, and it is in its core thesis about objectivity that its alignment with naturalized epistemology is most readily apparent. Against the naïve empiricist concept of objectivity, a concept on which objectivity requires the (attempted) elimination of the influence of biases on inquiry, postmodernist standpoint theorists urge us to turn our attention to our biases themselves, in order to turn them into aids to inquiry. Section 2 is devoted to arguing for the compatibilist thesis that this reworking comes to much the same thing as that urged by naturalized epistemologists.

## 2.1 STANDPOINT THEORY AS METAEPISTEMOLOGY

Harding, the foremost postmodernist feminist standpoint theorist, shares with Hartsock the view that the standpoint of women is in some sense privileged; whereas Hartsock singles one standpoint out as privileged, Harding multiplies privileged standpoints.<sup>16</sup> Such a multiplication of standpoints flows naturally from doubts that either of the two conditions that need to be satisfied in order for the experience of women to produce a unique privileged standpoint—that there is a set of experiences common to women and that this set of experiences provides a good route to knowledge of social reality—is satisfied, and Harding indeed holds that neither condition is met.

First, Harding argues that “there is no ‘*woman*’ to whose social experience the . . . standpoint justificatory strategy can appeal; there are, instead, *women*” (1986, 192). This denial of the existence of a set of experiences common to women generally leads her to conclude that “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 logic of standpoint theory leads to a refusal to essentialize its subjects of knowledge” (1993, 60, 66). The shift in focus from the lives of women generally (in Hartsock) to the lives of particular groups of women (in early Harding) to the lives of the marginalized generally (in later Harding) is not a mere change of emphasis: it stems from a recognition that the sorts of generalizations about the experiences of women made by modernist standpoint theory are very probably untenable. Once we reject the first of the assumptions about experience made by modernist feminist standpoint theory,

that theory begins to look like an unstable stage intermediate between Marxist standpoint theory and postmodernist standpoint theory: we can posit a unique privileged standpoint or we can appeal to “the phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity,” but we cannot do both at once. The turn to experience means that it is no longer feasible to identify a unique privileged standpoint: experience is simply too highly variable. Hence Harding’s multiplication of privileged standpoints.

Second, Harding, like Lukács, refuses to ground claims that standpoints are privileged in appeals to “phenomenological experience.” She argues that, because “experience itself is shaped by social relations,” women’s experiences do not reliably generate knowledge about nature and social relations (1991, 123). The thought here seems to be (approximately) that, since there is no experience that is not already mediated by ideology, we cannot count on anyone’s experience to provide privileged access to social reality. The possibility must at least be left open that we will need to reject, as being systematically misleading, the deliverances of experience, including the deliverances of the experiences of women and other marginalized people.

There is a danger involved in Harding’s multiplication of privileged standpoints. Bat-Ami Bar On points out that, once we allow that the standpoints of multiple marginalized groups are privileged, a temptation mistakenly to think of epistemic privilege as additive comes into play (1993, 89). In places, Harding seems to succumb to this temptation; she argues, for example, that research that begins from the lives of women who are marginalized also as members of certain classes should be expected to be even more productive than research that begins from the lives of women who are not also marginalized along that dimension (Harding 1991, 180–81). Bar On argues that this sort of move is plausible only given that marginality is itself thought of as additive (1993, 90), an assumption that is mistaken simply because power does not have a single center. Harding would, I suspect, concede the point: she readily admits, for example, that, once we acknowledge the epistemic benefits to be acquired by starting thought from the lives of the marginalized gender, we should be prepared to acknowledge the similar benefits to be had by starting thought from the lives of those marginalized (“only”) as members of certain classes and so on (1991, 178).<sup>17</sup>

These benefits, as noted above, are to be found in the capacity of marginalized standpoints to facilitate a “strong” sort of objectivity. In section 3, I discuss in detail Harding’s independent (applied epistemological) theses about how the standpoints of the marginalized in particular can help us to attain strong objectivity. In section 2, my goal is the comparative one of bringing the concept of strong objectivity itself into contact with the concept of objectivity implicit in naturalized epistemology.

The concept of strong objectivity can be thought of usefully as a means of solving the problem that Antony terms ‘the bias paradox’.<sup>18</sup> Antony argues that

there is a tension between two of the central aims of feminist research: feminist researchers have wanted to expose the sexist and androcentric biases of much inquiry; but at the same time, they have wanted to emphasize the inevitability of bias in general and even the epistemic value of biases of certain kinds. She argues that

the tension [between these two aims] blossoms into paradox when critiques of the first sort are applied to the concepts of objectivity and impartiality themselves. According to many feminist philosophers, the real flaw in the ideal of impartiality is supposed to be that the ideal itself is biased. . . . But how is it possible to criticize the partiality of the concept of objectivity without presupposing the very value under attack? (1993, 188–89)

The standard claim about how the ideal of objectivity as impartiality itself is biased is that appeals to the ideal tend simply to disguise biases shared across the community of researchers and to detect those that are not: the question of their objectivity is never raised about those views on which there is (virtual) consensus; and when the question is raised about dissenting views, they will, of course, fail to meet the impossible empiricist standards for objectivity (Antony 2000, 37).

Harding, like Antony, is alert to the paradox generated by the feminist critique of objectivity: having identified “sexist and androcentric biases in the disciplines,” and having concluded that the (empiricist) methods of the relevant disciplines themselves are “too weak to permit researchers *systematically* to identify and eliminate” biases shared across the community of researchers, the need for a set of “stronger standards for ‘good method,’ ones that can guide more competent efforts to maximize objectivity” becomes pressing (1993, 52). We need, in short, to presuppose a different concept of objectivity in order to critique the concept of objectivity as impartiality. The concept of strong objectivity is ideally suited to play this role:

Strong objectivity requires that the subjects 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.” . . . The subject of knowledge . . . must be considered as part of the object of knowledge from the perspective of scientific method. (Harding 1993, 69)

Knowledge, for postmodernist standpoint theory, is always situated and is therefore always produced by biased inquirers: the locations of knowers inevitably have effects on what is known.

Epistemically good inquiry, inquiry that conforms to good method, cannot be inquiry guided by an attempt to eliminate the influence of the locations of the inquirers, for such an attempt will fail to identify those biases that are shared across the community of inquirers. Epistemically good inquiry, rather, presupposes inquiry into the effects of the locations of the inquirers themselves, for only this sort of self-reflexive research, research in which the researchers focus a microscope on themselves, can provide us with a means of determining which biases are epistemically good and which are not: “The point is to strengthen [the standards of objectivity, rationality, and good method] so that they are competent to identify those values and interests that contribute to systematic ignorance and those that contribute to advancing the growth of knowledge” (Harding 2001, 518). Objective inquiry should be a means to knowledge, but empiricist objectivity is a hindrance. Postmodernist standpoint theory, in other words, conceives of biases as more or less epistemically useful resources for inquiry. Inquiry is objective not to the extent to which it is unbiased, but rather to the extent to which it is informed by epistemically good biases.<sup>19</sup>

It is important to note that this concept of objectivity is linked by Harding to a novel concept of epistemic value. In virtue of this connection, postmodernist standpoint theory can maintain that strongly objective research, research guided by epistemically good biases, will tend to produce knowledge that is in an important sense for the marginalized. Epistemically good biases are not simply those which, when employed, tend to produce many true beliefs; Harding’s evaluation of biases proceeds also along a second dimension, one involving the satisfaction of interests. In identifying certain epistemic standpoints as privileged, postmodernist standpoint theory attempts to set 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 . . . rather than *for* the use only of dominant groups in their projects of administering and managing the lives of marginalized people. (Harding 1993, 56)

Epistemically good biases, in other words, are biases that will tend to produce not simply knowledge, but knowledge that is (useful) for the marginalized (that is, for most of us). Note that the claim here is not simply that biases can be evaluated both epistemically (in terms of their tendency to produce knowledge) and politically (in terms of their tendency to produce knowledge that is for the marginalized); the claim, rather, is that epistemic evaluation itself proceeds along two dimensions. Both the tendency of a bias to produce knowledge and its tendency to produce knowledge that is for the marginalized are pertinent to a properly epistemic evaluation of the bias—the political, for postmodernist standpoint theory, is not external to the epistemic.<sup>20</sup>

In its refusal to relegate political considerations to the extra-epistemic realm, postmodernist standpoint theory remains fairly close to its modernist ancestors. For Hartsock, for example, the knowledge available from the feminist standpoint is superior to that available from the standpoint of abstract masculinity in two senses: first, it is more accurate than masculinist knowledge (because deeper than it); second, unlike masculinist knowledge, it is liberatory (it “points beyond the present”) (1983a, 464). For Harding, similarly, strong objectivity is better than empiricist objectivity in two senses: first, strongly objective inquiry is simply more likely to produce knowledge; second, strongly objective inquiry is more likely to produce knowledge that can serve the interests of the marginalized and their allies. But this family resemblance should not cause us to lose sight of the extent to which postmodernist standpoint theory departs from its modernist ancestor. The connection between a given privileged standpoint and the knowledge that it makes available is in two senses weaker for postmodernist standpoint theory than it is for modernist standpoint theory. First, occupying that particular standpoint is now made neither necessary nor sufficient for acquiring that knowledge—necessary connections between standpoints and bodies of knowledge are replaced by contingent ones. Second, whereas a “modernist” standpoint is bound up with a theory or worldview that is the only means of explaining the privilege of the standpoint itself, the knowledge produced from a “postmodernist” standpoint might in no way be about the standpoint itself—one can in principle detect the epistemic privilege of a postmodernist standpoint without occupying that particular standpoint oneself.

Its commitment to the possibility of detecting the epistemic privilege of a standpoint “externally” has led to some apparent difficulties for postmodernist standpoint theory. Susan Hekman argues that the commitment amounts to a (tacit) modernist assumption, an assumption that renders postmodernist standpoint theory internally incoherent. “All of Harding’s talk of ‘less false stories,’ ‘less partial and perverse accounts,’ and more ‘objective’ research,” she writes, “necessarily presupposes a shared discourse—a metanarrative, even—that establishes standards against which these judgments can be validated. Yet the centerpiece of Harding’s critique of masculinist science is the denial of the possibility of such a metanarrative” (1997, 355). The mention of metanarratives here is significant, for it reveals an important confusion: a claim that (we can tell that) an inquiry is (strongly) objective does not presuppose the existence of a metanarrative against which the claim can be evaluated;<sup>21</sup> such a claim, instead, simply presupposes that (we can tell that) the results of the inquiry are true or false. And we can often tell whether or not results are true without reference to any metanarrative: in general, the success or failure of action based on the results provides an indication of the extent to which they are true.<sup>22</sup> Despite her misleading use of the term ‘metanarrative,’ though, Hekman perhaps correctly grasps how things stand with postmodernist standpoint theory:

by virtue of its use of the notion of strong objectivity, the theory cannot, on penalty of inconsistency, also reject realism about truth.<sup>23</sup> Hekman's error—Harding, I argue below, makes the same mistake herself—is simply to suggest that such a commitment to truth on the part of postmodernist standpoint theory is somehow problematic.<sup>24</sup>

Indeed, as Sylvia Walby points out, once we privilege multiple standpoints, we had better commit ourselves to truth if we want to avoid a descent into some sort of relativism (2001, 495). Now, Harding is well aware of the dangers of relativism,<sup>25</sup> and yet she explicitly repudiates truth, and thereby implicitly commits herself to some sort of relativism.<sup>26</sup> We do not need to hold that our best theories are true, she argues, for we can “sort our beliefs into the more versus the less partial and distorted, or into the more versus the less false, without having to commit ourselves to the belief that the results of feminist research are ‘true’” (1991, 185). Harding's plausible thesis about the nature of objectivity is thus coupled with a wildly implausible one to the effect that the very goal of producing true theories is to be rejected.

Antony presumably has this repudiation of truth in mind when she remarks that one of the main advantages of naturalized epistemology over “standpoint and postmodern epistemologies” is that “it permits an appropriately realist conception of truth” (1993, 190). It is thus fortunate for my compatibilist project that Harding's repudiation of truth is independent of her plausible metaepistemological thesis, for were a version of postmodernist standpoint theory similar to Harding's but that does not incorporate the rejection of truth not feasible, then postmodernist standpoint theory could not be shown to be consistent with naturalist metaepistemology, which includes a firm commitment to truth.

Oddly enough, Harding's repudiation of truth seems in part to be motivated by a failure to appreciate the nature of her own applied work on the epistemic merits of various standpoints.<sup>27</sup> Recall the passage from Harding 1997 (her response to Hekman 1997) quoted as the epigraph: a stick in water appears from one perspective to be bent; when we adopt another perspective, the stick appears to be straight; the stick really is straight; thus, the second perspective is (in a narrow sense) epistemically better than the first; and we can, moreover, invoke theories of optics in order to explain why it is that the second perspective should be epistemically better. One expects Harding to put this example to work in an analogy in which visual perspectives are compared to standpoints: phenomenon *x* appears to be *F* from the standpoint of group *g*; from the standpoint of group *h*, however, *x* appears to be *G*; *x* really is *G*; thus, the standpoint of group *h* is (in a narrow sense) epistemically better than that of group *g*; we can, moreover, formulate a theory to explain why it is that the second standpoint should be epistemically better than the first. Instead of suggesting such an analogy, however, Harding goes on to say that standpoint theorists “observe how different ‘locations’ in such relations [of class, gender,

and so on] tend to generate distinctive accounts of nature and social relations. . . . Observing [different relations between ‘what one does’ and ‘what one can know’] is like walking around the pond” (1997, 384). The idea here seems to be that the conclusion to which our investigation of various standpoints leads us can only be . . . that there are various standpoints! The epistemic virtues of standpoints disappear from this picture. And so the picture gets the nature of Harding’s own applied epistemological work wrong: the upshot of that work is not the metaepistemological thesis that all knowledge is located, but rather the normative thesis that locations in a certain definite set are in specifiable respects epistemically superior to other locations. In part, the claim is that research that begins from those locations tends more often to arrive at correct results, to produce knowledge.<sup>28</sup>

Compatibilism requires that the repudiation of truth be separable from the remainder of the metaepistemological component of Harding’s theory. I said above that her repudiation of truth is independent of Harding’s plausible thesis about objectivity, but this is not quite right, for the two views are even flatly inconsistent with each other. This is best illustrated by means of a look at what becomes of the solution to the bias paradox, given that we repudiate truth. The problem posed by the paradox, recall, is that of identifying a basis on which to reject the empiricist ideal of objectivity as biased without tacitly endorsing the empiricist concept of objectivity. The postmodernist standpoint-theoretic solution that becomes available once we endorse strong objectivity has two planks: First, we can argue that research guided by an attempt to be impartial tends not to produce as much knowledge as does research guided by a recognition of the inevitability of bias and which treats biases as epistemic resources.<sup>29</sup> Second, we can say that research guided by an attempt to eliminate the effects of bias tends to fail to produce the knowledge that we should want. The first plank of this solution becomes unavailable once we repudiate truth, for to say that a bias is good because it tends to produce more knowledge is in part simply to say that it is good because it tends to produce a greater number of true beliefs.<sup>30</sup> And the second plank of the solution is insufficient on its own to solve the paradox: we cannot interpret that plank as saying that a bias is good because it tends to produce beliefs that are in the interests of the marginalized, whether it enables the production of true beliefs or not; the claim can only be that given that a bias enables the production of true beliefs the value of the bias is amplified or attenuated according to whether the knowledge it produces is for the marginalized.

In what follows, therefore, I am concerned with a version of postmodernist standpoint theory that does not incorporate a repudiation of truth. A version of the theory that does include such a repudiation would not be compatible with naturalized epistemology, but that version would also be untenable on its own (because internally inconsistent).

## 2.2 NATURALIST METAEPistemology

Harding often refers approvingly to Donna Haraway's claim that the "God trick" does not work (Haraway 1988): knowledge is always socially (and naturally) situated. Naturalized epistemologists, too, reject the God trick (though they tend not to refer to Haraway), maintaining that knowledge is always naturally (and socially) situated. Both approaches to the theory of knowledge, in other words, reject the Cartesian reconstructive aims of much "S knows that *P*" epistemology: on either approach, the context of discovery is, contra reconstructive epistemology, directly relevant to what is known.<sup>31</sup>

Quine, in his classic description of the naturalist program, says that, on naturalism, "epistemology, or something like it, simply falls into place as a chapter of psychology and hence of natural science" and that "it studies a natural phenomenon, viz., a physical human subject" (1969, 82). The behaviorist details of Quine's statement of the naturalist program have had relatively little influence on its subsequent development. What naturalized epistemologists have taken from him instead is a pair of claims: first, epistemology is (or should become, or should be replaced with) an empirical field; second, epistemology properly is centrally concerned with real, "empirical" knowers. As Antony puts it,

What we need to understand is not how a particular theory *could be* inferred by some ideal cognizer from some given body of data, in accordance with traditional rules of rationality and objectivity, but, rather, how empirically successful theories *do* result from imperfect reasoners, operating from limited perspectives, on highly defective bodies of data. (2000, 34)

Quine's stress on the role of the discipline of psychology in the reconstituted field of epistemology has been retained by many naturalized epistemologists, but since real, empirical knowers are always socially as well as naturally located, naturalized epistemology is thoroughly committed as well to the relevance of general social science to epistemology. Similarly, while standpoint theorists have tended to stress social location, they readily admit that natural location also matters to epistemology.

Antony suggests that treating knowledge as a natural phenomenon involves "shifting the central focus of epistemology away from *a priori* projects like the definition of 'knowledge' . . . toward empirically informed projects designed to explain the actual knowledge human beings (or other actual knowers) have managed to acquire, given the actual circumstances in which it arises" (2000, 34). This suggestion is potentially misleading, for it makes the naturalization of epistemology seem to involve giving up the investigation of knowledge as such, in favor of a variety of projects in applied epistemology. I take it that this is not what Antony has in mind, and, at any rate, the variety of metaepistemological

naturalism with which I am here concerned permits us to continue to investigate knowledge as such—it is just that, now, we are to treat this as an empirical question, rather than an a priori one.<sup>32</sup>

According to that form of naturalism (developed chiefly by Kornblith 2002), knowledge is to be conceived of as a natural kind. Natural kinds, in turn, are taken to be those kinds described by the homeostatic property cluster theory (developed especially by Boyd 1988, 1999, 2003a, 2003b). On any theory of natural kinds, if *k* (referred to by term *t*) is a kind, then its essence (and hence also its membership) is in an important sense independent of the ideas of speakers of the language of which *t* is a part: any description they happen to associate with *t* does not determine its reference, and hence it is possible to discover the essence of a natural kind only a posteriori. On the homeostatic property cluster theory, the essence of a kind *k* consists of a homeostatic cluster of properties, together with the mechanisms causally responsible for sustaining the homeostasis of the cluster. An object *o*, in turn, is a member of *k* (referred to by *t*) just in case *o* bears the appropriate relationships to the cluster and mechanism causally regulating uses of *t*. There are two relationships in play here: first, *o* must have enough of the important properties in the cluster; second, *o* must have the properties in question either in virtue of instantiating the mechanism that partly constitutes the essence of *k* (if the mechanism is internal) or as a result of the workings of that mechanism (if the mechanism is external).

Kornblith's hypothesis, then, is that knowledge is a homeostatic property cluster. On this way of naturalizing epistemology, there is still room for first-order epistemology. In particular, there is still room for attempts to define 'knowledge'—it is just that we are to do this not via an a priori investigation of our concept of knowledge, but instead by means of an empirical investigation of knowledge itself. And such an investigation centrally involves an investigation of the subjects of knowledge: whatever knowers do in virtue of which they know is what accounts for the existence of their knowledge; the Cartesian reconstructive project, again, is ruled irrelevant to epistemological inquiry. Postmodernist standpoint theory, too, recommends close attention to real, empirical knowers, and their shared focus on the subjects of knowledge already suggests the possibility of reconciling the two approaches to the study of knowledge.

In addition to the metaepistemological thesis that knowledge is a natural kind, Hilary Kornblith defends a particular characterization of the kind (that is, a first-order epistemology): knowledge, he argues, is (approximately) reliably produced true belief.<sup>33</sup> What of the mechanisms causally responsible for the homeostasis of this property cluster? He suggests that to identify these, we should look in the first place to cognitive ethology, one lesson of which is that the "information-processing capacities and information-gathering abilities that animals possess" have been selected for due to their reliability in the

animals' environments (2002, 62–63). Thus a range of mechanisms, a range of information-processing capacities and information-gathering abilities, are responsible for sustaining the homeostasis of knowledge.

The details of the workings of these mechanisms are of particular interest in the present context, for, in many cases, they amount precisely to biases of various sorts. Where the knowledge had by humans is concerned, we need to look to a range of disciplines in addition to cognitive ethology for clues as to the nature of the relevant mechanisms. What we find when we do so is, again, that in many cases they amount to biases. Antony's discussion of the implications for epistemology of current theories in linguistics is illustrative of what we tend to find: these theories suggest that the human mind is not "the streamlined, uncluttered logic machine of classical empiricism," but, instead, "a bundle of highly specialized modules, each natively fitted for the analysis and manipulation of a particular body of sensory data" (1993, 211).<sup>34</sup> Antony argues that the problem of paring down alternatives is in fact "the defining feature of the human epistemic condition. The problem is partly solved . . . by one form of 'bias'—native conceptual structure" (1993, 211).<sup>35</sup> Antony recognizes, however, that the problem is not entirely solved by innate cognitive mechanisms. The mechanisms responsible for the homeostasis of human knowledge, at least, may take the form of consciously held beliefs. She points out that the epistemological lesson of Chomskyan linguistics is similar to that taught by Kuhn's treatment of the history of science (1962): biases (which appear in Kuhn's treatment in the form of paradigms) do not hinder inquiry; on the contrary, they are a prerequisite for successful inquiry.

At this point, a deep commonality between postmodernist standpoint theory and naturalized epistemology begins to emerge. For both, biases—the right biases—are the key to successful inquiry. The bottom line about the question of the goodness or badness of particular biases is, for Antony, that it is empirical: "Biases are good when and to the extent that they facilitate the gathering of *knowledge*—that is, when they lead us to the truth. Biases are bad when they lead us *away* from the truth" (1993, 215). This naturalist solution to the bias paradox calls for "*an empirical theory of biases*," a theory that might "tell us something about the reliability and the corrigibility of biases of various sorts" (216). This resembles nothing so much as the first plank of the postmodernist standpoint–theoretic solution to the bias paradox (though it is not accompanied by any claim about the epistemic fruitfulness of starting inquiry from the lives of the marginalized). Objectivity is to be achieved by placing the subjects of knowledge on the same "critical, causal" plane as the objects of knowledge. The difference between the concept of strong objectivity and the naturalist concept of objectivity begins to look largely like a matter of emphasis: Antony tends to emphasize innate biases, while Harding tends to emphasize acquired biases.

I thus conclude provisionally that (given that we prune the repudiation of truth from postmodernist standpoint theory) naturalized epistemology and postmodernist standpoint theory are mutually compatible and even similar in spirit. Both postmodernist standpoint theory and naturalized epistemology urge us to treat knowledge as a situated phenomenon: differences of emphasis aside, both theories urge us to treat knowledge as something had by socially and naturally located creatures. Both theories, moreover, conceive of objectivity in the same way: objectivity, for postmodernist standpoint theorists and naturalized epistemologists alike, is achieved by employing biases correctly. This is not to say that the two theories come to the same thing: naturalized epistemology (or the form of naturalized epistemology with which I am concerned here), but not postmodernist standpoint theory, involves a commitment to a metaphysics of natural kinds. And it remains to be seen whether naturalized epistemology is committed to a concept of epistemic value that rules out the second plank of the standpoint theoretic solution to the bias paradox. I return to this worry in section 4.

### 3. COMPATIBILISM II:

#### POSTMODERNIST STANDPOINT THEORY AND PROCESS RELIABILISM

This completes the main part of the case for my first compatibilist thesis. I turn in this section to the much shorter case for my second compatibilist thesis, namely, that the applied epistemological component of postmodernist standpoint theory fits nicely with process reliabilist first-order epistemology. The groundwork here has already been laid by Kitcher (1994); my task here, then, is basically to refine his suggestion.

That I should want to attempt this second reconciliation should not be surprising. Reliabilism is, as already indicated, compatible with naturalized epistemology, but it is not the only first-order epistemology compatible with that metaepistemology. I have argued that postmodernist standpoint theory, too, is compatible with naturalized epistemology. The second compatibilist thesis, if it can be established, establishes the coherence of the epistemological package described at the outset of the paper.

#### 3.1 STANDPOINT THEORY AS APPLIED EPISTEMOLOGY

Before proceeding any further, I should pause to remark on the relevance to compatibilism of Harding's empirically oriented work (especially Harding 1998) on the history of science. Much of the work in question is interesting, even if some of its presuppositions (for example, that we cannot draw a principled distinction between scientific and other modes of inquiry) are implausible. But this portion of her empirical work is not of direct relevance to the project of

this paper simply because it is not normative, and so is not properly epistemological. It is not that this work is free of normative implications—naturalized epistemologists will be among the first to admit the normative relevance of this sort of empirical work<sup>36</sup>—but that these are not explicitly drawn out. Nor does the project of this paper require that they first be drawn out. I am concerned here only with Harding’s properly epistemological work, only with her work on the epistemic merits of particular knowledge-seeking techniques.

Harding makes two sets of claims about the merits of knowledge-seeking techniques: first, there is a set of specific claims about the merits of beginning particular inquiries from particular (sets of) marginalized lives. These claims provide evidence for the more general thesis that starting inquiry from the lives of the marginalized is epistemically beneficial. This second thesis is an empirical generalization: in many cases, starting thought from the lives of the marginalized secures better epistemic rewards than do other available strategies. The thesis, then, does not imply that the lives of the marginalized provide resources for inquiries of every conceivable sort. The thesis does not imply that research that does not begin from the lives of the marginalized is doomed not to produce any knowledge. And the thesis is compatible with the existence of cases in which starting thought from the lives of the marginalized is not particularly epistemically fruitful. Nonetheless, it is a bold and interesting claim in virtue of its serious implications for our strategy for achieving strong objectivity.

The generalization about the lives of the marginalized is comparative. First, the locations of members of dominant groups are disadvantageous ones from which to begin inquiry, due to “the failure by dominant groups critically and systematically to interrogate their advantaged social situation and the effect of such advantages on their beliefs” (Harding 1993, 54). Second,

the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies [as race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality] 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 people, as they understand them, provide particularly significant *problems to be explained* or research agendas. (54)

The answers to the questions raised by marginalized lives are not, Harding emphasizes, necessarily to be found in the lives or experiences of the marginalized. The general claim about the lives of the marginalized, then, is that research that is biased by beginning from those lives, by letting them shape its questions and priorities, will tend to be strongly objective.<sup>37</sup>

A standpoint, on this account, clearly is no longer what it is for modernist standpoint theory. For modernist standpoint theories, recall, a standpoint is

bound up with a metanarrative: achieving a modernist standpoint involves taking on certain more or less metaphysical commitments. For postmodernist standpoint theories, in contrast, a standpoint is a research method: to adopt a postmodernist standpoint is to conduct inquiry in a certain way. To achieve strong objectivity, it is crucial to employ the right biases—the claim is that the bias constituted by paying particular attention to the lives of the marginalized is epistemically better than that constituted by simply aiming for empiricist objectivity. The applied epistemological component of standpoint theory is, in other words, a partial empirical theory of biases of the sort called for by Antony. Naturalized epistemologists have drawn our attention to some of the biases with which such a theory must be concerned: we learn from cognitive ethology, psychology, linguistics, and other such fields especially about innate mechanisms of various sorts, many of which amount to biases that seem to have been selected for precisely because they are epistemically fruitful (and so contribute to fitness).<sup>38</sup> Postmodernist standpoint theorists draw our attention to another set of such biases: at issue here are biases that are not innate but acquired, and that require deliberate effort to acquire.

What of the evidence for the general thesis? As noted above, it consists of the cases that can be made for the virtues of using particular marginalized standpoints in particular inquiries. The case for compatibilism does not require an assessment of this material: compatibilism is a view about relationships between theories, not about the correctness of the theories in question. My own view is that much of Harding's work on this front (and that of the many other researchers on whose work she draws) is fairly persuasive.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, it seems to me, much more remains to be done, for much of this work is marred by a severe imprecision: it is often far from clear just which locations are being singled out as epistemically privileged.<sup>40</sup> This imprecision results, I suspect, from a failure to embed the claims within the framework of systematic social science. To take an obvious example: in these claims, the old, relatively precise class concepts are replaced by vague, pseudo-theoretical concepts such as that of "economically advantaged people" (which seems to be something like an academic counterpart to the familiar ideological concept of the middle class). Even the referent of 'the marginalized' is often unclear. Systematic cognitive science (together with work in related fields) is in the process of providing us in effect with a list of innate biases of the sort mentioned by Antony. Naturalized epistemologists are in the very early stages of the epistemological evaluation of those biases. Only systematic social science, I suggest, can provide us with a similar list of biases of the sort with which postmodernist standpoint theory is centrally concerned, a list, that is, of lives from which it is potentially epistemically profitable to begin thought. The beginnings of such a list of biases are a prerequisite for their serious epistemological evaluation.

Whatever one thinks of the empirical evidence that so far has been adduced for the claim that research that begins from the lives of the marginalized tends to be strongly objective, such evidence by itself does not suffice to establish the claim. Strongly objective research, recall, is research guided by biases that tend to be epistemically fruitful, and thus in part is research guided by biases that tend to produce knowledge. In order to establish, then, that thinking from the lives of the marginalized is a good way to achieve strong objectivity, we need to know whether such thought tends to meet the standards for knowledge. At this point, a gap in existing postmodernist standpoint theorizing becomes apparent: it needs to be supplemented by a first-order epistemology, for only given a commitment to a fairly definite characterization of knowledge is it possible to assess the claim that adopting certain standpoints tends to produce knowledge.

### 3.2 RELIABILIST FIRST-ORDER EPISTEMOLOGY

Reliabilism, as Kornblith argues, is well suited to the needs of naturalized epistemology. Kitcher has suggested that it might likewise be suited to the needs of standpoint theory. The suggestion is worth exploring: postmodernist standpoint theory, like naturalized epistemology, calls the distinction between context of discovery and context of justification into question, and, for reliabilism, the context of discovery just is the context of justification.

According to reliabilism, knowledge is (approximately) true belief produced by a reliable process. Merely counterfactual inferences—for example, inferences a subject could have made simply from sense data with which she is presented—are, on this view, strictly irrelevant to what a subject knows. What determines whether *S* knows that *P* is simply whether *S*'s belief that *P* is both true and produced by a reliable belief-producing process. Hence the compatibility of reliabilism and naturalism: the processes used by real, empirical knowers are the salient ones for epistemological purposes.<sup>41</sup> Kitcher's suggestion is that we should

probe systematically the ways in which different standpoints make available more or less epistemically apt dispositions, more or less reliable ways of generating true beliefs. . . . Reliabilists should . . . insist that some standpoints are better or worse than others with respect to particular types of propositions: given that the issue is to determine whether *P*, the chances of doing so may be greater if one's circumstances are one way rather than another. (1994, 124)

Thus, "the claim that a particular standpoint is preferable to others can . . . be recast in terms of the relative reliability of the processes that standpoints make available" (125). This suggestion makes sense only if it concerns postmodernist

standpoint theory: modernist standpoint theories do not make claims about the mere reliability of privileged standpoints, but postmodernist standpoint theories plausibly are construed as making such claims.

Even then, the suggestion requires modification. As it stands, it embodies a common misconception about standpoint theory, namely, that the standpoint-theoretic claim that certain locations are epistemically better than certain others (relative to certain topics of inquiry) means that those who actually occupy those locations are epistemically superior to those who occupy the others (relative to that range of subjects). Even for modernist feminist standpoint theory, this is not right, for although Hartsock's feminist standpoint is bound up with women's experiences, it is not an inevitable byproduct of those experiences—a standpoint is always something achieved. And for postmodernist standpoint theory, it is wide of the mark: Harding emphasizes (as noted in section 3.1 above) that a privileged standpoint is to be used by everyone.

With some minor modifications, however, we can make Kitcher's suggestion work. Occupying a location should not be taken to be a prerequisite for accessing the standpoint associated with it. And talk of standpoints need not be replaced with talk of the processes that particular locations make available. Instead, we should say that to occupy the standpoint associated with a given location just is to think from that location, to allow that location to determine one's research questions and priorities: standpoints, on this approach, themselves are identified with belief-producing processes. Similarly, we should say that to occupy a privileged standpoint just is to think from a privileged location: privileged standpoints are, to a first approximation, simply reliable belief-producing processes; and thus they tend to lead to strongly objective research. The applied epistemological claims of postmodernist standpoint theory, in other words, can be interpreted as applications of reliabilism, as claims about the relative reliability (and hence the epistemic privilege) of processes/standpoints.

Coupling reliabilism with postmodernist standpoint theory has the additional benefit of clarifying the shape of the applied epistemological claims of standpoint theory. The reliability of a belief-producing process is a relative matter: a given process will be reliable in some environments but not others; a given process will be reliable relative to some topics of inquiry but not others; and a given process will be reliable relative to some rival processes but not others. Adopting reliabilism thus forces us to recognize the need for a certain degree of precision in our applied epistemological claims about the extents to which various standpoints are privileged. At a minimum, it is necessary to specify in which environments a standpoint is privileged, with respect to which topics it is privileged, and in comparison to which rival processes it is privileged. Some work has, of course, already been done in this direction.<sup>42</sup>

Reliabilism, together with the sort of empirical work on particular biases carried out and drawn on by Harding, will entail applied epistemological claims of the sort made by postmodernist standpoint theory. Hence it is a suitable first-order epistemology for postmodernist standpoint theory. If we are standpoint theorists, then, we should be prepared to say that there can be a feminist first-order epistemology, but that it need not be a specifically feminist first-order epistemology. Since reliabilism is also compatible with naturalized epistemology, and since I have argued that naturalized epistemology in turn is compatible with the metaepistemological component of postmodernist standpoint theory, I conclude provisionally that compatibilism is true: the epistemological package made up of postmodernist standpoint theory, reliabilism, and naturalized epistemology is internally coherent.

#### 4. KNOWLEDGE FOR THE MARGINALIZED

That they tend to be reliable (and hence tend to produce knowledge) cannot be the whole story about the epistemic privilege of the standpoints associated with the lives of the marginalized. For (as we saw in section 2.1) postmodernist standpoint theory incorporates a novel concept of epistemic value: the standpoints associated with the lives of the marginalized are supposed to be privileged because they produce knowledge, yes, but in particular because they produce knowledge that is of use to the marginalized. Thus, the worry about whether reliabilism/naturalism can accommodate this concept of value reappears. I want, by way of conclusion, to say something to allay this worry.

Recall that the second plank of Harding's solution to the bias paradox involves the claim that strongly objective knowledge tends to be knowledge for the marginalized. I take it that behind this claim is a general concept of epistemic value: the epistemic value of a belief is determined not only by its truth but also by its utility; the epistemic value of a process is a matter not only of its tendency to produce true beliefs but also of its tendency to produce useful beliefs. Hence the naturalist solution to the bias paradox, on which biases are good to the extent that they tend to produce true beliefs, is, according to postmodernist standpoint theory, at least incomplete. And hence my modification of Kitcher's suggestion, on which privileged standpoints just are reliable processes, is incomplete: the extent to which a process/standpoint is privileged is a matter not only of its reliability, but also of its reliability with respect to topics in which we are interested. The question, then, is whether naturalism can and should endorse a two-dimensional concept of epistemic value.

Many mainstream epistemologists no doubt will shrink from the suggestion that the epistemic realm overlaps with that of the political. But I want to argue that this reaction would be a mistake. The tensions within a decidedly mainstream view of value (the "veritistic" view endorsed by Goldman), a view

of the sort normally presupposed by reliabilists/naturalists, already tend to force us to recognize that the epistemic value of a belief is a function not only of its truth but also of its utility. There is nothing naturalistically suspect about a two-dimensional concept of epistemic value—two-dimensional epistemic value is not “ontologically queer”<sup>43</sup>—and so these tensions suggest that naturalism can and should adopt the novel concept presupposed by Harding.

On Goldman’s view, epistemic states (knowledge, ignorance, and error) are the bearers of fundamental veritistic value: practices—I assume that methods count as practices—“have *instrumental* veritistic value insofar as they promote or impede the acquisition of fundamental veritistic value” (1999, 88). *S*’s epistemic states have value “when they are responses to a question that *interests S* (or, more generally, when other agents are interested in *S*’s knowing the answer)” (1999, 88). On this view, interests—Goldman allows that interests can be quite “objective,” that is, that one can be interested in something in the sense that it is in one’s interest to know about it—are already allotted some role in the determination of epistemic value, but there is an obvious question about the extent of the role Goldman wants to allow interests to play.

Goldman argues explicitly against allowing interests to play the sort of role they do on the two-dimensional view. On that view, the epistemic value of an epistemic state is some function of both the accuracy of the state and the extent of interest in the state; put another way, the value of a state is equivalent to the value of the accuracy of the state somehow weighted by the degree of interest in the question to which the state is an answer. On Goldman’s view, in contrast, interests provide a sort of threshold: if someone is interested to some extent in the answer to a given question, then an epistemic state that answers that question has veritistic value (where that value is a function of the accuracy of that state only). If no one is interested to any extent in the answer to the question, then an epistemic state that answers it has no veritistic value.

Goldman argues that “the intensity of interest a person takes in a question may reflect factors that do not properly belong in an epistemological analysis.”<sup>44</sup> As examples of such factors, he mentions “a person’s financial or mortal stake in the question” (1999, 95); we might add the political importance of the question. He is taking for granted here a certain analogy with consequentialist ethical theories (87): on this analogy, epistemology is something like Quine’s “technology of truth-seeking” (1998), just as consequentialists think of ethics as the technology of moral value-seeking.

Now, it clearly would be wrongheaded to turn ethics into the technology of seeking moral value in cases where it happens to be important to us (which is not to say that whether we care about something does not affect its moral value). But it is not similarly wrongheaded to turn epistemology into the technology of seeking truths that happen to be important to us, politically or otherwise. Once we put the point in these terms, in fact, it begins to seem fairly

obvious that what Quine should have said is precisely that epistemology is the technology of seeking truths that are of real interest to us.<sup>45</sup> Goldman himself is sensitive to this: he admits that “a social practice that systematically delivers information on topics of mild interest to an agent while regularly concealing or masking evidence on topics of core interest is an epistemically unsatisfactory practice” (1999, 95). This seems clearly to be right. The problem is that, on Goldman’s official view of epistemic value, such a practice might turn out to have precisely as much instrumental veritistic value as one that systematically delivers information on topics of core interest.

Hence there is pressure even from within Goldman’s official veritistic view of value to let interests affect the epistemic value of a state, to admit that the value of an item of knowledge lies not only in its truth, but also in the extent to which it serves our interests. The basic veritistic framework, in fact, should serve as a good starting point for working out a two-dimensional concept of epistemic value in detail.<sup>46</sup> If naturalized epistemology incorporates the resulting concept of value, then naturalized epistemologists will be in a position to say, with standpoint theorists, that certain biases are good not simply because they produce knowledge but because they produce knowledge that is useful for the marginalized.

Naturalists, then, can endorse both planks of the postmodernist standpoint theoretic solution to the bias paradox. I thus conclude that postmodernist feminist standpoint theory is compatible with both reliabilist first-order epistemology and naturalist metaepistemology.

## NOTES

Thanks to Louise Antony, Indrani Bhattacharjee, Ann Ferguson, Sandra Harding, Hilary Kornblith, and two anonymous reviewers for *Hypatia* for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

1. Salient exceptions to both rules are acknowledged in the appropriate places below. Note that, though Anderson 1995 complements this paper, its concerns overlap with mine here to a minimal extent: Anderson aims to interpret feminist epistemology as naturalized social epistemology; thus she does not share my focus on standpoint theory while I do not share hers on social epistemology. Note also that Ruetsche’s interesting attempt (2004) to bring standpoint theory into contact with mainstream epistemology largely bypasses the naturalist current in the latter.

2. There is a related difficulty, namely, that, though I intend in this paper to speak to two audiences at once, each audience is likely to read the argument as being directed primarily to the other: inevitably, much of the ground that I cover here will be familiar to one audience or the other; equally inevitably, much that I take for granted will seem obscure or unobvious to one audience or the other.

3. By proposing this map of the field, I do not mean to imply that epistemological researchers in practice (should) refrain from straying from one part of the epistemological territory into another; the map is meant only to provide the degree of conceptual clarity about differences among the sorts of questions treated by epistemology required by the task of the paper. I have no direct argument to offer in favor of this tripartite division of the field, but some indication of its fertility should be provided by the progress it enables towards clarifying the relationships between standpoint theory and reliabilism/naturalism.

4. Since the precise distinction between justification and warrant (where warrant is whatever turns true belief into knowledge) is basically irrelevant to the task of the article, I will usually treat the question of the nature of the justification relation as exhausting the question of the nature of the knowledge relation, though (as we have known since Gettier 1963) it does not; hence I write as if process reliabilism is to be understood as a theory of knowledge, when in fact it is most plausible as a theory of justification.

5. The term is Code's (1993). Antony herself prefers 'Cartesian epistemology'; but, since the latter term is potentially misleading—there are "S knows that P" epistemologies that look nothing like Descartes'—I follow Code.

6. Reliabilism is an "S knows that P" epistemology, and so the rejection of "S knows that P" epistemology by feminist theorists no doubt partly explains the tendency of standpoint theorists and reliabilists to ignore each other's work.

7. This line is most obviously plausible with respect to Descartes' own brand of first-order epistemology (an internalist foundationalism).

8. This is not, of course, to say that there is no reason to suppose that there are various "routes" to knowledge, but only to say that these should all be taken to be routes to the same thing: knowledge.

9. To say that there can and should be a feminist first-order epistemology is not yet to say that there can be a specifically feminist first-order epistemology, and I argue below that given postmodernist standpoint theory, an existing analytic first-order epistemology, namely, process reliabilism, is well suited to play the role of a feminist first-order epistemology.

10. There is an important historical question about whether any empiricist philosopher ever really endorsed this concept of objectivity. (For a discussion of the interesting case of Neurath's particular empiricism in the context of recent feminist epistemology and philosophy of science, see Okruhlik 2004.) There is no doubt, however, that the naïve empiricist concept of objectivity is current in both the popular consciousness and those of working researchers in a range of fields. (For an empiricist response to Harding's critique of empiricist objectivity, see Campbell 1994.)

11. This way of describing strong objectivity anticipates the argument of section 2; Harding herself does not describe the concept in terms of bias. Note that (for reasons made clear below) 'bias' here is not supposed to have any sort of pejorative connotation; nor are biases supposed to be reducible to the effects of (individual) interests or commitments.

12. If strong objectivity is desirable in first-order epistemological inquiry, it surely is desirable in metaepistemological inquiry, and similarly in meta-metaepistemological inquiry of the sort in which this paper engages. The question thus arises: is the inquiry of this paper itself strongly objective? If the applied epistemological component of

standpoint theory is right, this question leads immediately to another: have I managed to think from the lives of the marginalized? The very topic of the paper suggests that I have managed this to some extent, for the question of the possibility of a feminist first-order epistemology, for example, only suggests itself when we begin thought from marginalized lives. But strong objectivity, like the empiricist objectivity it supplants, can only be a virtue at which inquiry aims. No inquirer ever manages fully to be strongly objective, and so it is a given that biases associated with my own social and natural location have made further relevant questions invisible to me.

13. This thesis is qualified in section 2, where I argue that it holds only if some modifications to postmodernist standpoint theory are made. Note that there are independent reasons for these modifications, reasons internal to postmodernist standpoint theory itself.

14. This should not be taken to imply that I endorse the reasons typically given by analytic philosophers for rejecting postmodernism, though I am on independent grounds opposed to many of the approaches to which the term ‘postmodernism’ is standardly applied.

15. By agreeing with Jameson that modernist standpoint theory is scandalous, I do not mean to suggest that it is mistaken. There is a genuine tension between modernist standpoint theory and mainstream epistemology, but one that might, I think, be (dialectically) overcome.

16. My description of postmodernist standpoint theory is based primarily on Harding’s texts, and largely ignores the relatively minor changes in the theory over time. The theory I describe is perhaps best viewed as a charitable reconstruction of Harding’s.

17. But note that we consistently can simultaneously refuse to think of postmodernist epistemic privilege as additive and maintain that power has a single center—postmodernists would, of course, typically reject such a view of power—for epistemic privilege of the sort of interest to postmodernist standpoint theorists is of a much more modest sort than that claimed for standpoints by modernist standpoint theories.

18. Harding herself does not use the term, nor does Antony discuss the concept of strong objectivity.

19. Among the biases of particular interest to Harding are those that take the form of political commitments. When it comes to the influence on inquiry of politics, she writes, once we replace the naïve empiricist concept of objectivity with that of strong objectivity, the question “how to eliminate politics from science” is replaced by the questions “which politics advance and which obstruct the growth of knowledge; and, for whom (for which groups) does such politics advance or obstruct knowledge?” (2004, 31). The suggestion here is not that we are to let political commitments dictate whether we accept certain results or entertain certain hypotheses, but rather that endorsing certain political commitments will tend to lead us to propose better hypotheses or to obtain better results. We are in no position to evaluate this applied epistemological thesis, of course, until it is more fully fleshed out, but I will not return to the thesis in section 3 (where such an evaluation would belong), for Harding never gets around to telling us much about the nature of the political commitments she has in mind. She sometimes refers to “prodemocratic” politics (Harding 1991, 1993, 2001), but ‘prodemocratic’ appears to be little more than a placeholder term: the concept of democracy is either far too narrow to do the sort of work Harding needs it to do or has been stretched so

thin that it no longer has any determinate content (aside from some residual “emotive” content). This is an aspect of postmodernist standpoint theory the details of which remain to be worked out.

20. The details of the relationship between these two dimensions of epistemic evaluation are left relatively unexplored by Harding; I suggest a suitable framework in which to conduct this exploration in section 4 below.

21. Not that I myself object to metanarratives (in general)!

22. See Kitcher 1994, 122–24.

23. Note that Harding herself never explains how talk of “less false” or “less partial and distorted” theories can fail to be equivalent to talk of “truer” theories or theories that give us “more of the truth.”

24. None of this should be taken to suggest that modernist standpoint theorists (or anyone, for that matter) can get by without realism about truth. A modernist standpoint theory, of course, holds that the metanarrative revealed from the standpoint it singles out as privileged is true—it is just that (precisely because what is revealed from the standpoint is a metanarrative) the truth of what the standpoint reveals cannot in any straightforward sense be verified externally.

25. See, for example, her discussion of the implications of the “strong program” in the sociology of knowledge (Harding 1991, 168).

26. Harding makes it clear that she thinks that she can both repudiate truth and avoid relativism (2001); but she leaves it unclear how she thinks this can be done. If truth is not among the bases on which we decide the merits of a claim, then we are left only with bases such as its tendency to serve certain interests, and, while truth (the robust truth of correspondence theories) does not vary from person to person, from group to group, interests plainly do.

27. She gives a number of arguments against a commitment to truth. In her response to Walby 2001, for example, she seems to argue that an appropriate modesty *vis-à-vis* the justificatory status of our beliefs implies a refusal actually to endorse the contents of those beliefs, when she contrasts “the idea that sciences do and should seek truth” with the (correct) idea that “scientific claims can only ever be held tentatively since . . . they must be held open to revision” (2001, 521). But to hold a claim tentatively is not to refrain from endorsing it as true: to hold a claim tentatively is tentatively to endorse it as true. That justification does not entail truth does not entail that we should not take (what we take to be) our best-justified beliefs to be true.

28. Harding now rejects the “stick in water” metaphor, on the ground that it suggests that there is a unique best perspective (personal communication). But the metaphor does not imply this—there can be multiple epistemically good positions from which to observe the stick, just as there can be multiple epistemically privileged standpoints—and so I think that it remains useful.

29. See section 3.1.

30. As Antony points out, in order to solve the bias paradox, we must be able to say that “what makes the *good* bias good is that it facilitates the search for truth, and what makes the *bad* bias bad is that it impedes it” (1993, 190). While I agree with Antony that an adequate solution to the bias paradox must enable us to say this much, I argue below that this is not all that an adequate solution must allow us to say.

31. Sober states the problem with reconstructive epistemology eloquently: “To try to show that I rationally believe something because I *might* have arrived at the belief by a certain procedure is like trying to show that I have a disease because I *might* have been exposed to a particular infection” (1978, 189).

32. Clough 2004 can be read as defending an approach to epistemology like the one I reject here.

33. I return to this reliabilist account of knowledge in section 3.

34. Recall Noam Chomsky’s “poverty of the stimulus” argument, a caricature of which runs as follows: if a child were to attempt to learn the grammar of her language by following empiricist rules of inquiry, she probably would never succeed in learning that grammar; therefore, there is some innate structure that biases children toward hypothesizing certain grammars (1975, 1986). For a detailed reconstruction of Chomsky’s argument, see Laurence and Margolis 2001. For an extended study of the epistemological implications of the mind as massively modular, see Clarke 2004.

35. The latest bit of evidence: Dehaene et al. 2006 seems to suggest that basic geometrical knowledge might be innate.

36. On the naturalist treatment of normativity, see Pacherie n.d.

37. Harding does say, in the passage just quoted, that it is the lives of the marginalized, as the marginalized themselves understand them, that provide epistemically privileged starting points, and to say this might seem to be to reinvest the perspectives of the marginalized with the very epistemic privilege with which I have argued Harding does not want to invest them. But a more careful reading of the passage dispels this impression. Harding does not here say that the perspectives of the marginalized are particularly epistemically good. Instead, she contrasts research that begins from the lives of the marginalized, as the marginalized themselves understand those lives with research that begins from the lives of the marginalized, as those lives are understood from the position of power (as objects of administration, and so on).

38. Of course, not every bias that contributes to fitness is epistemically fruitful.

39. For one example among many, see the chapter “Thinking from the Perspective of Lesbian Lives” in Harding 1986.

40. I noted above that Harding claims that epistemically fruitful biases are provided also by “prodemocratic” political commitments. Since it is often unclear just what counts as prodemocratic, it is difficult to determine whether inquiry guided by such commitments really tends to be epistemically fruitful.

41. Reliabilism is not without its problems; the chief of these is the generality problem, the problem of individuating belief-producing processes (on which see, especially, Feldman 1985; Conee and Feldman 1998).

42. I should perhaps emphasize that I am not here asking for an a priori specification of the privileged standpoints: the assessment of the epistemic privilege of a standpoint can only be empirical, just as the assessment of the epistemic merit of any belief-producing process can only be empirical. And I should perhaps emphasize that I recognize that a claim that a given standpoint is privileged will be contingent, in two senses: no standpoint is necessarily privileged; and a standpoint that is privileged at one time might nevertheless not be privileged at another—indeed, there could be a time at which no standpoint is privileged.

43. I borrow this phrase from Mackie 1977.

44. He also offers an additional argument: because “one person’s questions of interest might be easier to answer than those of a second,” “the fact that the first scores higher on the set of questions that interests *her* does not demonstrate superior intellectual skill” (Goldman 1999, 95). This argument is relevant only if we think that the epistemic value of an epistemic state should measure the skill required to arrive at a correct epistemic state. There is no obvious reason in favor of thinking of epistemic value along these lines. And it is hard to see why the conception of value favored by Goldman should fare any better here, since it would have the implication that all true beliefs that answer questions that interest anyone to any degree require precisely the same level of intellectual skill to acquire.

45. Kitcher 2001 (chap. 6), perhaps implicitly endorses something like this view.

46. In particular, it provides means for responding to the charge that postmodernist standpoint theorists have not demonstrated that knowledge that is useful for the marginalized is of value to everyone, because they have not shown that the interests of the marginalized are (in some sense) the interests of everyone: knowledge that is for the marginalized is valuable because it is knowledge that is useful for some (namely, the marginalized); it is especially valuable because those for whom it is useful are especially numerous.

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