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**On the Independence of the Social and Situated Dimensions of Scientific Knowledge
from the Notion of Standpoint**

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1. Introduction

The main problem addressed in this paper concerns the notion of standpoint and its relationship to different gendered ways of knowing. On the one hand, we recognise that feminist standpoint epistemologies have some merits that cannot be disregarded; in particular, they rightly stress the importance of the social and situated dimensions of knowledge. On the other hand, we would like to prove that the very notion of standpoint inevitably yields essentialism, with awkward and unwelcome consequences for both epistemology and the philosophy of science. This discussion is closely linked to the idea of a specifically feminine way of knowing. On this point, we believe that deciding whether there is a gendered way of knowing is a purely scientific matter, not a philosophical one. Thus, our aim is to show that it is unnecessary to advocate a feminist standpoint epistemology to defend the social and situated dimension of knowledge. In fact, the notion of situated knowledge is independent from the notion of standpoint, because the latter involves additional features such as epistemic asymmetry, reliability, privilege, and advantage.

In section 2, we will analyse the notion of standpoint to identify its basic and central features. In section 3, we will consider the concept of essentialism as well as some of its detrimental consequences for epistemology and the philosophy of science. In section 4, we will briefly

summarise reasons to believe that feminist standpoint epistemologies actually yield essentialism and thus must be abandoned. Finally, in section 5, we will try to explain why upholding the social and situated dimension of knowledge without endorsing a feminist standpoint epistemology is a feasible option.

2. In search of a precise notion of standpoint

As many scholars have pointed out (Ramazanoglu and Holland 2002, ch. 4), it is not easy to determine a clear, unique, and uncontroversial definition of what a standpoint precisely is. However, we believe that it is possible to select a few useful descriptions and extrapolate from them some common features. For instance, let us consider the following three explanations:

A standpoint is not simply an interested position (interpreted as bias), but is interested in the sense of being engaged. [...] A standpoint [...] carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible. [...] In addition, the concept of a standpoint depends on the assumption that epistemology grows in a complex and contradictory way from material life (Hartsock 1983, p. 285).

Standpoint theorists claim that women's oppression can be turned into an epistemic advantage. Just as, in Marxist theory, consciousness-raising enables the oppressed to understand the structures that subordinate them better than those who benefit from those same structures, so feminist achieved understanding of their marginal position often enables women to know their oppressors and the systems that legitimate them more clearly than the oppressors know themselves (Code 1998, p. 223).

A standpoint [...] is an achievement, the result of analysis by more than one person who, in the first instance, occupy a particular social location. When some of the people in a social location work out an account of the conditions of their lives and of their pre-standpoint understanding of the world, they have developed a standpoint. The standpoint will also include an account of the conditions giving rise to their standpoint itself. [...] A standpoint is 'struggled for', arising when people occupying a subordinate social location engage in political struggle to change the conditions of their lives and so engage in an analysis of these conditions in order to change them (Potter 2007b, p. 239).

Following the above descriptions (see also Collins 2000, p. 24; Harding 1998, p. 150; Potter 2007a, pp. 131-132), it is possible to identify at least three basic tenets intrinsic to the very notion of standpoint:

(a) a standpoint is engaged; it is the result of critical analysis, and it must be struggled for;

(b) a standpoint carries with it an epistemic asymmetry: knowledge possessed by marginalised and subordinate groups is taken to be more reliable than knowledge possessed by dominant ones. In the case of feminist standpoint epistemologies, the marginalised and subordinate group is women, and thus women's knowledge is taken to be more reliable than men's knowledge;

(c) a standpoint is an objective position within a hierarchically structured society; that is, there are some social and/or natural facts concerning a particular group (e.g., its cognitive style, common experiences, work conditions, and so on) that characterise the corresponding standpoint on the natural and/or social world.

Let us analyse these characteristics in detail.

First, a standpoint arises only when people occupying a particular social location within a hierarchically structured society become *conscious* of occupying that location within society. More precisely, the standpoint of a marginalised and subordinate group is the result of *critical analysis by more than one individual* about the particular social and/or natural facts and conditions that produce marginality and subordination within their own hierarchically structured society. Such an understanding must be *struggled for* and represents an achievement for the marginalised and subordinate group in question. Let us consider a patriarchal society as the hierarchically structured society and women as the marginalised and subordinate group. In this situation, the standpoint of women is the result of critical analysis and reflection on what being a woman in a patriarchal system means and what being socially marginalised and subordinate *as women* is like; hence, such a standpoint is an achievement that must be struggled for.

This implies that merely being a (biological) woman is neither necessary nor sufficient to have the standpoint of women. On the one hand, men can adopt the standpoint of women if they recognise and understand the objective position occupied by the group of women within a patriarchal society; that is, if they appreciate those social and/or natural facts about women that characterise their standpoint. On the other hand, it is unfortunately apparent that some women recklessly accept the androcentric values as well as the oppressive and discriminatory ideologies of a patriarchal society and thus fail to adopt the standpoint of women. Similar considerations can be made for the specific case of a woman scientist. Being a woman scientist within an androcentric scientific endeavour is sufficient neither to become reflectively conscious of one's own marginality and subordination nor to understand that this condition can have undesirable and detrimental

consequences on scientific progress and science in general (Keller 1983).

Second, feminist standpoint epistemologists have argued extensively that some deep differences exist between knowledge produced by a marginalised and subordinate group and knowledge produced by a dominant one. In particular, occupying a marginalised and subordinate social location within a hierarchically structured society yields a better epistemic position (a position that is more epistemically reliable), while occupying a dominant social location yields a poorer epistemic position (a position that is less epistemically reliable). This difference in epistemic reliability between marginalised and subordinate groups, on one hand, and dominant groups, on the other, has been ascribed to the asymmetry of their disinterest or interest in maintaining the *status quo* of an oppressive system as well as in failing to understand the world as it really is (Collins 2000; Harding 1986, 1991, 1998, 2008; Hartsock 1983; Smith 1987, 1990). Even if it can be maintained that the issue of how and why certain conditions of marginality and subordination actually yield a better and more reliable epistemic position is an empirical matter (Wylie 2003), it is worth noting that social marginality and subordination alone do not assure the kind of disinterest necessary to hold a better and more reliable epistemic position. This is why a standpoint is understood to be the result of critical analysis. In addition, marginalised and subordinate groups can have a dual vision: because they are subjected to the rules of dominant groups, they have insight into the dominant group's perspective, but at the same time they have direct comprehension of their own point of view on nature and society. Such a dual vision yields a better epistemic position when trying to understand the natural and/or social world as they really are. Therefore, within a society where hierarchically structured organisations are gendered and where women represent the marginalised and subordinate gender (i.e., patriarchy), the standpoint of women is more epistemically reliable than that of men (Hartsock 1983; Rose 1983; Smith 1987). In the specific case of various sciences, the underrepresentation of women in some scientific institutions can lead women scientists to realise not only that scientific research is undertaken with a dominant male perspective but also that this underrepresentation is neither natural nor necessary; rather, it is simply socially contingent and must be overcome.

Finally, it is pivotal to clarify what it really means to consider a standpoint as an *objective* position within a hierarchically structured society. As Sandra Harding points out, 'What the standpoint of any particular group consists in must be determined by empirical observation and theoretical reflection. A standpoint is an objective position in social relations as articulated through one or another theory or discourse' (Harding 1998, p. 150). Understanding a standpoint as an objective position implies that there are social and/or natural facts concerning a particular group (e.g., women) that characterise the corresponding standpoint. Hence, one of the main problems of

feminist standpoint epistemologies is identifying which social and/or natural facts concerning the group of women characterise women's standpoint as such (and confer upon it greater epistemic reliability). According to Potter, for instance, 'regardless of how women and men understand them, many of their *biological processes* and *socially assigned activities* differ' (Potter 2007a, p. 142). Thus, let us begin to analyse biological processes, that is, natural facts.

Although there are obviously many cultural and social aspects of sexed bodies, it is difficult to deny that some biological and natural differences exist between women and men. The most significant differences regard their *reproductive systems*: for example, only women can go through the direct experience of childbirth; thus, they are exposed to some aspects and regularities of the natural and/or social world that are fully and basically inaccessible to men. Hence, it has been argued that women alone may have a personal understanding of those features of the natural and/or social world that are intimately connected to procreation, and for this reason, women have been considered more epistemically reliable than men about these features.¹ For a better understanding, let us focus on childbirth, a complex natural (and social) phenomenon to which women alone have a privileged epistemic access intrinsically unavailable to men, such as the pain that women experience during childbirth.

Regarding natural facts, it has also been pointed out that some *cognitive differences* exist between women and men, differences that may be thought of either as innate (Baron-Cohen 2003) or arising from the different mechanisms of identity formation experienced by male and female children during the early period of their lives (Hartsock 1983). Whether innate or cultural, these (presumed) cognitive differences become more evident in societies that are strongly gender-structured and that therefore impose different life experiences on women and men. For instance, a girl might resent the study of mathematics and logic simply because of the common conviction that girls are not good at mathematics and logic, or a boy might be worried by his tendency to be sensitive simply because of the common conviction that boys are insensitive. Cognitive sciences – if not invalidated by sexist and/or androcentric biases – can play a pivotal role in clarifying the origins of these (presumed) cognitive differences (are they innate or socially constructed?) and their relevance (are they significant or not?).

Turning to socially assigned activities, Nancy Hartsock explicitly writes about them, 'I will suggest that the sexual division of labour forms the basis for such a standpoint [of women] and will argue that on the basis of the structures which define women's activity as contributors to subsistence and as mothers one could begin, though not complete, the construction of such an

¹ Of course, the scope of women's greater reliability is not merely limited to a few natural and/or social aspects directly connected to reproduction.

epistemological tool' (Hartsock 1983, p. 284). Again, engagement in social work and activities such as tending children, caring for the young, the aged, and the sick, performing unpaid domestic work, and so on exposes women to some aspects and regularities of the natural and/or social world that men cannot fully and wholly experience.

3. A note on essentialism

Generally speaking, an essential property of an object is a property that such an object *must* have, a property that it has *necessarily*, that it *could not lack* to be the object it is. Thus, a simple and straightforward characterisation of essentialism is the doctrine that at least some objects have at least some essential properties (Mackie 2006; Robertson 2008).

In relation to feminist theories, the term “essentialism” is often used to refer to the doctrine that ‘the’ group of women has some essential properties that characterise this group as such and, consequently, that its members think, behave, and act alike (or ought to do so). To put it another way, essentialism is the idea that there are some fixed, necessary, natural, universal, and innate characteristics (e.g., cognitive style, feminine nature, and so on) that distinguish the group of women from other groups, such as the group of men. This definition can be extended to include social and/or cultural differences, given that they are still regarded as fixed, necessary, and trans-historical conditions characterising the group of women as such (e.g., work condition, common experiences, and so on).

Some feminists think that essentialism may provide some positive outcomes. If it were possible to identify some essential properties that characterise ‘the’ group of women and if there were one only shared women’s standpoint, then it would be possible to share women’s experiences, to create a distinctive women’s culture, and to ground female solidarity. However, it is not difficult to understand that this essentialism has many awkward and unwelcome consequences. If it were possible to single out the essence of woman, then it would be quite straightforward to annihilate and obscure all the great differences among women: all the members of ‘the’ group of women do (or ought to) think, behave, and act alike. In Mozartian words, the basic idea of essentialism can be encapsulated with the motto, “Cosi fan tutte” (Vassallo 2009a).

At the same time, it is easy to emphasise the many obvious differences among women to create conditions of exclusion or, at least, inferiority. If a certain individual does not exhibit the essential properties characterising ‘the’ group of women as such, then this individual simply is not a woman. In other words, accepting essentialism about women inevitably yields the assumption that certain biological features, psychological traits, social roles, and behaviours necessarily define group membership and gender identity. Thus, it also yields the conversion of any difference into

deviance and creates conditions of exclusion or inferiority. For example, if a woman exhibits a 'feminine' trait, it is considered a virtue, whilst if she exhibits a 'masculine' trait, it is regarded as pathological.

If one accepts the idea that there are some fixed, necessary, natural, universal, and innate characteristics that distinguish the group of women from, for instance, the group of men (e.g., their cognitive style, their feminine/masculine nature, etc.), then one also agrees to recognise essential biological as well as cognitive differences between women and men. This thesis inevitably brings with it the sexist idea that women and men perceive, think, and know differently. More precisely: women are understood as subjective, natural, empathetic, sensitive, and irrational while men are understood as objective, cultural, unfeeling, insensitive, and rational; women perform better than men in tasks regarding memory, linguistic competence, mechanical coordination, and so on, while men perform better than women in tasks regarding motor ability, spatial reasoning, geometrical figures, and so on (Hines 2004). In this sense, we may say that essentialism brings with it the idea that there is a peculiarly feminine way of knowing, different from other genders' ways of knowing.

Although studies have attempted to demonstrate that crucial differences exist between women and men in cognitive styles and ways of knowing (Baron-Cohen 2003; Belenky *et al.* 1986), it should be noted that they are considered dubious and controversial by the majority of scientists. When critically examined, these studies have shown to be irremediably flawed and inconsistent (Brabeck and Larned 1997; Fausto-Sterling 1985; Tavris 1992).² Let us consider, for example, studies regarding women's presumed inability to perform mathematics. More precisely, some researchers have argued extensively that women's performances on mathematical problems and operations are worse than men's performances. In spite of this, it has been persuasively demonstrated that women perform better and the average disparity between women and men disappears when the tested group of women is told that a group of men has already performed very badly at the same task or, in the case of Asian women, that they are being tested as Asian people (who, unlike women, are typically regarded as very good at mathematics). In both cases, women's performances are of a high quality because the tested group of women is not influenced by the prejudiced but widespread stereotype that women are worse than men at mathematics.

It is undeniable that the strictness dictated by essentialism clashes with the countless meanings of 'being a woman' for different individuals (Spelman 1988; Vassallo 2010) – provided that, of course, we succeed in conferring any meaning to 'being a woman'. In other words, what 'being a woman' means can only be understood from a first-person perspective because it must take

² If cognitive sciences were to reveal the existence of real and relevant cognitive differences between women and men, it would not be reasonable to ignore this evidence and continue to affirm the sameness of their cognitive styles.

into account one's own personal history, age, cultural background, race, religion, sexual orientation, social class, and so on (Garavaso and Vassallo 2007; Vassallo 2009a, 2009b). Essentialism, on the contrary, forces its defenders to reject, conceal, and even suppress all differences among women and to suppose that all women are subjected to the same prejudices, discriminations, and intolerances (De Gregorio and Vassallo 2011; Vassallo 2011b).

In summary, we have briefly shown that essentialism has awkward and unwelcome consequences for both epistemology and the philosophy of science. Thus, it should be rejected without hesitation. For the same reasons, we believe that all theories that directly or indirectly, explicitly or implicitly, or consciously or unconsciously yield essentialism (or its awkward and unwelcome consequences) should be discarded as well. What about feminist standpoint epistemologies? What is their actual relationship with essentialism?

4. Some reasons why feminist standpoint epistemologies yield essentialism

Some feminist standpoint epistemologists, such as Nancy Hartsock, somewhat reluctantly concede that the very notion of standpoint yields essentialism: 'I recognize that the effort to uncover a feminist standpoint assumes that there are some things common to all women's lives in Western class societies' (Hartsock 1983, p. 290). Conversely, other scholars, such as Sandra Harding, explicitly try to dismiss essentialism without abandoning the notions of standpoint or feminist standpoint epistemologies (Harding 1998; see also Wylie 2003).

We have argued extensively about the impossibility for feminist standpoint epistemologies to avoid the charge of essentialism (Amoretti and Vassallo 2010a, 2011), but we believe that some basic points still need to be clarified. To understand why feminist standpoint epistemologies inevitably yield essentialism, it is useful to summarise some of their central tenets: (i) a standpoint is an objective position (within a hierarchically structured society) that depends on some social and/or natural facts about the location of the corresponding group; (ii) a standpoint is the result of critical analysis *by more than one individual* belonging to a particular group about the social and/or natural facts that marginalise and subordinate such a group and make it more epistemically reliable than others; (iii) some social positions, and thus some social groups and their corresponding standpoints, are more epistemically reliable than others; (iv) in the specific case of women, because their group occupies a particular social position that is marginalised and subordinate in a patriarchal society, their knowledge is more epistemically reliable (privileged or advantaged) than that of others.

We find that the basic problem for feminist standpoint epistemologies arises when we reflect on the notion of epistemic privilege or advantage: that is, the idea that certain (marginalised and

subordinate) groups and their corresponding standpoints are more epistemically reliable than other (dominant) groups. To ground the notion of epistemic privilege or advantage, it is necessary to refer to some social and/or natural facts concerning the marginalised and subordinate groups in question (e.g., cognitive style, common experiences, work conditions, and so on) and explain why those facts bring with them a better epistemic position. Hence, to answer this question of why the standpoint of women is more epistemically reliable than that of men, one must refer to social and/or natural facts concerning women, such as their cognitive style, their common experiences, their particular work conditions, and so on. In this way, group membership (being a woman) is rigidly defined by the very social and/or natural facts that ground its epistemic privilege or advantage. To put it another way, the social and/or natural facts that ground the epistemic privilege or advantage of the group of women also single out the essence of woman.

Of course, claiming that men can adopt the standpoint of women is not sufficient to reject essentialism; the group of women would continue to be defined by those social and/or natural facts that ground its epistemic privilege or advantage. Thus, it would still be possible to single out the essence of woman.

Nor is it promising to divide the group of women into transversal subgroups that intersect culture, race, social class, sexual preference, personal history, religion, age, etc., thus admitting the existence of various transversal women's standpoints, such as black, Latina, lower class, lesbian, etc. (Collins 2000; Lugones and Spelman 1986). In fact, no matter how a transversal social group is defined, in order to realize and justify why the corresponding standpoint is more epistemically reliable than others one must refer to some social and/or natural facts concerning the transversal social group in question. Again, group membership (being a black woman, a Latina woman, a lower-class woman, a lesbian, and so on) is rigidly defined by those very social and/or natural facts that ground its epistemic privilege or advantage. Obviously, essentialism and its problematic consequences still exist.

Even attempting to deny the existence of any fixed membership and gender identity criteria for the group of women is unproductive. To grant that the standpoint of women is more epistemically reliable than the standpoints of others, one must refer to some social and/or natural facts concerning women themselves. To ground any epistemic privilege or advantage, these facts must be valorised, generalised, and idealised. Thus, they must be considered normative requirements that inevitably convert any difference into deviance and create conditions of exclusion (Bar On 2003). In other words, we may be able to discard essentialism, but not its undesirable consequences. Of course, this is not a satisfying result.

Finally, turning our attention to the epistemic value of the experience of marginalised and

subordinate *people* (i.e., particular members of a marginalised group) without making any substantial claims about marginalised and subordinate *groups* (Harding 1998) is simply to abandon the very notion of standpoint and, with it, any feminist standpoint epistemology. In fact, we have stressed that a standpoint is the result of critical analysis *by more than one individual* belonging to a particular group about the social and/or natural facts that make such a group marginalised, subordinate, and thus more epistemically reliable than others. Thus, if we renounce the characterisation of women as a group (either homogeneous or fragmented), then the notion of standpoint is no longer useful.

Since all of these problems emerge when we reflect on the implications of the notion of epistemic privilege or advantage, an alternative solution would be to reject any such notion. Unfortunately, this implies that all social groups must be considered equally epistemically reliable, and their knowledge of the world must be at the same level. Thus, the notion of standpoint becomes weak or even useless. Again, it is clear that there is no longer a reason to adopt a feminist standpoint epistemology.

5. Sociality and situatedness of scientific knowledge without standpoints: is it possible?

Thus far, we have argued not only that essentialism is detrimental for epistemology, philosophies of science, and science itself, but also that feminist standpoint epistemologies inevitably yield essentialism (or, at least, its problematic consequences). Abandoning a feminist standpoint epistemology, then, seems to present the best solution. However, things are not so straightforward. Feminist standpoint epistemologies have some merits that are difficult to disregard (Anderson 2010).

Feminist standpoint epistemologies correctly emphasise that knowledge is *situated*: our understanding of the natural and/or social world partially depends on our specific perspective. More precisely, these epistemologies underlie the relevance of our particular social location (our specific ‘situation’ or ‘life context’) in shaping not only our epistemic point of view as subjects of knowledge but also our objects of knowledge. In other words, they point out that the dichotomy between subject and object is overcome because the same social forces that shape agents of knowledge also shape their own objects of knowledge. By overcoming the dichotomy between subject and object, it is possible to represent the natural and/or social world in a way that is neither affected by particular interests and prejudices nor shaped by androcentric metaphors and conceptualisations of nature and society.

Moreover, feminist standpoint epistemologies rightly hold that there is no single epistemic subject able to produce knowledge independently of other epistemic subjects, and thus they rightly

stress the pivotal role of the notions of *intersubjectivity*, *testimony*, and *epistemic dependence*. This is evident in everyday life as well as in scientific discoveries: new hypotheses and/or scientific theories become knowledge only after they are tested, evaluated, and legitimated by a community of scientists—that is, intersubjectively. It is the scientific community (or one of its subgroups) that takes up a new hypothesis and attributes to it the status of knowledge.

Finally, the standpoint of women can be a useful resource for the sciences for at least three reasons (Potter 2007a, pp. 148-151). First, if we assume the standpoint of women, we may be able to identify new scientific problems and new research agendas that differ radically from those in dominant androcentric frameworks. To put it another way, adopting the standpoint of women may enrich the context of discovery because adopting a different perspective on the natural and/or social world may lead us to detect novel problems and facts that were previously unseen and unconsidered. Second, because women have no interest in defending a distorted (sexist and androcentric) description of the world, it would be easier for women to find new experiments to test and attempt to falsify scientific theories. That is to say, the standpoint of women can play a pivotal role in the justification for producing new knowledge or for identifying justified hypotheses, theories, and accounts of nature and society that are ‘less false’ and less distorted than those produced by dominant groups. Third, the standpoint of women may contribute to ensuring the *strong objectivity* of the sciences (Harding 1991, 1993). To obtain objective results (that is, results not biased by particular interests, prejudices, personal values, and so forth), the scientific community normally agrees to adopt particular methods and standards. However, those methods and standards may be considered too weak. Because most scientists are socially dominant men, their own methods and standards are not able to unmask the sexist and androcentric interests, prejudices, and values that are widespread and pervasive within the scientific community itself. Adopting the standpoint of women may contribute to revealing and unmasking the (perhaps unconscious, but widely held) sexist and androcentric biases and thus to assuring the *strong objectivity* of the sciences. These biases include, for example, biological research that scientifically strengthens sexist and androcentric stereotypes and behaviours through distorted presumptions about women’s and men’s ‘different sexual natures’ as well as cognitive psychological research that scientifically strengthens sexist and androcentric stereotypes and behaviours through distorted presumptions about women’s and men’s ‘different cognitive natures’. Unmasking these biases can help us to increase and assess the objectivity of scientific research and to deepen the opportunities to understand the natural and/or social world. Moreover, women have the kind of dual vision that yields a better epistemic position on both the natural and social world and allows them to critically analyse the dominant framework in a way that is inaccessible to the group of male scientists. Hence,

women's standpoint can contribute to unmasking methods, models, metaphors, and discursive resources that, when they are androcentric and immersed in cultural ideals of masculinity, can limit research and compromise a genuine understanding of nature.

Given all the above considerations, to evaluate whether rejecting the very notion of standpoint may be a promising solution for (feminist) epistemologies, one should answer the following question: Would it be possible to retain the merits of feminist standpoint epistemologies while renouncing the very notion of standpoint? We believe that the answer to this question should be 'yes'.

At the outset, we do not need to theorise the notion of standpoint to maintain that our knowledge of the natural and/or social world is socially situated. The notion of situated knowledge is independent from that of standpoint because the latter involves additional features such as epistemic asymmetry, reliability, privilege, and advantage. Thus, we do not need to belong to a specific standpoint to have a particular perspective on the natural and/or social world and, consequently, to have perspectival biases (Antony 1993; Campbell 1998, 2001; Longino 1989, 2001, 2006; Nelson 1990). Moreover, to recognise the social dimension of knowledge (including scientific knowledge) and to evaluate the crucial and widespread role of epistemic dependence, it would be sufficient to analyse (i) the centrality of testimony as a source of knowledge and (ii) our actual scientific practice. On the one hand, if we disregard testimony as a source of knowledge, we would lose a great part of what we actually know. On the other hand, if we examine how new scientific hypotheses and/or theories are produced, tested, and eventually accepted and justified, we see that almost all serious scientific research is pursued by large teams of scientists with a huge variety of expertise (Amoretti and Vassallo 2010b; Coady 1992; Hardwig 1985; Vassallo 2011a).

To conclude, if our aim is to make it easier to identify new scientific problems and research agendas as well as new ways to test a given scientific hypothesis and/or theory, we do not need the notion of standpoint at all. We only need to democratise the various sciences and improve the interactions within and across scientific communities, thus allowing people with different cultural traditions, social backgrounds, and personal skills to cooperate effectively in a common scientific enterprise (Anderson 1995a, 1995b; Longino 1990, 2001).³ In addition to the democratisation of the sciences, their pluralism would be the best tool for ensuring their strong objectivity; there is no need to suppose that some perspectives are more reliable, privileged or advantaged than others (as feminist standpoint epistemologies of the sciences do), but it is sufficient to recognise the epistemic authority of every single perspective (Janack 1997). In fact, the presence of various, even conflicting, perspectives on the natural and/or social world improves critical scrutiny, contributes to

³ Here, we intend the democratisation of the scientific enterprise, not the epistemic position of the subjects.

recognising and unmasking scientists' sexist and androcentric biases, and may eventually yield the strong objectivity of the sciences (Amoretti 2010). As a consequence of the above considerations, it is worth noting that recognising the epistemic authority of different scientific enquirers (i.e., the importance of epistemic inclusion) becomes not just a moral but also an epistemic matter.

6. Conclusions

We have analysed the notions of standpoint (section 2) and essentialism (section 3) and concluded that essentialism has several problematic consequences for epistemology and the philosophy of science. For instance, in the absence of scientific data, essentialism inevitably brings with it the sexist idea that women perceive, think, and know in a particular way that differs from that of other genders. We have shown that there are good reasons for recognising that feminist standpoint epistemologies actually yield essentialism (or at least its consequences) and thus provide evidence for rejecting both of them (section 4). Yet we argued that feminist standpoint epistemologies do contain a significant element, namely a stress on the importance of the social and situated dimensions of knowledge. Crucially, however, the notion of situated knowledge is independent of that of standpoint because the latter involves additional features such as epistemic asymmetry, reliability, privilege, and advantage (section 5). Thus, we may retain all of the merits of feminist standpoint epistemologies while renouncing the very notion of standpoint, and thus without being committed to essentialism. As a result of this argument, we have stressed (especially in part 3) that whether there is a specifically feminine (or, more generally, gendered) way of knowing is purely a scientific matter, not a philosophical one.⁴

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⁴ M. Cristina Amoretti gratefully acknowledges financial support for her research from the European Grant POSDRU/89/1.5/S/63663.

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