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Part II

**Feminist Epistemology and
Social Epistemology**

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6 Relativism in Feminist Epistemologies¹

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6.1. Introduction

Many popular critics of feminist epistemology, and of feminist theorising more generally, assume that it involves some form of relativism. Objective reason, it is claimed, doesn't "care about your feelings", or about gender, race, and social justice (Kimball 1990; Shapiro 2019). And so, whenever social factors like these play a role in theorising, that theorising must be tainted by relativism. On the other hand, many political and social theorists and activists criticise anti-feminist and anti-social justice figures like Trump and Jordan Peterson for the same reason: they accuse them of "post-truth politics", which is bound up with, or even caused by, post-modernism and associated "anything goes" style relativism (Dennett 2000; Kakutani 2018). The relationship between relativism and different social and political views seems to be a tangled one then. This chapter is an attempt at beginning to untangle the knot.

I will frame my discussion around the following central question: are feminist projects and goals best served by relativism or by absolutism? This question is intended as a way to bring the debate about the relationship between feminist epistemology and relativism to life without presupposing that feminist goals are shared by everyone. It should be possible to critically engage with the chapter regardless of what one's political beliefs and goals are. This question is *not* intended as the first step in a simplistic form of pragmatism, where one's political goals straightforwardly dictate which epistemic theories one endorses. The relationship between political goals and theory choice is more nuanced than this, as should become clear in this chapter.

I won't be able to offer a conclusive answer to the central question in this chapter, but I will do a considerable amount of groundwork. I'll evaluate four existing views to determine both what they *say* and what they *show* about the relationship that our central question focuses on – and there will often be differences between what they say and what they show. My overall argument will be that feminist projects can, at least sometimes, be served by relativism, and that the claim they can be

served by anti-relativism is under-supported. But to begin with, I will clarify some key terms and positions which will be essential to understanding this debate.

6.2. Terms and Positions

Much of the confusion in this debate comes from the misunderstanding of different terms, and the resulting misapplication of them to views to which they don't rightfully apply. To counter this, I will begin my discussion by running through what might seem like some very basic terms.

6.2.1. 'Liberatory' and 'Regressive'

The first terms I need to define are *liberatory* and *regressive*. I'll use these to highlight the social consequences or aims of different epistemic positions. I will use the term *liberatory* to denote views which aim towards social equality and away from social inequality and oppression. Most of the authors I discuss focus predominantly on gender inequality, as though it can be isolated from other forms of inequality and oppression.² It can't; without understanding how other forms of oppression and privilege (such as those based on race, class, ability, sexuality, and so on) intersect with gender oppression, we don't really understand gender oppression at all – as will become clear in Section 6.6. So I intend the term 'liberatory' to encompass (existing and potential) epistemic positions which pay attention to various kinds of oppression.

I will use the term *regressive* to mean any epistemic positions which don't tend towards equality. This includes views which have the creation and maintenance of oppression as (explicit or implicit) goals, but also views which have these as an unintended consequence. I think it's reasonable to describe any view which doesn't seek to dismantle oppression as an obstacle to progress given that we currently inhabit a world which contains considerable inequality – those who disagree can feel free to mentally substitute their own preferred term in place of 'regressive' if they wish.

6.2.2. 'Relativism'

The other basic terms that I need to define are *relativism*, *objectivity*, and *absolutism*, which are used to describe an aspect of the picture of justification that a particular view depends on. These terms are used in various domains (e.g. moral, scientific, aesthetic) and have slightly different meanings in each. In this chapter I will only talk about the *epistemic* domain, so I won't specify the domain each time. From now on, when I say, for example, 'absolutism', I am talking about epistemic absolutism.

When I describe a view as *relativist*, I mean that it satisfies the following three criteria for epistemic relativism:

Dependence: A belief has an epistemic status (as 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.

Non-Neutrality: There is no neutral way of evaluating different systems or practices.

(Kusch 2016, 33–34)

The first two criteria aren't too controversial within feminist epistemology, and most of the debate surrounding relativism turns on the last one. Because of this, it's worth taking some time to distinguish non-neutrality from a superficially similar claim about justification, which it is sometimes confused with. This other claim is often called "equality" (Kusch 2016, 35) or "equal validity" (Boghossian 2006, 2).

Non-neutrality says that there's no *neutral* way to evaluate different systems or practices, and so all evaluations of systems and practices must be non-neutral or system-dependent. Equal validity says that all systems and practices are equally good. These might seem to be similar. They both appear to say that we can't, or shouldn't bother trying to, rank systems; in one case because evaluations are impossible, in the other because the outcome will be a universal draw. But they are different.

Looking more closely, non-neutrality doesn't say that rankings aren't possible but rather that *neutral* rankings aren't possible. System-dependent rankings are compatible with non-neutrality. Equal validity doesn't say that rankings aren't possible either – in fact it *is* a ranking. It ranks all systems as equal. However, it seems to be a ranking which isn't system-dependent. And this is where the crucial difference arises: equal validity contradicts the first component of relativism (dependence) which says that justification is system-dependent, whilst non-neutrality (which only allows for system-dependent rankings) doesn't. Versions of relativism which include a commitment to equal validity will be doomed to incoherence from the outset, and so any charitable investigation into whether a view (such as a form of feminist epistemology) is relativist or not will be sure to focus on relativism as a commitment to dependence, plurality, and *non-neutrality*.

6.2.3. 'Objectivity' and 'Absolutism'

Relativism's opposite is sometimes taken to be objectivity and at other times absolutism – and to confuse matters further, different people use these terms in different, sometimes overlapping, ways. Except when quoting (or otherwise clearly using the terminology of) other authors, I

will use these terms as follows; *objectivity* is the idea that justification is independent of social and individual factors, whereas *absolutism* is the idea that standards for justification apply universally, regardless of time, place, etc. Whenever it's necessary to refer to these ideas collectively – or otherwise to refer to relativism's opposite without specifying one of these ideas in particular – I will use *anti-relativism* as a general umbrella term.³

Now that I've defined these terms, I can map out a matrix of four different positions that one might hold in this debate, depending on the social consequences of the view (i.e. liberatory or regressive) and the picture of justification it depends on (i.e. relativist or anti-relativist). This table represents this matrix and indicates in which section of the chapter each portion of the matrix will be discussed.

	<i>Liberatory</i>	<i>Regressive</i>
Anti-relativist	(Section 6.6)	(Section 6.4)
Relativism	(Section 6.3)	(Section 6.5)

In Section 6.3 I'll use Helen Longino's 'contextual empiricism' to illustrate *liberatory relativism*. I'll use Sandra Harding's criticism of 'weak objectivity' to illustrate *regressive anti-relativism* in Section 6.4 and her arguments against relativism as a framework to discuss *regressive relativism* in Section 6.5. In Section 6.6, I'll use Meera Nanda's discussion of 'modern science' as a way to explore *liberatory anti-relativism*.

My discussion of these arguments and views will be critical – with the exception of the criticism of weak objectivity in Section 6.4, I don't think that any of these arguments show what their author intends them to. Instead, I think that all of them lend support to the view that relativism is liberatory, or to the complementary view that anti-relativism is regressive, or to both. I'll revisit the matrix and consider what we should take from this in the conclusion.

6.3. Relativism as Liberatory

In this section, I'm going to discuss Helen Longino's 'contextual empiricism' (1994, 1997) as the view which I think most clearly demonstrates liberatory relativism. Longino doesn't apply this label to herself – she understands her own view as a liberatory *contextualism*, which she classifies as a third way between relativism and absolutism – but her view does have the three defining features of relativism, as I will demonstrate.

Longino's contextual empiricism starts from the premise that values play an important role in science and always have. In particular, she points out that values – such as the traditional theoretical virtues like simplicity and homogeneity – are needed to choose between different empirically adequate theories. Next, she highlights the scientific advances that have been made by feminist researchers deploying alternative theoretical

virtues, like novelty and heterogeneity, which suggest that more than one set of theoretical values is legitimate⁴ (1994, 1997).

This view is liberatory because, as Longino explains, the virtues she highlights help to meet the feminist *cognitive goal* of revealing the mechanisms and institutions of women's oppression (1997, 27), which in turn helps to achieve the feminist *political goal* of dismantling the oppression of women. For example, the virtue of ontological heterogeneity is a preference for identifying and theorising about difference. Researchers guided by this virtue have investigated whether the efficacy of certain drugs differs with the race and gender of the patients treated with it. In the cases where such differences have been found, the researchers effectively met both feminist cognitive goals (they revealed that previous researchers' assumptions acted to sustain oppression by recommending ineffective treatments for oppressed people) and political ones (they uncovered information about drug efficacy which can be used to improve oppressed peoples' material circumstances) (1994, 477, 1997, 21).

I think that this view is also relativist, because all three of the components of relativism I identified above are present within it. Dependence is present because Longino thinks that epistemic status is relative to a practice (i.e. to a particular scientific methodology and a set of community standards which include theoretical virtues), which is appropriate for a particular cognitive goal (1997, 28–9). She makes this point especially clear in the following passage:

The alternative virtues are only binding in those communities sharing a cognitive goal that is advanced by those virtues. Their normative reach is, thus, local. In emphasising the provisionality and locality of alternative virtues, this account contrasts quite sharply with accounts offered or implied by advocates of the traditional virtues which, as (purely) epistemic are represented as universally binding. (1997, 28)

Longino's point here is that the feminist virtues set a practice and a standard of justification for some people – those with feminist goals – but that for other people, with different goals, these standards won't have any normative force. Those people will need to meet other virtues, practices, and standards of justification relative to their own goals. So, justification is *dependent* on a practice.

The above quote also highlights the presence of the second relativist component in Longino's view. In this view, the feminist theoretical virtues and the practices associated with them aren't the only virtues and practices available. There is a plurality of goals and so a *plurality* of practices and of standards for justification.

We get a glimpse of Longino's commitment to the third component of relativism – non-neutrality – when she considers the objection that some hypothetical third set of virtues could serve as a single, objective or

92 *Natalie Alana Ashton*

absolute, standard (1997, 29–30). She identifies two characteristics of theories which might be able to play this role. One is truth, which she says collapses into a theoretical virtue that feminists and traditional epistemologists agree on; empirical adequacy. The other is empirical adequacy itself. As empirical adequacy underdetermines theory choice (this is why theoretical virtues are needed in the first place) (1994, 476–477), she rejects both options. In her own words: “the epistemic is not rich enough to guide inquiry and theory appraisal” (1997, 30). Neutral, value-free justification is insufficient, and there is no absolute or objective epistemic standard which could decisively bind us all independent of our goals.

If Longino is committed to this denial of universal standards, then she won't be able to provide an independent ranking of epistemic practices. And, actually, she doesn't want or try to. She says outright that she's not interested in a “single theory providing a best or definitive account of reality” and instead aims for a view which “does not privilege the feminist or any other set of theoretical virtues” (1997, 32–33). The only epistemic rankings she is interested in are *non-neutral*. So, all three of the components of relativism that I highlighted are present in Longino's view. Despite what she claims, Longino's view is a form of liberatory relativism.

6.4. Objectivity as Regressive

In this section, I'll use Sandra Harding's discussion of ‘weak objectivism’ as an illustration of regressive anti-relativism.⁵ She intends these arguments to show that traditional objectivity is regressive in the sense that I suggest, so in this case (unlike the case of Longino previously) what the view *says* and what I think it *shows* are in agreement with one another. Harding discusses weak objectivity in the context of outlining her own positive view – her take on a view called feminist standpoint theory – so let's begin with the basics of this view.

Standpoint theories have two central theses. First, they say that social factors affect knowledge because differing experiences of social privilege and oppression lead to the development of different *epistemic perspectives* (resources for determining which propositions are justified and which aren't). This is known as 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 than white men, and these different social locations come with different experiences, which have the potential to enable different epistemic perspectives.

Second, and more specifically, standpoint theorists say that social oppression can lead to *epistemic advantages*, so those who are worse off socially might be better off epistemically. This is known as the inversion thesis (2003) or the epistemic advantage thesis:

Epistemic advantage thesis: social oppression can lead to more, or better, epistemic justification

This advantage thesis comes with several caveats. First, standpoint theorists are careful to point out that epistemic advantage doesn't depend on essential categories; where categories like 'woman' are used, they needn't (in fact shouldn't) be thought of as natural (i.e. biological or pre-social) (Hartsock 1997; Smith 1997; Wylie 2003). Second, the possibility of possessing epistemic advantage is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for membership in a social group – it's possible for oppressed people to lack this advantage and for non-oppressed people to have it (Medina 2012). Third, the epistemic advantage isn't automatic. It requires work, in the form of collaborative critical reflection (Fricker 1999: 202–203; Medina 2012; Wylie 2003). And finally, the advantage needn't be global – it's scope can be restricted to certain claims, most plausibly to those about social relations (Harding 1991, 46; Wylie 2003, 37; Fricker 1999, 203).

Beyond these two theses and four caveats, different standpoint theorists cash out their views in different ways – in particular they have different explanations of how the epistemic advantage described in the second thesis arises. Looking at Harding's explanation of this will lead us into her discussion of weak objectivism.

Harding thinks the epistemic advantage that socially oppressed people have comes from their being better placed to identify a certain set of values which can have an effect on scientific practice. On the one hand there are *overt values*, which aren't shared by most researchers and affect science from the outside. Imagine a study on the health effects of tobacco which is funded by a cigarette company – most of us would read such a study cautiously and critically, keeping an eye out for signs of the company's values (such as their interests in avoiding negative perceptions of their products and in turning a profit) affecting the research. All else being equal (i.e. there's no explicit deception going on) these overt values are relatively easy for all researchers to spot.

On the other hand there are *constitutive values*, which are shared by a large proportion of researchers and affect science from within. Because they are widely shared, they can be less salient and so more difficult to spot – at least for some researchers. Harding's explanation of epistemic advantage turns on oppressive values being constitutive in this way. The idea is that people who are affected by these values – e.g. people of colour and white women in the case of racist and sexist values – will

find them more salient and so be in a better position to recognise them than people (such as the rich, white, and otherwise privileged men who have historically dominated ‘western’ science) who aren’t.⁶

With this background in place, we can now explore Harding’s argument that objectivity is regressive. Harding identifies a guiding principle of ‘traditional’ science, which is to exclude all social values from the research process. Recalling the definition that I outlined in Section 6.2, we can see that this principle coheres with an objective picture of science. I defined objectivity as the view that epistemic justification is independent of social and individual factors, while this guiding principle says that a certain kind of social factor – social values – should be kept out of scientific research.

Harding’s criticism of this objectivity principle is that it undermines itself. Socially oppressed people are less likely to participate in science due to financial, social, and other structural barriers. In recommending that *all* values be kept out of science, the endorsement of this principle prevents the social background and experiences of different scientists from being taken into account and so fails to attend to one important way that certain constitutive values can be identified. These values then reinforce the existing biases and values, which helps to reinforce the barriers keeping oppressed people out of science, and so on, in a vicious cycle which hurts science as well as hurting oppressed people on both an individual and structural level. This means that weak objectivity – in addition to being unhelpful scientifically – is also regressive. So, Harding’s argument illustrates the second position one might take towards our central question: regressive anti-relativism.

6.5. Relativism as Regressive

In the previous section, we saw Harding criticise objectivity as regressive. Despite this, she doesn’t endorse relativism as a way to support liberatory goals.⁷ In fact, she criticises relativism as regressive too. She makes two main arguments in support of this claim. I will discuss each in turn.

6.5.1. *Relativism as Weak Objectivity*

Harding’s first criticism is that relativism amounts to weak objectivity, which we have already seen is regressive. The passage where she puts forward this claim goes as follows:

Many thinkers have pointed out that judgemental relativism [which Harding equates with the “epistemological claim that there are ... no rational or scientific grounds for making judgements between various patterns of belief and their originating social practices”] 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.

There are two key things to note about this passage. Harding thinks (a) that epistemic (or what she calls ‘judgemental’) relativism is the view that there can be no (rationally grounded, ‘cognitively adequate’, or otherwise legitimate) judgements between different epistemic frameworks; and (b) that this view is equivalent to the claim that knowledge must come from “no place at all” – i.e. it must be non-situated and value-free. If she’s right, then relativism collapses into weak objectivity, which we have already seen is regressive and unsuitable for meeting feminist goals. However, both (a) and (b) are false.

Let’s take (b) first. This claim is false because the two views Harding describes are not equivalent. The weak objectivist says that knowledge can be produced “from no place at all”, i.e. value-free knowledge is possible. This is a positive claim about the existence of justification in a social vacuum. It is very different from the negative claim she attributes to the relativist, which is that we cannot rank different epistemic frameworks or sets of values.

More importantly for our interests, (a) is also false. The claim that there can be no (rationally grounded) judgements about different frameworks is not a relativist claim. As we saw in Section 6.2, relativists are committed to the non-neutrality claim which says that there is no *system-independent* way to evaluate different epistemic systems. In this view judgements about epistemic frameworks are possible, they are just relative to their own framework or system of values. So, both parts of Harding’s first criticism of relativism fail.

6.5.2. *Relativism as a Regressive Defence Mechanism*

Harding’s second criticism of relativism relies on a historical claim. She says that relativism has traditionally been used by members of socially privileged groups as a defence mechanism to enable them to retain their power (1991, 153). Initially she claimed that relativism was exclusively used in this way, although since then she’s weakened her claim and acknowledged that both relativism and objectivism have been used for both liberatory and regressive ends (2015, 333). But her general point still stands: some regressives do use relativism in this way (or at least appear to), which suggests that relativism works counter to feminist aims and goals. So, this criticism is worth exploring in more detail.

I can think of two sorts of cases that illustrate Harding's concern that relativism can be used as a regressive defence mechanism. The first case is of relativist-sounding claims which are used to undermine the claims of the oppressed, for example responding to criticism with lines such as "well, that's one opinion". This strategy appears to allow feminist, anti-racist, and other views to have some level of legitimacy ("of course I can see why *you* might think that"), but it is a regressive strategy because at the same time it attempts to absolve the speaker of the responsibility to properly engage with these views.

I agree with Harding that this kind of move runs counter to feminist aims, but I don't think it's a problem because relativism doesn't warrant it. This strategy seeks to undermine liberatory claims by classifying them as *merely relatively* justified. This only works if we presuppose that there's some other, more legitimate, *absolute* justification to compare the relative justification to. If you don't think such absolute justification exists – as relativists don't – then saying that liberatory claims are *merely* relatively justified isn't an undermining move. It attributes as much epistemic legitimacy to the feminist claims as it is possible to give. Someone who highlights the relativity of a claim's epistemic status in an attempt to undermine it isn't really a relativist; they are an absolutist who is either confused or disingenuous. So this case doesn't demonstrate the regressive nature of relativism, as Harding thinks, but rather the regressive nature of absolutism.⁸

The second case in which relativism is used as a regressive defence mechanism is when it is used as a way to avoid having to justify one's own views. A notorious example of this occurred after President Trump's first press secretary Sean Spicer made a series of false claims in his first official statement in the role. These included the claim that the crowd at Trump's inauguration was larger than the crowd at former President Obama's inauguration, that more people had used the local metro system on the day of Trump's inauguration than on the day of Obama's, and that Trump's inauguration was the first to see the use of floor coverings at the National Mall (Spicer 2017). When the Counsellor to the President, Kellyanne Conway, was asked about these false claims on NBC's *Meet The Press*, she defended them by claiming that Spicer was simply presenting "alternative facts" (Todd 2017).

The idea behind this kind of strategy is to reduce the justificatory burden on oneself. If I say that the facts I'm presenting are 'alternative' facts, then I don't need to prove that yours are false in order to assert that mine are true. As previously though, relativists would take issue with this strategy. Identifying that a set of beliefs are justified relative to a particular system is the beginning of the relativist story, not the end of it, as it entitles your interlocutors to investigate what system your beliefs are supposed to be justified relative to and whether that relativity relationship really does hold, as well as to make (system-dependent) judgements about that system. So whilst the general claim, that there are competing

sets of facts relative to different epistemic frameworks, is endorsed by relativists, the strategy of using this point to avoid the need to provide further justification is not a relativist strategy.

Neither of these cases supports the claim that relativism can be used as a regressive defence mechanism. Both the regressive-defence argument and the relativism-as-weak-objectivity argument have failed, and so Harding's view that relativism is regressive remains unsupported.

6.6. Anti-Relativism as Liberatory

In the last three sections, I discussed views in which – in line with the prevailing opinion in feminist epistemology – (traditional) objectivity is claimed to be regressive. In this section, I'll explore a much less common view, defended by Meera Nanda: that liberatory goals are best met by traditional scientific anti-relativism.⁹

Nanda's (2003) view is informed by the liberation movement resisting the oppression of Dalits (low caste people, also referred to as 'untouchables') and women in India. She describes how caste and gender are part of the oppressive traditional social order in India, which is upheld by Hindu religious beliefs and practices, and discusses the centrality of 'traditional' western scientific values to Bhimrao Ambedkar's challenge to this social order.

Ambedkar, who was originally Hindu, studied under John Dewey in the United States for three years. After returning to India, he publicly converted to Buddhism and launched the Dalit Buddhist movement, which challenges the country's caste system and related oppression (including gender oppression). Nanda emphasises the influence that Dewey and his understanding of 'modern science' has on Ambedkar and his activism and uses this to argue that the traditional western scientific values that feminist epistemologists eschew can actually be crucial to (at least some) liberatory projects. Metaphysical religious beliefs, like those around karma, were effectively challenged by naturalistic, scientific thinking, and so Nanda's claim is that traditional 'western' scientific values are key to the "Dalit-feminist standpoint" and that authors like Harding and Longino who criticise these values undermine the efforts and the liberation of non-western feminists.

Nanda makes a number of other criticisms of Harding, Longino, and "social constructivist critics of science, along with their feminist and post-colonial allies" which I think are unhelpfully sweeping and often only hit straw versions of the intended targets.¹⁰ However, her point that many feminist epistemologists have often overlooked, minimised, or misunderstood the concerns and struggles of women who aren't white and western is true, and her positive contribution to the literature deserves serious consideration.

In the context of this chapter, the aspect of Nanda's work which I find most interesting is the suggestion that Ambedkar's work is an example of

“objectivity and universality” used for liberatory ends (157). I am not convinced that this is the right way to interpret his project, and in the remainder of this section I will (i) recommend a qualification of the second part of this claim (the one regarding liberation), and (ii) challenge the first part (which regards anti-relativism).

So, first I want to qualify Nanda’s claim that the way Ambedkar used science is liberatory. Whilst his work did meet important liberatory goals in the context that Nanda describes – she makes a clear and detailed case for the importance of science to the concrete progress Ambedkar made – it’s important to acknowledge that this doesn’t show that the scientific values in question are *always* liberatory. In the same way that Nanda cautions against seeing Longino’s alternative scientific values as liberatory in all contexts (e.g. in the context of Dalit liberation), we can see that the scientific values which Nanda points to are oppressive in other contexts – e.g. in the western context, as Longino and Harding have argued.¹¹ Whilst Nanda succeeds in showing that traditional western science can be liberatory, its liberatory potential is restricted to certain contexts.¹²

Second, I want to challenge Nanda’s suggestion that Ambedkar’s achievements count in favour of anti-relativism. Nanda doesn’t say directly that she thinks Ambedkar is an anti-relativist, but she does frame her dissatisfaction with feminist epistemology (which Ambedkar’s work is supposed to be an alternative to) as (partly) due to its willingness to challenge science’s “objectivity and universality” (157), and she attributes to Ambedkar (and Dewey) the view that “the *content* of modern scientific theories demand[s] universal rational acceptance by *all* people” (158 [*italics in original*]). This suggests that she takes objectivity and absolutism to be an important part of why Ambedkar’s work was capable of supporting liberatory goals in the Indian context, and why (she believes) Longino and Harding’s wouldn’t be.

However, what Nanda says diverges from what her view shows. Nanda’s view of ‘modern science’ (by which she means the theoretical values characterising traditional western science (158)) as a Dalit-feminist standpoint (177) has considerable similarities to Longino’s contextual empiricism, and like that view it also has all of the basic components of relativism. The most obvious component is the second one: Nanda straightforwardly acknowledges a *plurality* of different epistemic frameworks or theoretical values – specifically, the attitude of ‘modern science’ and the feminist theoretical virtues.

I think that the first component is present too. Nanda seems to accept that both of the sets of values that she considers are successful in different contexts, at least when it comes to meeting liberatory goals (she argues that modern science has been successful in the Indian context, and doesn’t dispute that Longino’s alternative values have been successful in ‘the West’), so she seems to be committed to a kind of liberatory

dependence thesis. And she should also accept *epistemic dependence*, as both frameworks that she discusses have been shown to be epistemically successful (i.e. to have justification depend on them).¹³

The only remaining component is *non-neutrality*. It's difficult to tell what Nanda's stance is on this. On the one hand she says that Ambedkar and Dewey both thought the content of the framework she calls 'modern science' should be rationally accepted by all people, which might be intended as a system-independent evaluation of that (and other) framework(s). On the other hand, the criticisms she actually makes of other frameworks seem primarily to turn on their unsuitability in the specific context that she is discussing. This means that they are system-dependent and so are compatible with non-neutrality. Elsewhere (Ashton forthcoming) I have argued that all coherent versions of standpoint theory require non-neutrality, and so the principle of charity suggests that we presume Nanda does – or at least can – endorse non-neutrality. So, with all three components present, I think that Nanda's view is best understood as a form of liberatory relativism.

6.7. Conclusion

Let's return to the central question that I outlined in the introduction: are feminist projects and goals best served by relativism or by absolutism? I sketched a matrix of four possible positions one could inhabit in response to this question, and each of the preceding four sections explored one of these. We can now update the matrix as follows:

	<i>Liberatory</i>	<i>Regressive</i>
Anti-relativism		Weak Objectivity Defence Mechanism 1
Relativism	Longino's Contextual Empiricism Nanda's Modern Science	

Longino and Nanda both took themselves to defend a form of liberal anti-relativism (though Longino would make a distinction between anti-relativism involving objectivity and absolutism, and other non-relativist views, classifying her own view as the latter). I showed that both of them are better understood as arguing for versions of liberatory relativism and so belong in the bottom left portion of the matrix. Harding argued – and I agreed – that her criticisms of weak objectivity show that it can be regressive and belongs in the top right portion. Harding also tried to argue that relativism is regressive. Her first argument for this – that it collapses into weak objectivity – failed (indicated on the matrix by being struck through). Her second argument – that relativism can be used as a regressive defence mechanism – proved unconvincing. One of the strategies we

considered failed to show the intended conclusion (and again is stuck through), whilst the other turned out to be a form of regressive absolutism.

The result of this is that only the bottom left portion of the matrix (liberatory relativism) and the top right portion (regressive anti-relativism) are occupied. Should we conclude from this that feminist projects are best served by relativism? This answer would be too hasty – especially as Nanda has shown that there can be contexts and cases that we are ignorant of. Instead, at this stage I think we should just conclude that feminist projects *can* be served by relativism, and that the claim that they can be served by anti-relativism is under-supported – which is already a significant departure from the status quo.

Notes

1. Research on this chapter was assisted by funding from the ERC Advanced Grant Project “The Emergence of Relativism” (Grant No. 339382).
2. Authors who have considered the intersection of multiple oppressions in the formulation of standpoint epistemology include Patricia Hill Collins (1986), who has written on the standpoints of black women, and Jose Medina (2012), who argues that we should strive to develop a “kaleidoscopic consciousness” which is always open to the possibility of further standpoints or ways of looking at the world grounded in other intersections of oppression.
3. Though for the record, I only consider absolutism to be the true opposite of relativism.
4. The other theoretical virtues Longino considers are *ontological heterogeneity*, *complexity*, *applicability to human need*, *diffusion of power*, and *empirical adequacy*. This last one is worth noting as it also features in traditional lists of theoretical virtues. It recommends theories which fit with the available data and means that inquiry conducted according to Longino’s alternative theoretical virtues is no more ‘subjective’ or ‘pragmatic’ than inquiry conducted according to the traditional virtues.
5. Harding makes a distinction between *objectivism*, which she argues is an unhelpful scientific norm, and *objectivity*, which (as we will see shortly) is a version of this norm which she thinks can guide good science.
6. Patricia Hill Collins (1986) made this point first, though she didn’t use the term ‘constitutive values’. For further discussion of this and the connection to Harding’s work, see Ashton and McKenna (2018).
7. Instead she suggests an alternative objective guiding principle for science, *strong objectivity*, which she claims is liberatory. I have argued elsewhere that she is wrong – strong ‘objectivity’ is actually a kind of liberatory relativism (Ashton forthcoming).
8. A more sophisticated attempt at this same strategy would be to say that the feminist views are justified in the only way possible, but that they are justified relative to a set of values or presuppositions that one doesn’t accept – for example, the claim that women are equal to men. This is a legitimate move to make according to relativists, and it also serves one of the feminist cognitive goals that we saw earlier: it helps to reveal the way that gender and assumptions about gender operate in science. So, this would be a relativist strategy, but not one which serves regressive goals particularly well.
9. To be clear: it’s not uncommon for epistemologists to think that some form of epistemic objectivity is correct – that’s the standard view in traditional

- epistemology, and even amongst feminist epistemologists, some modified version of objectivity (such as Harding's 'strong' kind) is the norm. But amongst epistemologists who explicitly share liberatory aims, *traditional* (or 'weak') objectivity is an unusual view.
10. It's beyond the scope of this chapter to expand on this point in detail, but Elizabeth Anderson's (2004) review of the volume in which this chapter first appeared makes some more general points about the problematic ways that many critics engage with feminist epistemology.
 11. Nanda might resist this conclusion, as she thinks that there are other problems with Harding and Longino's arguments. As I've said in note 10 previously, I don't think those criticisms are successful, although I don't have time to address them in detail here.
 12. My point here is that both Nanda's work and the work of Harding and Longino are subject to this qualification, but I don't mean to imply that Nanda's failure to make it explicit is as egregious as Harding and Longino's (both mention that their work is limited to the feminism of a certain subset of women, but most of the time they tend to talk as though this isn't the case). Emphasising the qualification is important in both cases when we're merely thinking about the issue of relativism, but there are additional reasons to emphasise the qualification in Harding and Longino's work as it creates the imbalance which Nanda is responding to.
 13. Nanda might resist this, as I think part of her response to Longino (163–4) is intended to imply that the alternative values will be less epistemically successful than the traditional ones. But the relevant passage reads like a written version of an 'incredulous stare', rather than a systematic critique, and it fails to acknowledge any of the examples of uncontroversial scientific advancement that Longino attributes to her alternative values, so I don't think this undermines my claim that she should accept epistemic dependency.

Not for distribution

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102 *Natalie Alana Ashton*

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