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Can Standpoint Epistemology Avoid Inconsistency, Circularity, and Unnecessariness? A
Comment on Ashton's Remarks about Epistemic Privilege

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In two provocative and interesting articles (Ashton 2019, 2020),¹ Natalie Ashton argues that standpoint epistemologies, though are not presented by their own authors as cases of epistemic relativism, are in fact relativistic, in a sense she reconstructs on the basis of a proposal advanced by Martin Kusch. As is known, standpoint epistemologies declare that knowledge (or justified belief) is somehow dependent on a given “standpoint” *but* that these standpoints can themselves be ranked, which dispels the threat of relativism: not all standpoints have the same epistemic value, and therefore not “anything goes”. However, Ashton retorts, this very ranking of standpoints must *itself* be dependent on a standpoint. In her own words:

The central and defining component of standpoint theory [...] says that justification is dependent on socially-situated perspectives. This means that the justification of a ranking of different systems will be dependent on socially situated perspectives too, and so standpoint theorists are committed to understanding the epistemic advantage thesis (which is effectively a ranking of different systems) as system-dependent. The epistemic advantage has to be understood as system-dependent if standpoint theorists are going to maintain a consistent view, and so standpoint theory is best understood as a form of epistemic relativism (Ashton 2020, 78).

In this text, I will try to discuss whether this assimilation of standpoint theory to relativism (as the sole alternative to inconsistency) is inevitable. I will proceed as follows:

- In *Section 2*, I will briefly summarize Ashton’s reconstruction of epistemic relativism, on the one hand, and standpoint epistemology, on the other, to show why she concludes that the latter should either be accepted as a variety of the former, or radically reformulated.
- In *Section 3*, I will try to show why the dilemma presented by Ashton cannot be resolved by simply *weakening* the standpoint thesis—that is, by limiting its scope only to *first-order* beliefs about the world, and exempting precisely the kind of second-order epistemological assessments such as the one that attributes an epistemic advantage to a certain standpoint. As I will argue from the example of Michael Löwy’s standpoint theory, the obvious difficulty for such a weakening of the thesis is that it appears to be *ad hoc*: it is far from clear why only first-order beliefs would be affected by the impossibility of neutral evaluation, whereas second-order beliefs would be exempt from this rule.
- In *Section 4*, I will argue, however, that the result of simply accepting (as Ashton recommends) that a standpoint cannot be declared superior *on neutral grounds* might not be very encouraging after all: as Bhikhu Parekh, Martyn Hammersley and Catharine Saint-Croix had already pointed out, this would mean that the thesis of epistemic privilege can be justified only in a circular manner—and that, as a consequence, this justification could not provide us with a reason to *adopt* a standpoint. Worse still: the criticisms by these authors

¹ In the first of these texts, Ashton takes a proposal by José Medina (2013) as a starting point; however, she points out that her conclusions are not restricted to this case but apply to standpoint epistemologies in general.

reveal, in the form of a dilemma, that the justification of the attribution of epistemic privilege not only risks being circular, on the one hand, but also (if it is made on the grounds of a neutral knowledge of reality) of making the whole recourse to standpoints simply *unnecessary*, on the other. A satisfactory solution to the problem of epistemic privilege will then need to avoid both risks at the same time.

• In *Section 5*, I will try to briefly sketch such a solution. I will elaborate on texts by José Medina and Kristin Intemann to suggest that the attribution of epistemic privilege can proceed in a “reliabilistic” manner, which involves assessing whether a standpoint is “sensitive” to certain aspects which we *assume* that reality has—and then *employing* this reliable standpoint for the acquisition of *new* beliefs in future research. Like all reliabilistic approaches, this one necessarily assumes that we do know things about the world independently of the standpoint, process, etc., which we declare reliable, but this, I will argue, is the only way to escape the dilemma presented by Parekh and Hammersley.

Section 2: Relativism, Standpoint Epistemology, and Epistemic Privilege

Partially following Kusch, who lists five essential and four non-essential features (Kusch, 2016, p. 36) of epistemic relativism, Ashton identifies three tenets which she takes as “components” of the position:

(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, 34–35).

Though this last claim, taken by itself, would prohibit *any* ranking of epistemic systems and practices, Kusch points out that it “can take a number of different forms that are worth distinguishing”. One of these forms is “Non-Neutrality”, which claims that there is “no *neutral* way of evaluating” different systems of practices (Kusch 2016, 35).² This is the reason why, when Ashton moves from the consideration of relativism to that of standpoint theory (a move which requires, *grosso modo*, substituting “standpoint” for “epistemic system or practice” in the tenets above) she may find the “epistemic-advantage thesis” as compatible with relativism: what relativism, well understood, prohibits is not the claim that we can rank

² Though Kusch does not use this example, Rorty’s “ethnocentrism” seems to illustrate this point quite well: whereas Rorty reserves the term “relativism” for a doctrine according to which a variety of belief-systems would stand on a par and could not be ranked as better or worse, his own ethnocentrism does not hesitate to condemn the views of Nazis, religious fundamentalists, tribesmen, etcetera, as *inferior*, but he immediately adds that such a condemnation is, of course, made on the basis of his own “liberal bourgeois postmodern” beliefs and desires. (For a brief reconstruction of Rorty’s “ethnocentrism”, cf. Cormick 2011; Rorty’s main texts on ethnocentrism are probably Rorty 1984, 1986, 1991, 2000.)

different standpoints as better or worse, but only that we can rank them *on neutral grounds* (Ashton 2019, 332, 334). But to understand this point, let us first turn to Ashton’s reconstruction of standpoint epistemology. According to the author, it would consist of the following:

(SITUATED-KNOWLEDGE THESIS) Differences in social factors create epistemic differences (e.g. in the kinds of things that inquirers are justified in believing).

(STANDPOINT THESIS) Justification depends on “socially situated” perspectives.

(EPISTEMIC-ADVANTAGE THESIS) The social oppression that socially disadvantaged groups experience can bring them epistemic benefits (Ashton 2019, 330–331).

What will turn out to be decisive for Ashton’s conclusion that standpoint epistemology is relativistic is the standpoint thesis. “If justification depends on socially situated perspectives”, writes Ashton, “then so does justification about standpoints and how they are ranked” (Ashton 2019, 335). And if, on the contrary—as we may continue the reasoning—justification about standpoints and how they are ranked did *not* depend on socially situated perspectives, then it could not be the case that justification *in general* depends on socially situated perspectives. In other words, *if* the possibility existed to determine, on neutral grounds (and not on the grounds of the previous adoption of a “standpoint”) that a certain belief *p* is justified or not-justified, what would then the “standpoint thesis” amount to? If standpoint theories end up saying that, after all, we were able to neutrally assess beliefs all along, what would be the point of an entire theory that seems to affirm precisely the opposite? “This means”, writes Ashton, “that standpoint theorists have a decision to make: either they accept relativism”—that is, they keep the standpoint thesis in place, but adopt “non-neutrality” as well—“or they must radically rethink, or even abandon, their view” (Ashton, 2019, 332).

Section 3: Weakening the “Standpoint Thesis”?

Now, perhaps a non-relativistic partisan of standpoint epistemologies might say that this conclusion is too hasty. Why could these epistemologies not weaken the standpoint thesis somewhat, and then claim that *first-order* beliefs, beliefs directly about the world, can only be assessed as justified or not-justified by presupposing the value of a standpoint, whereas *second-order* beliefs, by contrast on the contrary, can in fact be subjected to a *neutral* evaluation?

In this reading, for example, one could not do sociology or historiography without adopting a certain standpoint (proletarian or bourgeois, according to the historicist Marxist; androcentric or feminist, according to the feminist standpoint theorist), but the problem

would allegedly not reappear at the level of a *meta-theory* which helps us determine what the best standpoint for elaborating and assessing first-order theories is.

In this case, then, we could neutrally evaluate *second-order* beliefs (for example, the belief “oppressed subjects have no interest in promoting conservative illusions and as such tend to pursue the truth about society”), and it would be thanks to *this* evaluation that we could, then, return to practicing first-order theory, now with the invaluable guide of knowing what the epistemically privileged standpoint for such a task is. We must therefore answer: why isn’t *that* an acceptable solution?

First of all, let us state explicitly what the position would consist of. Unlike the standpoint thesis as Ashton reconstructs it, this alternative version would have the following form:

(STANDPOINT THESIS-FIRST ORDER) Justification of *first-order beliefs* depends on “socially situated” perspectives, while justification of *second-order beliefs* does not.

In fact, this kind of solution seems at least *suggested* by some works in standpoint epistemology.

Take the case of the “historicist Marxist” Michael Löwy³. Even though he does not explicitly state that second-order theories can be assessed on neutral grounds, his proposal includes:

- (i) The tenet that theoretical disagreements in the level of first-order theories in social science cannot be resolved on neutral grounds, because we cannot depart from our “class point of view” (Löwy 1973, 201, 214, 217, 224; 1985, 122, 124, 148–149, 191, 210);
- (ii) The fear that, without some criterion, this would lead to a kind of relativism in which “anything goes” (Löwy 1973, 229; 1985, 146, 149, 210),⁴ but finally;

³ I prefer to speak of “*historicist* Marxists” rather than just plain Marxists, because—as Löwy himself shows—there are clear examples of Marxist authors who are not committed to the thesis of epistemic privilege—e.g., the “second” or “intermediate” Althusser, between his alleged adhesion to the “great festival of proletarian science of the decade of 1950” (Löwy 1973, 223) and his later acceptance of a role of “class struggle” in “theoretical practice”. Other Marxist authors which do not adhere to a standpoint epistemology are those who Löwy views as “positivistically inclined”, especially in the Second International. Parekh, in turn (and against Löwy’s reading) thinks that a commitment to the idea of a pure, disinterested non-partisan science can also be found in Marx himself (cf. his conclusions in Parekh 1982, 184–185). Finally, though it is Lukács who is frequently identified as *the* Marxist author thanks to whose influence standpoint epistemology came to be (Fricker 1999; Jameson 1988; Toole 2019), I find it doubtful that Lukács himself was a standpoint theorist in the sense which is relevant here—that is, an author who denies the possibility of a proposition’s being justified save relative to a certain “standpoint”. I leave this question for a later work on the subject.

⁴ *Mutatis mutandis*, the idea that the thesis of epistemic privilege functions as a solution for a relativistic problem can also be found in Mills and in Tanesini’s global reconstruction (Mills 1988, 241–242; Tanesini 2019, 336)

(iii) A tie-breaker, provided by a meta-theory that assures us that the standpoint of the proletariat is more reliable than that of the bourgeoisie, because the proletariat “needs the truth” whereas the power of the bourgeoisie is benefited by a variety of illusions and forms of (sometimes self-) deception (Löwy 1973, 233, 234, 236; 1985, 129, 134, 140, 215, 224–225).

It will be interesting, for our purposes here, to try to determine why this is not an acceptable solution, and to what extent this unacceptability can be generalized to other proposals.

The problem for which an epistemology such as Löwy’s cannot provide a satisfactory solution is, predictably, the following: how, if not by means of an unacceptably *ad hoc* exception, would the evaluation of meta-theoretical arguments appear as more “neutral”, less socially conditioned, than the evaluation of first-order evidence? It is not clear at all why an argument such as “the oppressed are in need of the truth, *therefore* their perspective is more reliable”⁵ would be more amenable to a neutral evaluation than first-order sociological or historical evidence. If the case of first-order theoretical positions motivates a relativistic doubt because our formulation of the problems, evaluation of the evidence, etcetera, will be tainted by values and interests distinctive to the researcher’s class standpoint, then it must be shown why the case of second-order tenets, concerning the reliability of a standpoint, is exempt from such conditioning. Here it is the standpoint theorist that bears the burden of proof—and, in the case of Löwy, no specific argument is offered to reply to this predictable objection.

Worse still, some beliefs that are key to the second-order argument Löwy makes are *the same* first-order beliefs about which different “standpoints” would yield different theoretical verdicts—and therefore cannot be said to face a better chance for neutral evaluation as those first-order beliefs. The tenet that oppressed groups such as the proletariat need an accurate representation of reality in order to overcome such a situation presupposes, to begin with, the belief that *they are, in fact, oppressed*—as opposed to beliefs such as the one that the proletariat, although dispossessed of the means of production, benefits itself from private property because the latter “increases the social product” (Nozick 2013, 177). Of course, this latter conservative belief could in principle be contested by appealing to evidence from economy and sociology, *but it is precisely Löwy who cannot do this*. If Löwy insists that all first-order scientific evidence is in principle only acceptable *relative to a class standpoint*, and can only be made good when complemented by a meta-theory that supports the epistemic superiority of one of the standpoints in question, then his meta-theory cannot appeal precisely to the kind of first-order beliefs (such as “the proletariat is an *oppressed* class”) whose very value has been put in question.

⁵ The alleged link between a practical *motivation* to know the truth and a higher reliability appears in a variety of “historicist Marxist” authors, such as Gramsci. For a similar remark—in the context of *feminist* theory—on the motivations of the oppressed, cf. Jaggar (Jaggar 1983, 370). I will not dwell here on the consequences that Jaggar extracts from this remark.

Section 4: Back to a Relativistic Understanding of Standpoint Theory? The Problem of Circularity and, yet another one, Unnecessariness

Now, if the standpoint thesis cannot plausibly be weakened so that it leaves room for a neutral ranking of standpoints (that is, a ranking not dependent on standpoints themselves), does this entail that the relativistic understanding of standpoint epistemology is the only available option? Before considering a potentially more promising alternative, it is worth noting that Ashton's conclusion that standpoints can only be ranked in a way that is itself dependent on a standpoint had already been considered—though as a more worrying result—by Parekh, Hammersley, and Saint-Croix. According to these authors, if, in fact, *every* belief can only be assessed from a certain standpoint, and this applies to the very meta-theoretical considerations concerning the superiority of a standpoint, then a possible outcome is that a standpoint is used to assess *its own* reliability (i.e., we know “from” the proletarian standpoint that the proletarian standpoint is epistemically privileged) and, consequently, that standpoints can only receive an epistemically circular justification.⁶

Though the problem of epistemic circularity is more complex than would appear at first blush, and therefore such a charge might be seen by a relativist as a less definitive objection than Parekh and Hammersley think, it should be clear, in any case, why the prospect of justifying a standpoint's superiority only on the grounds provided by that very standpoint might raise some suspicions: at least, it means that, if standpoints can somehow be *chosen*, as a theoretical tool (and this is an idea some standpoint theorists are committed to⁷), then epistemic privilege cannot appear to us, in advance, as a *reason to adopt* the “privileged” standpoint: its “privilege” will only appear to us as such *once we have already adopted the standpoint in question*, not before. As Saint-Croix writes, “If we are to convince those in power

⁶ If we “insist that only those whom a particular standpoint theory treats as epistemically privileged can judge its validity”, Hammersley writes, the problem is that “this is circular, and therefore can provide no support” (Hammersley 2011, 35). Decades before, Parekh had written that “we need to know from what point of view Marx worked out a general theory concerning the best way to obtain the truth about human societies. Since a social theorist allegedly cannot rise above a class point of view, Marx must have worked out such a theory from the standpoint of a particular class, and such a class can only be the proletariat. This means that the proletarian point of view is its own judge and that it alone can offer the truth about capitalism because it says so!” (Parekh 1982, 171–172). A very similar concern, though not explicitly framed in terms of circularity, is expressed by Helen Longino: “If genuine or better knowledge depends on the correct or a more correct standpoint, social theory is needed to ascertain which of these locations is the epistemologically privileged one. But in a standpoint epistemology, a standpoint is needed to justify such a theory. What is that standpoint and how do we identify *it*?” (Longino 1993, 107; italics in the original text). Saint-Croix, in any case, reads Longino's remarks as making indeed a charge of circularity against standpoint epistemologies: “if the claim is that epistemic success in general depends on the correctness of the standpoint from which one engages with the world, then this must be true of our judgments about standpoints, too. On this view, however, such judgments are the product of a particular social theory. Since knowledge of such theories also requires that one approach the question from a correct standpoint, we need a way to identify that correct standpoint, which will also need to be identified by a correct social theory, and so on. [...] Moreover, if we assume that the justifying theory is the same one that justified our initial judgment, we're in a worryingly circular situation” (Saint-Croix 2018, 12).

⁷ One of the most explicit applications of the theory of epistemic privilege in this sense, though certainly not the only one, is Schaff's recommendation: “We say to the students of social phenomena: ‘If you wish to attain objective truth in your studies, then consciously adopt class and party positions which are in accord with the interests of the proletariat’” (Schaff 1976, 245–246).

to change their ways”—that is, to *adopt* the privileged standpoint—“it will be of little help to present circular justifications” (Saint-Croix, 2020).

Up to this point, then, what we have is that the version of the standpoint thesis reconstructed by Ashton leads to a situation in which the alleged superiority of a standpoint can only be justified in a circular way, and that the alternative, “STANDPOINT THESIS-FIRST ORDER”, escapes from this result in a suspiciously *ad hoc* manner. Can the standpoint thesis be reformulated in yet another way? We must bear in mind, of course, that the thesis should not be weakened to such a degree that it ceases to count as a “standpoint thesis” in any interesting sense. That is to say, if we grant that we can assess, in a neutral way, the attribution to privilege to a given standpoint, *but that this is a consequence of the fact that we can evaluate, independently of a standpoint, first-order beliefs themselves*, then the problem is no longer circularity but, instead, that the recourse to a “privileged standpoint” has become *unnecessary* for the knowledge of reality. As Parekh writes about this alternative:

Since Marx must already know what capitalism is like in order to conclude that it can only be known from the proletarian point of view, he did not need to adopt the proletarian point of view to know the truth about capitalism! To say that only the proletarian point of view enables one to grasp the truth about capitalism or makes the social reality visible is to imply that one already knows the truth about capitalism independently of the proletarian point of view (Parekh 1982, 171–172).

We need, then, not only to avoid the possible *inconsistency* pointed out by Ashton. We also need to move between the Scylla of epistemic *circularity* and the Charybdis of *unnecessariness*. Let us explore, in the following section, a possible alternative.

Section 5: A More Promising Alternative? Restricting the “Standpoint Thesis” in a Heuristic Sense

Now, on the basis of more recent work by Intemann and Medina, perhaps a charitable reading of standpoint epistemology could attribute to it the following thesis:

(STANDPOINT THESIS-HEURISTIC) Heuristic decisions concerning how to perform scientific research are only justified on the grounds of a previous commitment to the epistemic superiority of a standpoint, *but* the relative value of standpoints themselves can in turn be assessed on a neutral basis—namely, our knowledge of results of *previous* research.

Before appealing to the texts, let us try to analyze what this proposal should amount to. We need to carefully distinguish three aims:

1. To avoid the risk of an inconsistency such as the one identified by Ashton, the thesis does not say *both* that every belief is justified only relative to a standpoint *and* that the very ranking of standpoints can be made on neutral

grounds. Instead, it distinguishes between some theoretical decisions that are made on the grounds of a standpoint—and which concern how to organize future research—on the one hand, and the ranking of standpoints, on the other hand.

2. To avoid the risk of circularity, the ranking of standpoints is made on neutral grounds, i.e., this ranking does not presuppose the kind of theoretical commitments that are only possible on the basis of having adopted a standpoint, but only justifies those commitments.

3. To avoid the risk of unnecessaryness, the thesis does not say that the beliefs which we can acquire on neutral grounds—that is, the beliefs whose acquisition *does not need the detour via the adoption of a standpoint*—are, as Parekh would criticize, the same beliefs which we can acquire once we have adopted a standpoint. What the thesis asserts is that we can know on neutral grounds that certain standpoints showed, in the past, to be sensitive to certain aspects of reality, and that, on that basis, we can prefer adopting those standpoints so that the *future* beliefs we may form are also sensitive to those aspects of reality.

Another preliminary observation that we need to make is that (for example, in a recent proposal by Intemann) what standpoint theory recommends is *a way to constitute better research communities*—that is, the *locus* of epistemic privilege cannot be an isolated individual (Intemann 2010; 786). The theory, in this reading, is committed to “the claim that epistemic communities that include members of marginalized groups will have epistemic advantages, or more rigorous critical consciousness, than communities that do not (at least in some contexts)” (Intemann 2010, 787). This involves a heuristic recommendation for future research: “include members of marginalized groups; avoid a homogeneous community composed only by white, heterosexual cisgender males”. This recommendation is founded, predictably, on the previous assumption that the standpoint achieved by a diverse community is epistemically more beneficial than the standpoint which is characteristic of a community composed only by socially privileged members. But here comes the crucial step: how can the existence of this alleged epistemic benefit be itself tested—in a way, of course, that does not *circularly* hinge on the same standpoint being assessed, or make it *unnecessary* to appeal to standpoints at all?

Recent comments by José Medina about empirical evidence obtained in a series of experiments including “mock juries” and performed by Samuel Sommers suggest an answer: the test would be supported, in a reliabilistic manner, on considerations about *previous* performances of diverse communities, on the one hand, and homogeneous communities, on the other. About these experiments, Medina writes:

Half the juries were all-white; the other half included both white and black members. Concerns about racism playing a role in the case were raised more frequently in the racially diverse juries than in the all-white juries. What is [...]

interesting is that critical sensitivity to racism was expressed not only by black jurors but also by white jurors in the racially diverse juries. In fact, white jurors in racially diverse juries were more likely than black jurors to raise the issue of racism [...]. Not only does the evidence strongly suggest that the presence of non-white subjects triggers white jurors' critical sensitivity with respect to racism, but it also strongly suggests that the presence of a white homogeneous composition—that is, the exclusive presence of racially privileged subjects—in the jury inhibits expressions of such critical sensitivity (Medina 2021, 337).

In the light of his appeal to this kind of evidence, Medina's line of reasoning seems to be the following: *firstly*, he starts from the assumption that racism is in fact a component of social life. *Secondly*, using that assumption, he attempts to determine what (collective) standpoints have proven to be more sensitive to that component—and concludes, hinging on evidence about the past, that racially diverse epistemic communities have. *Thirdly*, he can recommend that, in the future, epistemic communities be racially diverse, because this will guarantee their sensitivity to racism as an aspect of social reality⁸.

Making, in the first step, the assumption that we *already know* something about reality (i.e., that racism exists) does not involve a lack of critical awareness; it is, instead, the only possible starting point for an assessment of *reliability* (the kind of assessment that, as Philip Kitcher suggested, standpoint theory should be inclined to make).⁹ We can check whether a clock is reliable by assuming that we may know at diverse moments, independently of that clock, what time it is—and only then will we confidently employ the clock in question. We can determine that a person is reliable in forming certain kinds of beliefs only if we can have a direct access to the same reality that, we declare, she knows well—and this is why we will trust her in the future. Of course, *if* Medina declared that we *cannot* justifiedly believe, unless by adopting “the standpoint of a diverse community”, that racism is in fact a component of reality, then it is clear that it *would* be circular to say that the standpoint of a diverse community is “privileged” because it is sensitive to that component. A standpoint cannot be declared to be “reliable” simply because it is sensitive to *reality as it is perceived from that*

⁸ This appeal to past experience as a source of lessons as to how to organize inquiry is, of course, not distinctive of recent versions of standpoint theory; rather, it is shared by a naturalized form of feminist epistemology such as Anderson's—who is usually classed as a “feminist empiricist” (cf. Anderson 1995 for an analysis of this naturalized recourse to the history of science; Harding 1991, for the canonical distinction between “feminist standpoint”, “empiricist” and “postmodern” feminist epistemologies) Whether or not it is still useful to distinguish between feminist *empiricism* and feminist *standpoint* epistemology is a question that exceeds the purposes of this article. (Cf., however, Intemann 2010, 791–792 for an alleged disadvantageous consequence of the specifically empiricist approach to the question of diversity; and Lorenzo 2020, 89–90 for a reply to Intemann on this issue.)

⁹ In his words, it would be advisable “to 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” (Kitcher 1994, 124). This, as any reliabilistic assessment, would of course be impossible unless we already assumed that we have some way to determine that something is in fact a *true* belief. A general reflection that takes up Kitcher's proposal of linking standpoint epistemologies and reliabilism can be found in Michaelian (Michaelian 2008).

standpoint. However, the point is: *why* would Medina need to say such a thing? Returning to a comparison with the case of Löwy will, in this sense, be fruitful.

Löwy cannot, in principle, justify the thesis of an epistemic superiority of a certain standpoint (that of the oppressed in general and of the proletariat in particular) in a “reliabilistic” direction, which takes for granted a certain feature of social reality and then moves to the task of detecting which standpoint is more sensitive to it, because, in Löwy’s analysis, as we have seen, *we have no neutral way of justifying first-order beliefs, beliefs directly about social reality*; the only way to arrive at justified beliefs on those subjects is via the endorsement of a standpoint. In Löwy’s approach, the equipollence between incompatible descriptions of reality makes a theory of epistemic privilege indispensable, and conversely the possibility of a neutral knowledge of reality would render that theory unnecessary. But Medina’s proposal does not *need* to deny the possibility of that neutral knowledge, because, in his case, the use for a theory about the epistemic advantages of certain standpoint is not provided (as in Löwy’s case) by the need to have a “tie-breaker” between competing accounts of reality, but by the need to guide future research on the basis of the lessons learned about epistemic communities in the past.

A new objection, however, could take the following form: perhaps a proposal that sets off to determine reliability based on some knowledge which is taken for granted is not circular, *but it is, on the contrary, less critical* than an approach such as Löwy’s. Maybe, after all, Medina *should not* use, as a starting point, the assumption “Racism is a component of social life” as a neutral datum, but insist instead, in a perhaps more cautious manner, that *only from a certain standpoint* can we justifiably believe that racism has such a role. Even though more should be said, in order to tackle this objection, about what exactly constitutes different standpoints, one consequence of the “cautious” approach can be immediately identified: under that approach, the aim of providing a non-circular justification for the attribution of epistemic privilege to a standpoint *does*, now, become unfeasible. To put this in the form of a dilemma: *either* we accept that the value of standpoints can be assessed on the basis of some knowledge which we take to be unproblematic (perhaps, in the limit, we could appeal to the kind of universally recognized cases of knowledge that are used by the “particularistic” solution to epistemic relativism (this strategy has been carried out, following in Chisholm’s and Laudan’s steps, by Howard Sankey; cf. Sankey 2010; 2012; 2013; 2014; 2015), *or* we stay “critical” and “cautious” at the cost of not being able to provide any reason to *adopt* a given standpoint. One last remark: there is, of course, a big step between, on the one hand, a series of specific studies comparing epistemic communities in artificial conditions and, on the other hand, a global claim about the alleged advantages of the “standpoint” available to socially diverse research communities; surely more evidence needs to be mobilized (Cf. Pinnick, 1994, 2005 for some criticisms in terms of historical evidence supporting the thesis that diversity in research communities confers an advantage)¹⁰. My purpose here, however, is not to evaluate the available *empirical* evidence that supports the tenet that some (community) standpoints are better than others, but simply to point at a possible form that would have a standpoint theory that avoided a series of obstacles *of principle*.

¹⁰ I will not address here whether Pinnick’s criticisms are well-founded.

Summing Up

Let us recapitulate the results at which we have arrived.

1. The problem identified by Ashton in standpoint epistemologies—if all justification is relative to a standpoint, so is the justification of our ranking of different standpoints—cannot be resolved in an easy manner by just exempting second-order beliefs from the scope of the thesis. This solution, in fact, seems unacceptably *ad hoc*, as I have tried to show by analyzing the example of Michael Löwy.
2. Though this result seems to entail that we should accept Ashton’s conclusion that every ranking of standpoints must itself be based on a standpoint, the epistemic circularity that stems from it is, however, rather discouraging: if the positive assessment of a standpoint is necessarily circular, then it cannot provide us with *a reason to adopt* the standpoint in question.
3. A more promising alternative appears to be, instead, one in which the value of a standpoint is justified in a “reliabilistic” manner, as a standpoint that has proven “sensitive” to some aspects of reality—a strategy which, of course, requires that *we do know* things about reality independently of the standpoint in question.
4. In order to avoid not only circularity but also unnecessaryness (the second horn of Parekh’s dilemma), we need to show that a standpoint thus justified is capable of offering us a *heuristic* rule that guides future research.

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