

Relativising Epistemic Advantage¹

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Abstract: In this paper I explore the relationship between one branch of feminist epistemology – standpoint theory – and epistemic relativism. I begin by defining both views, and by briefly recounting the standard ways the connection between them is understood. So far the literature has focused on an aspect of standpoint theory called the *epistemic advantage thesis*, and on an aspect of relativism called *equality*. I show that the connection actually turns on a different aspect of standpoint theory – the *standpoint thesis* – and on an aspect of relativism called *non-neutrality*. I argue that shifting our attention to these aspects reveals that standpoint theory is clearly and unavoidably relativist, but unproblematically so – standpoint theory can capture everything it sets out to, even on a relativist understanding of the view.

1. Epistemic Relativism

First I'll outline the definition of epistemic relativism that I will be using throughout this paper. By '*epistemic relativism*' I mean relativism about justification of beliefs, as opposed to relativism about the property of truth (alethic relativism), the truth value of propositions (semantic relativism), or relativism about any other domain (such as relativism about morality or aesthetics). By '*epistemic relativism*' I mean accounts of justification as dependent on an epistemic system or practice. The term '*relativism*' is sometimes used loosely by epistemologists who want to indicate that a view renders justification as arbitrary, unimportant, or non-existent. Often this loose usage also carries negative connotations - a view on which justification turns out to be arbitrary doesn't do justice to our intuitions or practices and so is problematic. My usage of the term '*relativism*' is intended to be merely descriptive, and not to carry such connotations. However I will evaluate this view of relativism in section 6.

On my definition relativism has three components, which I take from Martin Kusch²:

Dependence: A belief has an epistemic status (as epistemically justified or unjustified) only relative to an epistemic system or practice.

Plurality: There are, have been, or could be, more than one such epistemic system or practice.

Symmetry: Epistemic systems and practices must not be ranked. (Kusch 2016: 33-4)

The third element is a placeholder which can be filled out in various ways. Kusch lists four (2016: 34-5), two of which are relevant for this paper. The first is Non-neutrality:

Non-neutrality: There is no neutral way of evaluating different systems and practices. (2016: 34)

This follows from the rejection of absolutism (the idea that justification is independent of time, place, culture, and so on) embodied by Dependence. If justification is system-dependent, then the justification for any evaluation or ranking of a set of systems will be dependent too.

The second way of spelling out Symmetry is Equality:

Equality: All systems and practices are equally correct. (2016: 34)

This is a stronger claim than Non-neutrality. Rather than simply denying the possibility of neutral rankings, it offers its own ranking: it says that all systems are equally good. This presumes a neutral standpoint from which such a claim can be made, meaning it requires absolutism and so denies Dependence. Equality can't, consistently, be incorporated into relativist views. Charitable discussions of relativism (as I intend this one to be) will therefore characterise relativism as based on Non-neutrality unless there is evidence to suggest that the relevant authors intended otherwise.

2. Feminist Standpoint Theory

Feminist Standpoint Theory is one of the three main branches of feminist epistemology. Feminist epistemologies explore the influence of social factors (such as gender and race) on knowledge, via justification. The idea that these social factors have such an effect on justification is often called the *situated-knowledge thesis*:

Situated-Knowledge Thesis: differences in social factors create epistemic differences (e.g. in the kinds of things that inquirers are justified in believing).

In addition to standpoint theory, the other main branches of feminist epistemology are feminist empiricism (e.g. Anderson 1995, Longino 1997), and feminist postmodernism (e.g.

Haraway 1988). There are various similarities and differences between these, at both the level of the branches themselves, and also at the level of specific accounts within these branches.³ However, in this paper I will only focus on views which can be clearly described as standpoint theories.

Feminist standpoint theories combine the situated-knowledge thesis with two further claims. The first is the standpoint thesis:

Standpoint thesis: justification depends on ‘socially situated’ perspectives.

According to this idea, subjects have different ‘social locations’, or different statuses as socially oppressed or socially privileged. For example black women occupy very different social locations to white men. And these different social locations come with different experiences, which have the potential to enable different epistemic perspectives.

This idea has its roots in Marxist historical materialism. On György Lukács’ (1971) interpretation, Marx argued that the different social locations of the bourgeoisie and of the proletariat lead them to have different perspectives on economic exchange and the social relations that hold between the two groups. From the perspective of the proletariat, the oppressive nature of these social relations is, or can be made, visible, whilst from the perspective of the bourgeoisie the oppressive nature of these social relations is obscured. Feminist standpoint theorists focus on social locations that are determined by gender oppression, and by multiple intersecting dimensions of oppression (e.g. oppression based on both race and gender).

The second thesis distinctive of standpoint theory is the epistemic-advantage (sometimes ‘inversion’) thesis:

Epistemic-Advantage Thesis: The social oppression that socially disadvantaged groups experience can bring them epistemic benefits.

The idea is that that subjects who are socially oppressed have distinct experiences, and through critically reflecting on these can turn their perspective into a ‘standpoint’ – an epistemically privileged perspective from which the nature of relevant social relations is visible. Subjects who aren’t oppressed don’t have these experiences, and as a result are less likely to achieve a standpoint.

Standpoint theorists have made several important caveats about this thesis.⁴ First, the epistemic-advantage thesis does not presuppose essential categories. There needn’t be any properties which all members of an epistemically advantaged group share (Hartsock 1997; Smith 1997; Wylie 2003). As Fricker puts it, standpoints don’t depend on oppressed people

(or even particular subsets of oppressed people, such as Latina women or gay men) being the same; they only require that their experiences are similar in certain ways (Fricker 1999: 201).

Second, possessing epistemic advantage is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition on membership of a particular group. Not all oppressed people have it, and some non-oppressed people do (Medina 2012).

Third, epistemic advantage is not automatic, but must be achieved through critical reflection. And this achievement is collaborative; it is not the work of an individual (Fricker 1999: 202–3; Medina 2012; Wylie 2003).

Fourth, the advantage can be restricted in scope. Standpoint theorists are usually clear that the argument for advantage will need to be made on a domain-by-domain basis, and that it is easiest to find in domains of knowledge which involve social relations (e.g Harding 1991: 46; Wylie 2003: 37). Miranda Fricker suggests that knowledge of “the social world” should be “fragmented” even further into knowledge of “relevant areas of the social world” (Fricker 1999: 203).

All standpoint theories have these two theses in common. Beyond this there are differences, particularly between different accounts of the epistemic-advantage thesis, but I won't discuss these in this paper. Instead, I will focus on the relationship between standpoint theory and epistemic relativism. In the next section I'll discuss the relationship between relativism and one particular version of standpoint theory, but first I want to make two comments on the 'standard' understandings of this relationship.

The first thing to say is that it's widely reported in the literature that standpoint theory's critics draw a connection between the standpoint thesis and relativism. I have struggled to find defences of this claim in print – these critics aren't, as far as I've found, named or cited. (Perhaps the standpoint theorists mentioning them were referring to worries raised in personal conversation or by referees). But whatever the source, there is general acknowledgement of a suspected connection between the standpoint thesis and relativism.

We can make a good guess about why some might think this connection holds. The standpoint thesis clearly incorporates Dependency and Plurality, as it says that justification depends on a perspective, and that there are multiple perspectives. So standpoint theory has two of the three components that views need to have in order to count as relativism.⁵

The second thing to note is that, in response to this, standpoint theorists standardly cite the epistemic-advantage thesis. This move is made frequently in print (most recently and explicitly in Tanesini, forthcoming), although discussion of it is usually brief. But again we

can identify the thinking behind it using our triadic definition of relativism: the epistemic advantage thesis seems to claim that standpoints can be ranked, and therefore contradicts Symmetry, the third component required for relativism.

My investigation into the relationship between standpoint theory and relativism turns on the claim that epistemic-advantage renders standpoint theory and Symmetry incompatible. In the next section I'll argue that one recent account of epistemic advantage is compatible with Symmetry – or at least with Symmetry based on Non-neutrality, rather than Equality. This account of epistemic advantage is not capable of showing that standpoint theory isn't relativism.

I'll discuss the relationship between relativism and other standpoint theories in section 5. I'll argue that non-neutrality follows from the situated knowledge thesis, and so any account of epistemic advantage will either be compatible with non-neutral symmetry, or will contradict the first central thesis of standpoint theory. This means that standpoint theorists have a decision to make: either they accept relativism, or they must radically rethink, or even abandon, their view.

3. Medina on Epistemic Advantage

The epistemic-advantage thesis has been cashed out in different ways by different authors, for example: in terms of the nature of the work that socially oppressed groups tend to undertake (Hartsock 1983); the ability that oppressed groups have to identify constitutive values (Harding 1991); and the opportunity that oppressed groups have to compare multiple perspectives (Collins 1986). The account most relevant to this paper is one defended by José Medina (2012), which grounds epistemic advantage in epistemic character, and specifically in terms of the development of epistemic virtues and vices.

On this view, the experiences people have influence their epistemic character. Since people who are socially oppressed and people who are socially privileged tend, in general, to have different experiences, they will tend, in general, to develop different epistemic characters. These epistemic characters influence their ability to respond to something called *epistemic friction*, which is key to achieving epistemic advantage. In the remainder of this section I'll explain the notion of epistemic friction, and the process of character development it's important to.

Like physical friction, epistemic friction is a jarring, but productive 'force' which occurs when two or more objects come into contact (2012: Ch. 1). When you rub your hands together there is resistance, which produces heat. In the epistemic case the 'objects' that come into

contact are different perspectives. Contact between perspectives can be jarring, because subjects often find it challenging to be confronted by alternative values and beliefs, but it can also be productive, because if we respond to it appropriately we can learn about both perspectives.

What does it mean to respond *appropriately* to epistemic friction? Medina offers two guiding principles. The first is the principle of *acknowledgement and engagement*:

Acknowledgement & Engagement: “all the cognitive forces [epistemic perspectives] we encounter must be acknowledged and [...] in some way engaged.” (Medina 2012: 50)

Medina is aware that engaging with some perspectives is extremely difficult, and that there may be cases in which “only a negative mode of engagement is possible or epistemically beneficial”. I understand this as a way of anticipating the worry that some perspectives – such as explicitly and aggressively bigoted ones – have very few epistemic benefits to offer, and the potential to inflict many epistemic harms. In these cases, dismissal might be a valid form of (negative) engagement, and one which still requires initial acknowledgement. What Medina wants to rule out is ignoring, or remaining completely oblivious of, perspectives.

The second principle is the principle of *equilibrium*:

Equilibrium: it is important to aim for “equilibrium in the interplay of [different perspectives], without some forces overpowering others, without some cognitive influences becoming unchecked and unbalanced”. (Medina 2012: 50)

I’ll discuss this principle, about how to weight different perspectives, in section 4.

I’ll now return to Medina’s discussion of epistemic-character development, and sketch out his understanding of the source of epistemic advantage.

As I said above, on Medina’s view the epistemic advantage oppressed people have, or can have, is grounded in their epistemic character. This epistemic character is influenced by their experiences, and in turn influences subject’s abilities to respond to epistemic friction.

The table below summarises Medina’s detailed discussion. The first column shows different sets of experiences, which Medina says are characteristic of privilege (top row) and oppression (bottom row) respectively. The second column shows character traits that these experiences tend to result in, and the final column contains the effects these traits have on subjects’ abilities to respond to epistemic friction.

	Experiences	Character traits	Effects
Socially Privileged	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educated to dominate - See self as authoritative - See marginalised groups as less credible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Epistemic arrogance - Closed-mindedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Less likely to notice friction - Less likely to engage with friction - Difficulty achieving equilibrium
Socially Oppressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Educated to defer - See other's views as important 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Epistemic humility - Open-mindedness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Likely to notice friction - Likely to engage with friction - Experienced at achieving equilibrium

According to Medina, socially privileged people are (often) educated to dominate – they are taught to see themselves as authoritative, and others (especially those from marginalised groups) as less credible, and less worthy of respect (or even note). He illustrates this idea with accounts of education of slave owners' children in the American South, but intends it to generalise to other, less blatant, situations of oppression (2012: 31-2).

Medina says these experiences lead to the development of traits like epistemic arrogance and closed-mindedness, and make it difficult to respond to epistemic friction. Privileged subjects are less likely to notice or engage with friction, because they rarely need to do so (and often not doing so is required to keep them in power). And when they do notice it, they will struggle to balance the different views and sources of friction according to the principle of equilibrium, because they're not used to doing so.

In contrast, oppressed people are educated to be deferential, and to acknowledge and assign importance to the views of others (in particular to the dominant group, on whose approval their survival depends). Here Medina talks about slave mentality, as well as other contexts of oppression (2012: 40-3). He says this leads oppressed people to develop traits like epistemic humility and open-mindedness, which give them an advantage when it comes to epistemic friction. They've already developed the kind of character which can notice and engage with multiple sources of friction, and are well practiced at keeping them in equilibrium. This is the basis of epistemic advantage on Medina's account: socially oppressed people have an epistemic advantage in how they tend to be disposed to respond to epistemic friction.

There are plenty of criticisms that could be made of this view. We could question whether oppressed groups and dominant groups really have the experiences Medina attributes to them. We might also question whether these experiences always, or even often, result in the virtues and vices he attributes to them. But Medina's account of epistemic advantage isn't my goal in this paper. In the next section I'll consider whether Medina's understanding of epistemic advantage could (if plausible) block Symmetry, and therefore relativism.

4. Advantage and Symmetry

In this section I'll show that the standpoint theorist's standard response to relativism isn't available to Medina, because on his account epistemic advantage is compatible with Symmetry. In the next section I'll argue that this is true of all standpoint theories.

My reason for beginning with Medina is that his view, on first blush, seems very amenable to relativism. His account of epistemic advantage is based on differing responses to epistemic friction, with the advantageous responses being guided by the principle of acknowledgement and engagement and the principle of equilibrium. Equilibrium says to strive to balance the influence of different systems and perspectives, which sounds like saying systems shouldn't be ranked. This would be an endorsement of symmetry rather than a contradiction of it.

Medina is aware that equilibrium sounds relativistic, but denies that it is. He says:

... the principle of epistemic equilibrium was not a relativistic principle that demanded giving equal weight to all perspectives. Rather, it was the desideratum of searching for equilibrium on the interplay of cognitive forces, without some forces overpowering others, without some cognitive influences becoming unchecked and unbalanced (Medina 2012: 195).

This response shows that equilibrium is (or at least could be) incompatible with one interpretation of Symmetry, namely Equality. It says that systems can be weighted differently, leaving open the possibility that some could be more correct than others, contrary to Equality.

But this only tells us part of the story. In section 1 we saw a second interpretation of Symmetry – Non-neutrality – which only denies that systems and practices can be evaluated *independently of a system*. Medina's response doesn't engage with this interpretation, which seems to be compatible with his account of epistemic advantage. Achieving the equilibrium Medina advocates requires a standpoint – a particular, socially-located epistemic perspective – which is exactly what Non-neutrality demands.

Whilst Medina shows that his view is incompatible with relativism based on Equality, he doesn't address its (in)compatibility with relativism based on Non-neutrality. In fact, his view appears to incorporate Non-neutrality, and so it looks like Medina's standpoint theory is relativist.

5. Generalising

Other standpoint theorists might claim that Medina's view is an anomaly. They don't advocate Equilibrium, so if that's what introduces relativism their views are unaffected. However this response is too quick.

Medina's account makes standpoint theory's commitment to non-neutrality vivid because his version of epistemic advantage emphasises equilibrium, whilst most versions emphasise the opposite. But this commitment isn't unique to Medina or his account of epistemic advantage, because his account of epistemic advantage isn't the problem. The commitment to non-neutral Symmetry comes from the standpoint thesis.

Recall that Medina couldn't fully separate his account of epistemic advantage from Symmetry because achieving equilibrium (and therefore epistemic advantage) required a standpoint. This dependence on standpoints for justification isn't a quirk of Medina's epistemic advantage. It follows from the standpoint thesis. If justification depends on socially situated perspectives, then so does justification about standpoints and how they are ranked. Any view involving the standpoint thesis will involve non-neutral symmetry, so all standpoint theories are committed to non-neutrality, to symmetry, and to relativism.

6. Relativism as Unproblematic

One of the standpoint theorist's central theses, the standpoint thesis, commits them to relativism based on non-neutral Symmetry. It says that justification is *dependent* on systems or perspectives, that there are a *plurality* of these perspectives, and (because it says justification is system-dependent), it's also committed to the idea that there is *no neutral*, perspective-independent way to rank these systems.

Standpoint theorists have a decision to make: either they accept relativism, or they must radically rethink, or abandon, a central part of their view. In this final section I argue that a radical rethink is unnecessary. The main worries standpoint theorists have about relativism don't apply to relativism based on non-neutral symmetry, and so accepting relativism is their best option.

Sandra Harding (1991) offers the most thorough and extended discussion of standpoint theorists' problems with relativism. I'll respond to her two main worries.

Her first worry is that relativism collapses into ‘weak objectivity’, her name for the guiding principle of mainstream science. She says this principle advocates removing all social and political values from science, but fails, instead leaving behind sexist ones. So it would be a problem if relativism were equivalent to weak objectivity.

Here’s Harding on relativism and weak objectivity:

Many thinkers have pointed out that judgemental relativism [which Harding equates with the claim that there are no rational or scientific grounds for evaluating various epistemic systems] is internally related to objectivism. For example, science historian Donna Haraway argues that judgemental relativism is the other side of the very same coin from “the God trick” required by what I have called weak objectivity. To insist that no judgements at all of cognitive adequacy can legitimately be made amounts to the same thing as to insist that knowledge can be produced only from “no place at all”: that is, by someone who can be every place at once. (1991: 152)

The crucial comparison is in the final sentence. Harding says the ‘relativist’ view that there are no legitimate judgements comparing epistemic systems is the same as the claim that knowledge can be produced from no place at all (ie. that knowledge and justification can be value free, as on weak objectivity).

This claim is false, for two reasons. First, the two views she describes are not equivalent. The weak objectivist claim that knowledge can be produced from no place at all is a positive claim about the existence of justification in a social vacuum. Whilst Harding thinks this claim is incoherent and best understood as showing that no justification is possible, it’s important to separate this from the negative, sceptical claim about the impossibility of justification. The claim that there are no legitimate judgements about systems is sceptical, the claim that there are judgements of a particular, value-free kind is not.

Second, relativists needn’t make the claim Harding attributes to them. Whilst Equality-based relativism incorporates the denial of any legitimate judgements about epistemic systems, non-neutral relativism – the kind I’ve argued is present in standpoint theories – does not. Non-neutral relativism only justifies the claim that there are no *system-independent* judgements about systems. So relativism doesn’t collapse back into conservative weak objectivity.

I think Harding’s second worry is the real motivator behind resistance to relativism: relativism has negative connotations. She identifies several which might raise problems for standpoint theorists. The first two are that relativism is seen as ‘weak’ compared to objectivity, and that it is coded as feminine (Harding 1995: 340). I take her point here to be strategic – it’s not that these connotations run counter to feminist goals, or that they make

a view less likely to be true, but they might mean a view is taken less seriously by other scholars.

If this is her point then I see where she is coming from, but I don't think these connotations should trouble us too much. For one thing, *feminist* standpoint theory already runs the risk of invoking connotations of femininity and weakness given its title. For another, these connotations are (at least somewhat) less negative nowadays than they used to be.

However, the third connotation presents a greater challenge. The epistemic-advantage thesis is intended to show the importance and validity of marginalised standpoints, and that claims made from these standpoints should be taken more seriously. But according to Harding, relativism is often used in service of precisely the opposite goal; it is used by dominant groups to undermine the claims of the oppressed, saying that they are *merely* relatively justified (Harding 1991: 151).

This leaves me with some important questions to answer if I'm going to conclude that a relativist standpoint theory is unproblematic. First, how can a relativist understanding of epistemic advantage avoid reinforcing oppression? And second, how can it support the aim of tackling oppression?

The key to answering the first question lies in recognising that the relativity of a claim shouldn't be seen to diminish its credibility, or its validity. If you have an absolutist view of justification then the 'mere' relativised claims will, of course, seem inferior. But this isn't the view that relativists have – they think that *all* claims are relative, and so dismissals of claims of the oppressed on the basis of relativity are only as legitimate as dismissals of claims of the dominant on this basis. If I'm right, and this relativist view follows from the standpoint thesis, then standpoint theorists don't need to worry about reinforcing oppression either. Dominant viewpoints don't come out as superior on this view.

What about the second question? How can a relativised epistemic advantage support the aims of tackling oppression? I'm unsure whether my answer to this question will satisfy standpoint theorists, although I think that it should. Remember that a non-neutral relativism (which is the kind of relativism I claim is present in standpoint theory) can allow for evaluative judgements about epistemic systems. So a standpoint theory that is relativist in this sense is compatible with the claim that some perspectives lead to better, or more accurate, claims than others – whether that claim is based on a story about virtues and vices, as with Medina's view, or on some other account. Of course this claim has to be relativised to a non-neutral perspective. It's not an absolute advantage. But I think that this is all that someone who truly understands and endorses the standpoint thesis should want to say anyway.

7. Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the connection between feminist standpoint theory and relativism. I demonstrated that the current debate, which focuses on the epistemic advantage thesis and equality, is missing its target, and suggested that instead we shift our attention to the standpoint thesis and non-neutrality. I argued that when we do this, we quickly see that standpoint theory is committed to relativism at its very core, and so standpoint theorists have a decision to make - between relativism, and a radical rethink of their view. Finally, I argued that the relativist route is a lot smoother than standpoint theorists tend to think, and so standpoint theorists should embrace the relativism within their view.

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Endnotes

1. Research on this paper was assisted by funding from the ERC Advanced Grant Project “The Emergence of Relativism” (Grant No. 339382).
2. Kusch’s definition incorporates two further essential (and four non-essential) elements. All of these are important for understanding how relativism has been presented by different authors, but I have streamlined my definition for simplicity. In particular, I haven’t included Kusch’s ‘essential’ *exclusiveness* and *notational confrontation*, because I think these follow from pluralism: if these differences weren’t present then the multiple frameworks would collapse into one, and so pluralism would not be present either. C.f. Williams 2007 and Coliva 2015 who use similar triadic definitions of relativism.
3. Intemann (2010) has argued that some versions of standpoint theory and feminist empiricism have more in common with each other than with other accounts from their own branches.
4. Not all of these have been expressed explicitly by all standpoint theorists, though I think all standpoint theorists would (and should) endorse them.
5. I’m unsure whether this connection was drawn on the basis of the presence of these two components because it was not known that the third component was required, or because it was presumed that standpoint theory did meet the third conclusion - perhaps standpoint theory was interpreted as arguing that justification relative to a feminist standpoint is ‘just as good’ as (and so symmetrical to) justification relative to other standpoints.
6. Although Harding criticizes this principle of objectivity (and objectivity and relativism are often taken to be opposites) she does not describe herself as a relativist. Rather she sees herself as criticising both (weak) objectivity and relativism, and instead offering a new and improved principle of objectivity which she calls ‘strong objectivity’ (1991 Ch. 6).