Standpoint Then and Now

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Some things are best understood from the standpoints of those who are less powerful, less economically privileged, less entitled. This, initially counterintuitive claim, is the distinctive feature of standpoint epistemology which is one of the most controversial and most discussed feminist approaches to the study of knowledge.[[1]](#footnote-1) In the social sciences where, arguably, standpoint has had its widest appeal, this approach has often been interpreted as offering some broad methodological recommendations in favour of listening to the views of the subjects one studies even when those subjects may appear unreflective or uneducated.[[2]](#footnote-2) In philosophy, standpoint has generally been interpreted as a theory about the epistemic practices involved in attributing, claiming, discovering, justifying or communicating (putative) knowledge and understanding.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The theory centres on three tenets: the *situated knowledge thesis* which states that (many) claims put forward as knowledge are socially situated because they are based on putative evidence which is more accessible from some social locations or perspectives than others (Wylie, 2003: 31; Intemann, 2010: 784-7); *the standpoint thesis* which asserts that some socially situated perspectives (standpoints) are epistemically privileged in that they offer a less partial, less distorted understanding or because they contain a higher number of (significant) truths than those provided by other perspectives (Intemann, 2010: pp. 787-9); and *the inversion thesis* which claims that the perspective(s) of the socially subordinated are epistemically privileged compared to those of dominant groups (Wylie, 2003, p. 26). Standpoint shares the first two tenets with other feminist epistemologies; it is, arguably, differentiated from them by its endorsement of the third.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In this overview I explain the nature of standpoint epistemology; detail its evolution through the responses offered by its supporters to their critics; and briefly point to the continued fruitfulness of the approach.

1. Social situatedness, epistemic privilege and inversion

It is common place in feminist philosophy to think of standpoint as one of three, distinctively feminist, approaches in the philosophy of science (Harding, 1986). These are in addition to standpoint, feminist empiricism and feminist postmodernism. Standpoint theory shares with postmodernism a commitment to the situated knowledge thesis.[[5]](#footnote-5) In what follows I first offer an overview of each of the three theses characteristic of standpoint before discussing its evolution since its earliest versions in the mid-1980s.

The thesis that knowledge is socially situated has been formulated in a number of different ways (Hartsock, 1983; Harding 1986 and 1993, Haraway, 1991). However, the guiding thought often is that individuals who occupy the same or similar social roles, and/or belong to the same social group, and/or subjectively identify with one such group are likely, because of these facts, to develop the same cognitive and practical skills and a similar point of view on numerous issues, questions and topics.[[6]](#footnote-6) Once the claim is fleshed out in this manner, it is an empirical question whether there is a unique point of view which is the product of any given social location.[[7]](#footnote-7) If the notion of standpoint is to have any plausibility, it cannot imply that without exception all those who share a social location must share a perspective. But, although this fact is less often appreciated, even weaker interpretations which make hedged generalizations are for many social locations equally problematic. The claim that there are any significant theories, beliefs, understanding or experiences that a preponderance of women are likely to share in virtue of occupying the same or similar social locations is an empirical one. It also appears to be false (Spelman, 1990).

These considerations have led some recent supporters of the socially situated knowledge thesis to a reformulation of it in more individualistic terms. Given this understanding, an agent’s social location is said to affect that person’s access to the evidence, the cognitive and practical skills that one is able to develop, and which experiences one is likely to have (Wylie, 2003: 29 and 31; Anderson, 2015: 1-14). This claim however may or may not support generalizations about different areas of inquiry and across individuals who occupy the same or similar social location. So understood the situatedness thesis would belong to a form of social epistemology that takes individuals rather than groups or collectives as the primary object of study.

There is, however, another very different understanding of the thesis that knowledge is socially situated. In this reading social location is explained in terms of shared objective interests rather than subjective identification with, or membership in, a social group.[[8]](#footnote-8) Putative knowledge is thus said to be socially situated in the sense that, given their shared interests, some knowledge claims are more useful than others for collectives and their members. [[9]](#footnote-9) For instance, they may help members of groups to understand better their situation, and to improve it, and in general may reveal aspects of the social world that are important to them. On this understanding a standpoint is defined by its pragmatic features. It is a set of theories, beliefs, explanations or skills that work for some people because they are of assistance in achieving their social and political goals. This interpretation of the thesis is much more faithful than those presented above to the earliest incarnations of standpoint epistemology as a version of critical theory deeply inspired by Marxist thought (Hartsock, 1983). It explains why standpoint is not automatic but is an achievement, since it requires the acquisition of a point of view which is in fact helpful to understand and improve the position of those who share some interests.[[10]](#footnote-10) It also explains why the scope of standpoint is likely to be limited to knowledge of the social world, this is the field of study which is more likely to be affected by the interests of different social groups. In this account the thesis that knowledge is socially situated is unashamedly normative. It states that acceptance of some claims as knowledge serves the interests of some groups whilst acceptance of different claims is of benefit to other collectives. It takes skill and effort to figure out which claims are actually in the interest of one’s own group.

The second tenet of standpoint theory defines the view’s opposition to relativism since it states that not all standpoints are epistemically on a par. There are several dimensions to epistemic privilege. A collection of theories, explanations, beliefs and the range of evidence in their support (including experiences) may be superior to another because it includes more truths, or more significant truths, because it affords a better understanding of the situation as a whole. But it could also be superior because it is more readily applicable to solving pressing problems or because it opens up useful avenues of thought about different topics. It would seem that the kind of epistemic privilege afforded by given perspectives might vary from case to case and be also relative to a number of pragmatic considerations.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Finally, the inversion thesis is the most distinctive feature of standpoint. It claims that the perspective of the downtrodden is epistemically privileged. I began this overview by highlighting the initial implausibility of the thesis. Since those who are systematically disadvantaged are less likely to have received a formal education, lack the leisure to read and reflect, and are likely to be psychologically damaged because of oppression and discrimination, it is at least plausible that they are less likely than those who are educated to have a good theoretical understanding of the social world that they find themselves in (Narayan, 1988: 36). Whilst there is truth to this claim, it is not an objection to standpoint once both the notions of a standpoint (as socially situated body of putative knowledge) and of epistemic privilege are adequately clarified.

If, as I suggested above, the thesis that knowledge claims are socially situated is interpreted as the claim that some bodies of putative knowledge are more useful than others to groups of individuals that share the same interests, then the inversion thesis is best understood as the view that knowledge claims which are most useful to the downtrodden to understand and improve their situation are also epistemically superior to those which are employed by the privileged because they offer a more truthful, or less distorted, account of the social world or a deeper understanding of some of its features. Following Sandra Harding’s stronger objectivity thesis one may argue that any theory of the social world that gives central stage to the facts about the lives of the oppressed and aims first and foremost to explain and understand them is likely to be epistemically superior (more truthful and insightful) to any account that ignores them (Harding, 1991 and 1993). Whilst it remains an open question whether theories or approaches that aim to serve the interests of the oppressed are more empirically adequate or more insightful than theories suited to serve a different range of interests, much of the intuitive implausibility of the inversion thesis is thus dissipated.

Two further points emerge from these considerations. First, the inversion thesis--if true at least in some localized cases--would show that empirically adequate or true theories may be formulated more effectively by epistemic agents who are socially and politically engaged. That is to say, more objective theories may be developed if the agents who formulate them are not dispassionate or politically neutral (Wylie, 2003: 33). Second, they may explain why, although standpoints are not automatically acquired and lack of access to education damages those who are oppressed, those who are downtrodden have a better chance of accessing a viewpoint that serves their interests than members of privileged groups. They have an incentive, which members of dominant groups lack, to acquire this putative knowledge. Arguably, powerful individuals actually have strong self-interested reasons *not* to know.[[12]](#footnote-12) Hence, even if it is true that the majority of the oppressed have not acquired a standpoint on oppression, nevertheless the barriers in their path to this achievement are, despite being extremely powerful, less insurmountable than those to be found on the road that members of dominant groups must travel to acquire that same standpoint.

2. From Marxist beginnings to a pluralist present

In its earliest formulation feminist standpoint theory is based on an analogy with Marxian accounts of the standpoint of the proletariat (working class). According to the latter the working class occupies a unique social position within the capitalist system. Capitalism is defined in part as a system of production predicated on a division of labor by class. The manual labor of members of the proletariat is essential to the perpetuation of the system. Yet, the system primarily serves the interests of the capitalists or bourgeoisies. Marxists propose that a deeper understanding of the economic laws governing the capitalist system is gained if one studies it with the aim of developing a theory that serves the interests of the working class and helps them to address their oppression. Marxist justifications in favor of this point of view are complex and need not detain us here but they are centered on the thought that theories that serve the interests of the working class would be instrumentally more effective to bringing about social change in the interest of the whole of humanity (and not only of the proletariat).

Marxists also think that individual members of the working class have fewer obstacles than capitalists to gaining this understanding. Firstly, they have first-hand experience of the working of the system since their labor is essential to it. Second, they have an incentive to acquire the viewpoint that is in the service of their interests. Nevertheless, achieving the standpoint of the proletariat remains a difficult task. However, even individuals who, like Marx himself, are not members of the working class are not precluded from this accomplishment.

This account provides the basis for Nancy Hartsock’s hugely influential formulation of a feminist standpoint (1983 and 1997). In Hartsock’s view women occupy a unique social position in patriarchy, defined as a system that organizes the division of reproductive labor by gender. Women’s reproductive labour in creating and sustaining the next generation by giving birth, feeding and nurturing it is essential to the perpetuation of this situation. The system, however, does not serve their interests. Hartsock proposes that we gain a better understanding of the social relations between the genders if we aim to develop theories that would serve the interests of women by revealing the shortcomings of the current system. The arguments for the epistemic privilege of this viewpoint are partly pragmatic. Developing it is more likely to lead to accounts that are of help to change society so that the needs of all of its members are served more fairly. But they are also partly epistemic. Standpoints that aim to serve the interests of those who do not benefit from the current system are less likely to be distorted by self-serving interests. Hence, empirically adequate theories about gender relations are more likely to be formulated if one carries out inquiries whilst bearing in mind the interests of those who are in a subordinate position.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Once the view is explicated in these terms it becomes clear why in response to her critics Hartsock often pointed out that hers was an account of a feminist standpoint rather than a womanly one (Hartsock, 1983 and 1997). In this regard her views have been largely misunderstood by her earliest feminist critics who argue that standpoint is guilty of essentialism and that it assumes that the views of members of oppressed groups should be automatically granted epistemic privileges.[[14]](#footnote-14) It is however a misunderstanding which has been facilitated (and partly warranted) by the second half of Hartsock’s original paper where she invokes object relation psychoanalytic theory apparently to argue for the existence of a distinctive cognitive style that pertains to women under patriarchy. This aspect of the account largely disappears in Hartsock’s later writings but it is responsible for giving the impression that a standpoint is a point of view that all actual women share because they are women.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Among these critics are Spelman (1990) and hooks (1982), who have argued convincingly that there are no experiences that are shared by all women since one cannot neatly separate out in one’s experience those aspects which follow from one’s gender from those that pertains to one’s race, ethnicity or sexual orientation. In response feminist standpoint epistemologists have, accepting the criticism, endorsed pluralism about standpoints. They have acknowledged that there is no single feminist standpoint but a plurality of standpoints each related to a different social location.[[16]](#footnote-16) This approach is generally associated with the work of Patricia Hill Collins (1991) who, while developing the notion of a black feminist standpoint, has also provided a novel rationale for the epistemic privilege of the view from the margins.

Collins convincingly argues that at least some individuals who belong to marginalized groups are capable of acquiring a dual focus or bifurcated consciousness. They are able to observe social reality both from the point of view of the privileged and from that of the underprivileged. This is an ability which is born out of necessity. The subordinated need to know how the privileged think in order to outwit them so as to deflect the worst consequences of oppression and discrimination. They also know how things look from the perspective of the marginalized because they have first-hand experience of occupying this position. The dual point of view of outsider-within confers an epistemic advantage on those who are capable of adopting it, because by aggregating the insights offered by two perspectives, it is less partial than each of them individually (Collins, 1991, p. 11-13).[[17]](#footnote-17)

More recently, Alison Wylie (2003) has, building on the work of Collins and earlier standpoint theorists, developed arguments for the inversion thesis which bring standpoint closer to feminist empiricism. In her view we should not be surprised to learn that members of subordinated groups have developed, because of their social and economic positions, cognitive skills and heuristics which are at variance with those deployed by more privileged members of society. Further, she points out, it is possible that for some kind of inquiries and in some local contexts the skills developed by the underprivileged produce true beliefs and genuine understanding more reliably than those nurtured in privileged individuals. The issue, as Wylie also notes, is empirical and can only be addressed on a problem by problem basis as a ‘second-order application of our best available research tools to the business of knowledge production itself’ (2003: 40).[[18]](#footnote-18)

I have claimed above that standpoint theory has been often misunderstood by its feminist critics. Some of the objections that have been levelled against it by less sympathetic opponents have been even cruder. Perhaps the most common among these, which has been levelled against feminist epistemology as a whole, is the claim that it endorses feminist propaganda, disregards the objectivity of science, and simply wishes to silence those whose values feminists oppose (Haack,1997; Pinnick et al. 2003). These criticisms have been ably rebutted on behalf of feminist empiricism by Anderson (2002, 2004 and 2015). In her view one must distinguish the impartiality of a theory from its value-neutrality.

The latter pertains to theories that have no value-laden consequences or assumptions. If it is granted, as seems sensible, that the goal of inquiry is to find out truths which are significant rather than trivial and which are not misleading, then good scientific theories cannot be value neutral since values are essential to decide which truths are significant rather than trivial. What can save value-laden theories from the objection that they must lack in objectivity, however, is impartiality.

A theory is accepted on impartial grounds if the only considerations taken into account when deciding on its adoption are whether it exemplifies cognitive values such as simplicity or explanatory power and whether there is sufficient evidence in its support (2002, and 2004). Thus Anderson recommends that we keep issues of truth and of significance distinct. The truth of a theory must be assessed on impartial grounds but its significance is dependent on the values that guide one’s inquiry. Similar defenses have been adopted by those who, like Wylie (2003), think that standpoint has essentially merged with empiricism. In response to the critics Wylie can point out that it is perfectly possible that those who subscribe to some political values rather than to others may as a result of their political commitments be more reliable in their attempts to figure out the truth about some features of social reality. For example, primatologists committed to feminist values have paid attention to the behavior of female apes and by doing so have been able to acquire more reliable information about primate social organizations (Cf. Anderson 1995).

Arguably, however, these defenses may concede too much to standpoint’s opponents. If it is granted, as it is plausible, that standpoint epistemology is limited to assessing theories about the social world, then its focus is on beliefs and assumptions which involve the use of concepts purporting to refer to social kinds. In this context standpoint epistemology can be seen as engaged in an ameliorative project of the sort described by Sally Haslanger (2012). Such a project begins with the awareness that social reality can be categorized in different ways each of which is based on existing shared properties. However, only some of these taxonomies are helpful when one is trying to formulate theories which facilitate the pursuit of political projects. Ameliorative analyses are attempts to formulate new concepts and modify old ones so that they become serviceable for the purpose of formulating theories that are effective to illuminate those aspects of the social world that the underprivileged need to understand and to do so in a manner that makes them readily usable for political action. The notion of an ameliorative analysis thus offers a way of developing further the interpretation of the notion of standpoint which I have favored in this overview. Knowledge claims that constitute a standpoint are socially situated in the sense of relying on a conceptual framework which is adopted because of its predictive and explanatory power but also because of its emancipatory potential. It is a consequence of this view that, contrary to Anderson’s proposal, evidential considerations cannot be sufficiently disentangled from pragmatic ones to allow any assessment of the empirical adequacy of theories to proceed on completely impartial grounds.

An example discussed by Anderson herself may help to clarify the issue. Some social scientists committed to feminist values have conceptualized divorce not as the breaking up of a family but as the separation of the adults’ parental roles from their role as spouses. Conceiving of divorce in these terms has made it possible to think that on some occasions divorce is not the dissipation of a family but the creation of a new two-household family structure. Using this novel categorization of what counts as a family research can be carried out that helps to see when family restructuring is beneficial to vulnerable parties (cf Anderson, 2004). In cases such as this one, it is not possible to distinguish neatly issues of truth from issues of significance since the very concepts in which the theory is formulated are chosen in light of their emancipatory potential.

It may be granted that this response, even when more fully developed, is less likely to convince standpoint non feminist opponents than Anderson’s reply. Nevertheless, it has the advantage of highlighting the fact that standpoint theorists do not share the presupposition, implicitly made by their opponents, that all values are equally just propaganda. Instead, supporters of standpoint are committed to the belief that some values are better than others and that these can be rationally defended.[[19]](#footnote-19)

3. The continued fruitfulness of standpoint

I have argued so far that there are different versions of standpoint theory in the contemporary literature. On some accounts standpoint is of a piece with naturalised epistemology and claims that individuals who occupy underprivileged social locations are likely to have developed more reliable views than dominant individuals about some specific aspects of the social world. On other accounts standpoint is a form of critical theory which asserts that perspectives which are selected for their emancipatory potential also offer a deeper understanding of the nature of power relations in deeply unequal societies (Cf., Rolin, 2009). Either way standpoint has motivated feminist philosophers and critical race theorists to ask novel questions and these have generated burgeoning research programmes.

Two stand out among many: work on epistemic injustice and on the epistemology of ignorance. The first studies how members of subordinated groups can be harmed and wronged in their epistemic capacities. This area of research is based on Miranda Fricker’s account of testimonial and hermeneutical injustices (2007). It has emerged because of a switch of focus when studying epistemic practices to exploring what happens to those who are less powerful when they come into contact with members of dominant groups. The second explores epistemic practices which produce and sustain ignorance of many aspects of social reality (Medina, 2013; Mills, 2007; Tuana, 2004 and 2006). According to this programme the privileged are often ignorant of the facts about their privilege because they have an incentive not to know the truth about themselves. This programme too can be traced back to some of the themes that standpoint theorists have explored since the inception of this approach.

In summary, standpoint epistemology has all the trademarks of a productive research programme in the social epistemology of the social sciences. It has been refined and modified in response to pertinent criticisms and it continues to generate new hypotheses and research questions that lead to fruitful discoveries.[[20]](#footnote-20)

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Further Reading:

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1. See Anderson (2015) for an excellent overview. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For this approach see Smith (1987) and, arguably, Rolin (2009). For a critic, see Walby (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hence, standpoint theorists are usually interested in what people claim to know, how they go about discovering things, how they justify their beliefs. They often use the term ‘knowledge’ non-factively to include both knowledge and other items which are put forward as knowledge (even though they may be false). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. But as Anderson (2015: 69) notes in recent years the three views have largely converged into hybrid versions. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Contemporary feminist empiricists also subscribe to this thesis. In Harding’s (1983) original characterization empiricists would limit the thesis application to the context of discovery claiming that social location may make a difference to the range of claims one puts forward as true, but does not affect their actual justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hence, the expression ‘social location’ is used capaciously to include social role, subjective identification with a social group or objectively characterised membership of such a group. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Walby’s main objection to standpoint in her (2001) is that these questions when they have been scientifically investigated have generally received a negative answer. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. There might be robust correlations between having the same interests and occupying the same social role or being assigned membership to the same social group. The correlations between subjective identification and interests may be weaker. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Here and in what follows I use the expression ‘knowledge claim’ as a shorthand for knowledge attributions in general. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Recently, and following Harding (1991) the claim that standpoint is an achievement has been understood to entail self-reflective awareness of one’s own point of view and of the effects that social locations have on it. See also Wylie (2003). In my view this transforms standpoint into an exclusively intellectual kind of achievement and forgets that in its original formulation it was intended to be also an example of political emancipatory success. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This is a complex issue. Once it is granted that the goal of inquiry is not simply to maximise true beliefs and minimise false ones, but that what matters is the maximisation of true beliefs that are significant (rather than trivial), it becomes hard to disentangle purely epistemic from partly pragmatic considerations. Anderson (2002 and 2004) has offered one of the best attempts to keep them distinct. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The idea that dominant individuals are committed to remaining ignorant about the reality of unearned privilege is one the central insights of the epistemologies of ignorance (Cf. Mills, 2007; Tuana, 2004 and 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. I have formulated this claim in terms of the factors that affect the formulation of theories (context of discovery) rather than factors that affect their justification (context of justification). I have done so because the claim is most obviously true in this interpretation. But it can also be defended in the case of justification. One way of doing so is to argue that theories whose conceptual framework is value-laden may be more empirically adequate or have more explanatory power of rival theories which are laden with a different set of values. See Anderson (2002) for a similar claim. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Some of these charges, however, are not groundless. Although Hartsock does not presuppose that all women share the same experiences of womanhood she assumes that there is a significant number of interests which they all share. This is, as critics have pointed out, at least debatable. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For reasons of space I cannot explore this facet of standpoint but it figures prominently in the work of several feminist philosophers of science and epistemologists. See for example Keller (1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. In this manner standpoint has become closer to postmodernism since the latter has always been associated with the view that there are plural situated knowledges (Haraway, 1991). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. In addition, one may say that the point of view of the insider-outsider is epistemically advantaged because these individuals have no vested interest in the continuation of the system of social relations that marginalise them whilst having an incentive to understand it fully so as to minimise its negative impact on their lives. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. An assessment of whether despite recent rapprochements disagreements between and standpoint and feminist empiricism persist is beyond the scope of this overview. See Intemann (2010) for an excellent evaluation of these issues. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. There is also another common objection to standpoint according to which it is a theory that promotes women’s ways of knowing. Although early cases of reliance on psychoanalytic theory may be plausibly read as developing this theme, as I have shown in this text these tendencies are not present in contemporary accounts of standpoint theory. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I would like to thank Miranda Fricker for her helpful comments on an earlier draft. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)