

What is Standpoint Epistemology?

Epistemology is the study of knowledge, *episteme*. Plausibly, there are many kinds of knowledge. You can know *that* the cat is on the mat. You can know *that* water is H₂O. You can know *how* to knit or *how* to drive a car. You can know *your mother* or *your best friend*. Philosophical inquiry into knowledge in the “Western” tradition has focused on ‘knowing that’, or ‘propositional knowledge’. But even considering just ‘knowing that,’ there are still many kinds of cases. I can have knowledge of ordinary states of affairs, e.g., that the cat is on the mat. I can have scientific knowledge, e.g., that water is H₂O. I can also have knowledge of my own my attitudes and perceptual states, e.g., I can know that I’m a bit chilly right now and want a sweater. And I can know mathematical and logical truths.

I’m going to describe two approaches to standpoint epistemology, but it will help to start with a rough characterization of what standpoint epistemology is responding to.

On most philosophical accounts, one’s beliefs count as knowledge only if they are justified, whether by reason or evidence or in some other way. When it comes to scientific knowledge, there are certain specific requirements that this justification seems to need to meet. Scientific knowledge is not just knowledge of particular facts, like whether the post office is open today. Science provides more general knowledge and aims to serve as a common ground for our efforts to coordinate. If we want to provide clean potable water to a city or town, we need to have knowledge of the local geography, thermodynamics, mechanical engineering, and human health needs. Just guessing, or relying on unwarranted belief, is not going to be good enough to make a system of this kind work reliably and serve our ends. Moreover, in a democratic society, the basis for actions that affect the collective should be, at least in principle, transparent. Knowledge is a source of power, so we shouldn’t rely on arcane sources of information. To avoid manipulation of the population, we should rely on claims that can be tested and verified; to achieve this, we need systematic methods that are public and replicable. In other words, scientific justification needs to be public and replicable.

Historically, such methods have required, among other things, *aperspectivity*. That is, the evidence that we use to support a claim should be, in principle, available to anyone. Of course, when we are talking about sophisticated thermodynamics, not everyone is going to be able to understand the reasoning behind the model in question. Nevertheless, the point is that sophisticated scientific claims are the result of a combination of careful observation and reasoning, and although it may take training to have access to the observations and perform the complex reasoning, there is nothing hidden in the process. It is public and again, *in principle*, open to anyone.

Now, finally, to standpoint epistemology. As I mentioned, there are two, quite different, uses of the term “standpoint epistemology.” One use of the term arises within the tradition of feminist empiricism. In this tradition, a standpoint is understood in terms of *situatedness* and challenges *aperspectivity*. Another use of the term arises in critical theory. In the critical tradition, a standpoint is understood as a *critical vantage point* and challenges ideology. Interestingly, these different uses can align but can also be in tension.

Let’s start with situatedness. Note that the commitment to *aperspectivity* places rather strict limits on what can count as evidence for a scientific claim. Evidence is there for anyone to encounter or collect. Feminists, critical race theorists, and others, argue that what evidence is available to an individual depends, in important ways, on their social position. More specifically, they argue that those who are oppressed have access to

information about the world that those who have not experienced oppression lack direct access to (though they may come to know the information through testimony). This access may arise from a variety of factors, for example, the oppressed may be concerned with very different questions, they may have developed sophisticated know how for noticing things, their emotional stance towards the object of inquiry may reveal important information; they may have distinctive experiences that aren't broadly available. Moreover, especially in the social sciences, access to information about a phenomenon may depend on how the researcher is perceived. So, for example, in racially sensitive ethnographic work, a White person cannot gain access to the same information as a Black person.

A wonderful example of situatedness was published by Sarah Hrdy in "Empathy, Polyandry, and the Myth of the Coy Female" (Hrdy, 1986). Hrdy considers "the presumption basic to many contemporary versions of sexual selection theory that males are ardent and sexually indiscriminating while females are sexually restrained and reluctant to mate" (Hrdy 1986: 132). This claim, at the time she was writing, had been entrenched in evolutionary biology "for three decades" (Hrdy 1986: 132), in spite of available evidence to the contrary. The paper argues against this presumption; but more importantly for our purposes, she asks why the presumption was so entrenched. Hrdy argues, "New or better data alone did not change the framework in which we asked questions; rather, I believe, something motivational changed. Among the factors leading to a reevaluation of the myth of the coy female, the role of women researchers must be considered" (Hrdy 1986:147). She maintains that women doing fieldwork in primatology were more apt to track the behavior of female primates and learned facts about their behavior that had been obscured or downplayed by men in the field; as the number of women increased, the evidence became much more compelling that the "coy female" hypothesis was unjustified.

Hrdy considers a number of reasons why women, in particular, might have had different perspectives on the phenomena, and doesn't draw a firm conclusion. One she takes seriously, however, is whether women researchers' identification with female primates (and men with male primates) plays a role. She complicates this hypothesis, however, noting that

identification with same-sex individuals in another primate species may not be quite so simple as it sounds. This history of primatology suggests that the nature of this identification was changing over time as the self-image of women researchers also changed. In my own case, changes in the way I looked at female langurs were linked to a dawning awareness of male-female power relationships in my own life, though "dawning" perhaps overstates the case. (Hrdy 1986:151)

What does this example teach us about aperspectivity? On the face of it, it suggests that the gendered social position of researchers situates them differently with respect to the phenomena they are studying, and *perspectival inquiry can be important for gaining knowledge of a phenomenon*. The researchers gained important information by *identifying with* the female primates, and this knowledge was not directly available to those who were unable to take up this stance.

But does this example show that the evidence that undermined the "coy female" theory was unavailable even *in principle* to men who couldn't identify with the female primates? That's a hard question that I can't answer here. Of course it depends on what you mean by *in principle*. In my experience, there are many individuals socially positioned as men who are incapable of identifying with women, of understanding women's lives and concerns, of taking up a stance that even recognizes women as full persons. But is there a possible world in

which those individuals might have gained the skills to do that? And would that world be one in which the social positions of men and women are as they are in our world? I think it is doubtful.

So what does this suggest for scientific methodology? Helen Longino has offered an answer to this in her *Science as Social Knowledge* (Longino, 1990). She argues that scientific knowledge is not, in the central cases, individual belief (A knows that p), but instead is knowledge held by a community. This is because justification for a scientific claim is collective: only *together* do we have good evidence for the claim. She sets out a number of principles that must be met by a community in order for the claims they make to count as scientific knowledge; these include a requirement for diversity of inquirers and criteria for incorporating observations and reasoning that aren't directly available to everyone. This is a way of achieving objectivity and satisfying the need for an epistemic common ground, without assuming aperspectivity.

So far, I haven't yet said much about the critical approach to standpoint epistemology and I will have to make do with pointing you in a direction for further inquiry. The critical theorist does not assume that situated perspectives, even if they provide us evidence for a claim, are adequate to provide the basis for coordination on terms we all have reason to accept.

Notice that in Hrdy's narrative about the "coy female" hypothesis, women had been doing fieldwork in primatology for some time, and not all of them questioned the presumption. It took something other than just being a woman to raise questions about the model. Presumably, women who themselves were expected to play the role of "coy females," especially where this role was naturalized, would not necessarily question it. It would seem as common sense to them as it would to the men in the field. Hrdy reflects on this: "In my own case, changes in the way I looked at female langurs were linked to a dawning awareness of male-female power relationships in my own life..." Hrdy seems to be suggesting that it wasn't just her situatedness as a woman that enabled her to challenge the presumption, but her perspective *as a feminist*.

Corresponding to this insight, some have distinguished a *woman's standpoint* (the situatedness in the social position of women), from a *feminist standpoint* (the critical perspective on one's gendered situatedness). The feminist standpoint, according to the critical theorist, doesn't just aim to describe "how things are," but also provides us with insight into the ways in which our current social formation – and the ideology that supports it – is flawed. There are two reasons why a feminist standpoint may be valuable.

First, as social subjects, we may form epistemic habits that are useful for life within a particular social position. These habits can go far in combatting biases that those from different positions bring to the phenomena. For example, women scientists may be more attentive to female langurs and notice ways in which they deal with their mates and infants. However, Hrdy points out that her feminist alarm bells went off when investigating the coyness hypothesis (that "males are ardent and sexually indiscriminating while females are sexually restrained and reluctant to mate.") Isn't this claim strikingly similar to a bit of ideology about human sexuality that feminists had recently debunked? To ask this question is not to assume the answer. Empirical investigation is required. But a critical feminist perspective enabled Hrdy to identify and challenge background assumptions about gender and sexuality within primatology. And she turned out to be right.

Second, ideology has a tendency to "make itself true." For example, if women rather than men are expected to do the work of caregiving – of the young, elderly, sick, and disabled – then it will generally be true that

women are better caregivers than men. Without questioning the background division of labor, it may come to seem that this capacity for caregiving is natural or just “how things are.” But attention to the force of culture and convention, shows the standard divisions of labor to be far more varied and contingent than previously thought. Again, bringing a critical perspective to the phenomena is not to prejudge the issue. Instead, it opens space for alternative hypotheses and shifts the relevant methods for inquiry from the natural sciences to the social sciences.

Critical standpoints are not simply focused on gender, however, for they attend broadly to the variety of ways in which our background categories and assumptions, i.e., the local ideology, create a reality – of gender binaries, racial divisions, class exploitation, disability marginalization – that even those occupying the subordinate positions often take for granted. If science is to provide us a basis for flourishing collectively in a fair and equal society, it should go beyond accepting perspectivity; it should take a critical stance. We need a science that reveals how and why reality has been formed to entrench hierarchy, and to provide knowledge that grounds resistance.

Works Cited:

Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer, “Empathy, Polyandry, and the Myth of the Coy Female.” In *Feminist Approaches to Science* (ed. Ruth Bleier), Pergamon, pp. 119–146, 1986.

Longino, Helen, *Science as Social Knowledge*, Princeton University Press, 1990.