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Do Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies of the Sciences Answer the Charge of Essentialism?

by M. Cristina Amoretti¹ and Nicla Vassallo²

¹ University of Genoa, Dept. of Philosophy,
Via Balbi 4, 16126 Genoa, Italy
cristina.amoretti@unige.it

² University of Genoa, Dept. of Philosophy,
Via Balbi 4, 16126 Genoa, Italy
nicla.vassallo@unige.it

Abstract

This paper has a two-fold goal: we wish to stress not only some general merits of feminist standpoint epistemologies of the sciences, but also the intrinsic flaws within the very notion of standpoint. Feminist standpoint epistemologists face a dilemma: if they hold the epistemic privilege or advantage of the women's standpoint, they need to ground it in some biological or social facts, and thus embrace essentialism. Alternatively, all standpoints must be considered equally privileged or advantaged. We believe that neither option is valuable and that no feminist standpoint epistemology of sciences can be endorsed.

Keywords

Essentialism; feminist epistemologies; scientific knowledge; standpoint epistemologies

1. What is a standpoint?

The notion of standpoint is of great importance among feminist epistemologies of the sciences, and, of course, different ways of grounding any particular standpoint theory are available. The result is that a great many standpoint epistemologies and epistemologies of the sciences variously characterize what a standpoint precisely is. Nevertheless, even if no unique, clear definition of standpoint exists, some useful and key descriptions of it have been stated. Let us consider the following three:

“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” (Hartsock 1983, p. 285).

“The standpoint of some particular marginalized group can point the way to less partial and distorted conceptual frameworks, methods, rules, and procedures of inquiry. 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).

“A standpoint is an achievement, the result of analysis by more than one person who, in the first instance, occupy a particular location in a political order. ... A standpoint is not the same as a viewpoint or a perspective, for any group of people occupying a common social location may unreflectively hold a point of view or perspective. On the contrary, a standpoint arises 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. Thus, a standpoint is an achievement that is struggled for” (Potter 2007a, pp. 131-132).

Following the above descriptions, we can say that (a) a standpoint is engaged, (b) it is the result of critical analysis, and (c) it must be struggled for. But we can also say that a standpoint carries with it an epistemic asymmetry: knowledge of subordinate and marginalized groups is more reliable than knowledge of dominant ones. Furthermore, a standpoint is an objective position within a hierarchically structured society. In other words, there are some natural features or social facts (e.g., cognitive style, common experiences, work conditions) that characterize a particular standpoint on physical and social nature. Let us be clearer about these pivotal common features.

To begin with, a standpoint arises only when people occupying a particular social location become conscious of occupying that very location within the society. More precisely, the standpoint of a marginalized and subordinate group is the result of critical analysis, made by more than one human being, about the particular social facts and conditions that produce marginality and subordination within a hierarchically structured society. Such an understanding must be struggled for and represents an achievement for the marginalized and subordinate group. If we consider a patriarchy, the standpoint of women is an achievement that is struggled for, the result of critical reflection on what being a woman in a patriarchal system means and on what being socially marginalized

and subordinate as women is like.¹ The same thing can be said for a woman scientist. Being a woman scientist is sufficient neither to become conscious of one's own marginality and subordination, nor to understand that that can have undesirable consequences on scientific progresses. For example, critical analysis and reflection are required to appreciate how scientific progress would have proceeded more rapidly if the pioneering work of Barbara McClintock on genetic transposition had been immediately incorporated into mainstream biology (see Keller 1983).

Second, some differences exist between knowledge produced by a marginalized and subordinate group and knowledge produced by a dominant one. In particular, occupying a marginalized and subordinate social location yields to a better epistemic position, while occupying a dominant social location yields to a worse epistemic position. This difference is due to the asymmetry of interest/disinterest in maintaining the status quo of an oppressive system. Of course, social subordination and marginality alone do not assure the kind of disinterest needed to hold a better epistemic position. This is why a standpoint is conceived as the result of critical analysis about those particular social and natural facts that produce not only marginality and subordination, but also more epistemic reliability.²

The idea of attributing epistemic privilege in function to marginality and subordination is not new at all; rather, it descends from Hegel and has been developed by Marx, Engels and Lukacs. Although it might seem that Marxism has to do only with division of labor, whereas standpoint theories are concerned with the so-called "division of the sexes," the affinity with Marxism becomes evident when we try to clarify why a marginalized and subordinate group should be more epistemically reliable than a dominant one (see, for example, Hartsock 1983, Rose 1983, Smith 1988). We have mentioned that knowledge produced by dominant groups is less epistemically reliable, because these groups are interested in keeping the status quo and thereby in failing to recognize that their own set of beliefs may misrepresent or distort the world. Conversely, knowledge produced by marginalized or subordinate groups is more epistemically reliable because those groups are interested in understanding the world as it really is. In addition, marginalized or subordinate groups can actually have a dual vision: since they are subjected to the rules of dominant groups, they have an insight into the dominant groups' perspective, but at the same time they have a direct comprehension of their own point of view on nature and society. Such a dual vision yields to a better epistemic position when we are trying to understand and to know both the natural and social world as they really are. Therefore, within a society where hierarchically structured organizations are gendered, and where women represent the marginalized and subordinate gender (i.e., patriarchy), the standpoint of women is more epistemically reliable than that of men. For example, the underrepresentation of women

¹ This implies that simply being a woman is neither necessary nor sufficient to have the standpoint of a woman. On the one hand, men can adopt the standpoint of women, too; on the other hand, some women recklessly accept androcentric values and oppressive ideologies, and thus do not adopt a feminist standpoint. It should also be noted that emphasizing the necessity to hold and exploit special critical abilities might prevent some women – for instance those lacking a sufficient education – from achieving the women's standpoint.

² But, at the same time, it can be maintained that it is an empirical matter how and why certain conditions of marginality and subordination yield to a better and more reliable epistemic position (see, for example, Wylie 2003).

in some actual scientific institutions can lead women scientists to realize not only that scientific research might be undertaken under a dominant masculine perspective, but also that this underrepresentation is neither natural nor necessary; rather, it is simply socially contingent and must be overcome.³

Finally, it has been argued that “regardless of how women and men understand them, many of their biological processes and socially assigned activities differ” (Potter 2007a, p. 142). Although there are many cultural and social aspects of sexed bodies, it is not easy to deny that biological differences exist between women and men. The most significant differences regard reproductive systems: women alone can go through the experience of reproduction and thus they are clearly exposed to some aspects and regularities of nature in ways inaccessible to men. Hence, only women may have a personal understanding of those aspects of the natural and social world that are intimately connected to procreation. For example, childbirth is a complex natural and social phenomenon to which women have a privileged epistemic access, a unique access precluded to men, such as the pain that women experience during childbirth. (Of course, this is not to say that childbirth must be a study field reserved for women, or that sciences such as gender medicine – if not invalidated by sexist and/or androcentric biases – cannot contribute to a better theoretic and practical understanding of it.)

It can also be said that some cognitive differences occur between women and men that may be thought of either as innate (see, for example, Baron-Cohen 2003) or due to the different mechanisms of identity-formation faced by male and female children during the first period of their lives (see, for example, Hartsock 1987). Whether innate or social, these (presumed) cognitive differences surely become more evident in societies that are strongly gender-structured and that therefore impose different life experiences on women and men, respectively. Let us consider how a girl might experience the study of math (simply because of the common conviction that girls are not good in math) compared to how a boy might experience the tendency to be sensitive (simply because of the common conviction that boys are insensitive). Sociology (if not invalidated by sexist and/or androcentric biases) can play a pivotal role in understanding why and how societies are gender-structured, whereas cognitive sciences (if not invalidated by sexist and/or androcentric biases) can clarify the origin of these (presumed) cognitive differences and their actual relevance.

Concerning socially assigned activities, Hartsock explicitly writes: “I will suggest that the sexual division of labor forms the basis for such a standpoint 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 epistemological tool” (1983, p. 284). Again, being engaged in social work and activities such as tending children, caring for the aged and the sick, performing unpaid domestic work, etc., exposes women to some aspects and regularities of nature that men cannot experience.

³ The dual vision we are talking about might be fruitfully compared with the “bifurcated consciousness” that Smith (1974) attributes to women sociologists and that assure them an epistemically privileged position over male sociologists. In fact, women sociologists have a “bifurcated consciousness” experience of both the conceptual world of sociology and the material world of their everyday lives as women.

According to some standpoint theorists, there are still other consequences of the biological and social differences mentioned above. First, women's and men's interests in their bodies and environments, and thus their desires about the natural and social world, are set apart to the extent that women and men are biologically different and they are assigned social activities that systematically differ. Second, women's and men's relationships to cultural metaphors, models, and narrative constructions differ, especially when they carry sexual and gender meanings, which often may limit our understanding of nature and society. Third, different biological processes and socially assigned activities are responsible for a different organization of scientific work and technological research.

To summarize this brief overview, we consider standpoint theories, epistemologies and epistemologies of the sciences as committed to the following statements:

A standpoint depends on the social and natural facts about the location of a group.

Knowledge is socially situated: knowledge is produced by social groups (not by individuals), and the social location of a group "shapes" its knowledge.

Some social locations – and thus some social groups (e.g., marginalized and subordinated groups) – are more epistemically reliable than others, because they allow for a "dual vision."

The social location of women, who constitute a unique marginalized group, makes their knowledge more epistemically reliable.

2. Some pros of standpoint epistemologies of the sciences

Some general pros regarding standpoint epistemologies of the sciences can be easily recognized. First, these standpoints correctly stress that knowledge is situated: our understanding and our knowledge of both the natural world and the social world partially depend on our specific perspective. In particular, they underlie the relevance of the social and economic location (of the subject's "situation" or "life context") in shaping our epistemic point of view. It should be noted that maintaining the situated quality of knowledge does not rule out the possibility of objective knowledge, but it certainly raises new questions about the very notion of objectivity. More important, according to standpoint epistemologies of the sciences our social location constitutes not only social groups (i.e., subjects of knowledge), but also the objects of scientific knowledge. Objects have actual cultural meaning as long as scientists understand them through concepts and principles deriving from their own social group and from earlier generations of scientists. Thus, no clear distinction exists between objects and subjects, because the same social forces that shape agents of knowledge also shape objects of knowledge.

Another characteristic of standpoint epistemologies of the sciences is that they rightly hold that not a single epistemic subject is able to produce knowledge independently from other epistemic subjects. This is particularly evident when we think about scientific discoveries: new hypotheses or scientific theories become knowledge only once they are tested, evaluated, and legitimated by a community of scientists. It is the

scientific community (or one of its subgroups) that takes up a new hypothesis and attributes to it the status of knowledge.⁴ Different communities, as epistemic agents, can obviously differ one from the other and produce different, or even contradictory, accounts of the natural and social world. Communities, as epistemic agents, are also internally variegated and heterogeneous. This represents a resource for sciences because internal heterogeneity may be useful to corroborate scientific theories. Adopting a standpoint may also contribute to reaching such a result, because it requires critical self-reflection, which may unmask old biases and prejudices obstructing our knowledge of the world.

How and why can the standpoint of women be a useful resource for the sciences? The basic idea is that the standpoint of women is more epistemically reliable because it overcomes the dichotomy between subject and object, producing representations of the natural and social world that are not affected by particular interests and prejudices nor shaped by androcentric metaphors and conceptualization of nature and society. To cite an example, Barbara McClintock has proved that by minimizing the distance between subject and object, and dedicating loving attention to the object, it is possible to establish a less dominant relationship and, therefore, to reduce the rigid separation between the two. But let us try to give a more satisfying and theoretic answer to the above question.

According to Potter (2007a, pp. 148-151), it is possible to identify at least three ways in which the standpoint of women may become a useful resource for the various sciences. First, if we assume the standpoint of women, we may be able to identify new scientific problems to be explained and solved, as well as new research agendas. These problems and research agendas are completely novel, because they differ radically from those that appear and are actually considered in dominant androcentric frameworks. To put it another way, adopting the standpoint of women may enrich the context of discovery, since adopting a different perspective on the natural and social world may lead us to detect problems, and even facts, previously unseen and unconsidered.

Second, the standpoint of women (no matter how internally variegated and heterogeneous it may be) can contribute to ensuring the strong objectivity of the sciences.⁵ In order to obtain objective results – in other words, results not biased by particular interests, prejudices, personal values, and so forth – the scientific community, in a field of natural or social sciences, normally agrees to particular methods and standards. However, according to feminist standpoint epistemologies of the sciences,

⁴ It is clear that standpoint theories adhere to some tenets of social epistemology, but, of course, not all social epistemologies espouse standpoint theories' theses. If most social epistemologists believe that there cannot be a single scientist who is able to produce scientific knowledge, many also maintain that knowledge and science are non-sexist. Nowadays, almost all serious scientific research is pursued by large teams of scientists with a variety of expertise. This fact became evident in the second half of the past century with projects such as the Manhattan Project and the Human Genome Project. By the way, it is worth noting that women scientists were involved in the Manhattan Project, but their roles were often overshadowed – and standpoint theories would have much to say about that, especially as it contributes to unmasking old biases and prejudices. However, it goes without saying that not all biases are damaging for the epistemic and scientific enterprise (see, for example, Antony 1993).

⁵ The notion of “strong objectivity” is particularly developed in the writings of Harding – see, for example, Harding (1991) and Harding (1993). For good overviews of the relation between objectivity and feminism, see Tanesini (1999, pp. 160-185) and Tanesini (2009).

those methods and standards are still too weak. Since most scientists are socially dominant men, their own methods and standards are not able to unmask sexist and androcentric interests, prejudices and values that are too widespread and pervasive within the scientific community itself. Adopting the standpoint of women may instead contribute to revealing and unmasking perhaps unconscious but still widely held sexist and androcentric biases and thus to assuring the strong objectivity of the sciences. What biases? Consider, for example, biological research that scientifically strengthens sexist and androcentric stereotypes and behaviors because of 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 behaviors because of distorted presumptions about women's and men's "different cognitive natures." Moreover, if those natures are judged without proper investigation and reflection to be just two (female and male, or women and men), many possibilities are ruled out at the very beginning, such as those of an androgynous sexual or cognitive nature. Unmasking these biases can help us not only to increase and assess the quality of scientific research's objectivity, but also to deepen the opportunities to understand the world, whether natural or social, gender-structured or non gender-structured.

In any case, women have indeed the kind of dual vision that yields a better epistemic position both on the natural and social world. On the one hand, women are "outsiders" and can understand their own situation in a way inaccessible to the dominant group (i.e., male scientists). On the other hand, they are also "outsiders within": since they live within the dominant framework without having any interest in perpetrating it, they can critically analyze that framework and understand it in a way that is inaccessible to the group of male scientists. In other words, by discovering those biases that are unconsciously held by the entire scientific community, women may gain less partial and more empirically adequate knowledge of the natural and social world. 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 our research and compromise a genuine understanding of nature.

Third, the standpoint of women can play a pivotal role in the context of justification. Since women have no interest in preserving the status quo or in defending a distorted (sexist and androcentric) description of the natural and social world, it would be easier for them to find new methods and experiments to test scientific theories. Hence, they may significantly contribute to producing new knowledge or at least to finding justified hypotheses, theories, and accounts of nature and society that are "less false" and less distorted compared to those produced by dominant groups. We have already mentioned the reasons why some claim that women's knowledge is different from men's: either biological or social characteristics should guarantee that the standpoint of women is more reliable, privileged, or advantaged, and thus able to assure a better understanding of the world. However, we should not think that the scope of women's privilege is merely limited to a few natural and/or social aspects directly connected to reproduction. Also, traditional epistemology would actually accept that women have special and privileged knowledge about some particular biological processes and social activities, and we must not forget that this often presents a negative picture of women's cognitive abilities. Maintaining that women have a different cognitive style and access the world in a peculiar way – typically characterized by empathy, sensitivity, relational aptitudes,

and so on – could be dangerous, because it could easily trigger a return to old sexist and androcentric stereotypes.

3. Some problems with the notion of standpoint

At first, referencing “the” standpoint of women has implied conceiving of women as a single and homogeneous group. However, such a claim not only is patently false (since women differ by culture, race, social class, sexual preference, personal history, religion, age, etc.), but it also leads to a form of the metonymic fallacy: one particular standpoint – for example, that of a minority of white, middle-class, heterosexual women – is taken to be the standpoint of all. In fact, even if being a black, Latina, lower class, lesbian woman is neither necessary nor sufficient to have the standpoint of black, Latina, lower class, lesbian women, we should recognize that it is not desirable that a minority of white, middle-class, heterosexual women could inappropriately assume, interpret, and/or conceal the standpoint of all other women. Consequently we should talk, not about a single standpoint of women, but about a great variety of different standpoints of women (see, for example, Collins 1990, Lugones & Spelman 1986). We should note that insisting on the existence of a single standpoint of women yields to essentialism (i.e., the idea that the social group defining a standpoint has necessary and fixed characteristics and that its members do or ought to think, behave and act alike).⁶ Since according to (i) the standpoint of women depends on the social and natural facts about the location of women (e.g., cognitive style, common experiences, work conditions), group membership and gender identity are defined by those very facts. Thus, social and natural facts become normative requirements, which inevitably convert any difference into deviance and create conditions of exclusion (see, for example, Spelman 1988).

A possible solution is to recognize both the hopelessness of defining a unique and homogeneous standpoint of women, and the opportunity of characterizing some transversal social groups that intersect culture, race, social class, sexual preference, personal history, religion, age. In other words, we should admit the existence of several subaltern women’s standpoints (e.g., black, Latina, lower class, lesbian, etc.). Such a move could initially seem very attractive, but is not promising to defend standpoint epistemologies of the sciences for at least three reasons. First, if we multiply the standpoints too much, we might run the risk of contravening Ockham’s razor – *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem*. Second, if we fragment the group of women excessively it becomes complicated to defend (iii); accordingly, the social and natural facts about the location of the marginalized group must guarantee that this very group is more epistemically reliable than others because it has a dual vision. If more than one marginalized and subordinate group of women is recognized (not only women, but black women, Latina women, lower class women, lesbians etc.), it is difficult to attribute epistemic privilege to just one of them. The usual criterion used to decide which group is more epistemically reliable than others is to consider its level of marginalization and subordination: “Presumably the more distant one is from the center the more advantageous is one’s point of view” (Bar-On 1993, p. 89). Epistemic privilege is thus conceived as a function of peripheralization (marginalization) or

⁶ In Mozartian words, the basic idea of essentialism is “*così fan tutte*”: see Vassallo 2009a.

multiple oppressions (subordination). But even if we admit that the group that is more epistemically reliable is the one that is more marginalized and/or subordinate, the problem immediately arises of how to establish and define the different levels of marginalization and subordination. In fact, groups are marginalized not from a single center of power, and subordinated not to a unique dominant group, but from different centers of power and to a great variety of dominant groups. In other words, there are several distinct centers of power and oppressive systems, which overlap and intersect one another in either enhancing or undermining ways (see, for example, Young 1990). And if this is true, it is impossible to rank marginalized groups. Third, no matter how a transversal social group is thought of, according to (i) the standpoint of this very group still depends on relevant social facts about its location (common experiences, work conditions, etc.). Again, group membership (being a black woman, a Latina woman, a lower class woman, a lesbian, etc.) is defined by those very facts. As we have seen before, such a view yields to essentialism and to its undesirable consequences. For instance, defending a black feminist standpoint brings in an objectionable essentialization of black women, defending a lesbian standpoint brings in an objectionable essentialization of lesbians, and so on for any women-transversal social groups we consider. It should be noted that once we agree to reject essentialism, there is no logical stopping point in the proliferation of standpoints.⁷

Even accepting the above criticisms, it is still possible to defend standpoint epistemologies, arguing that there is no reason for them to exist because group membership and gender identity must be defined by natural and social facts about the location of the group. If it is right to deny the existence of any fixed membership and gender identity criteria, then there are no more grounds to fear essentialism and its unwelcome consequences. Such a consideration seems to be correct. However, even if we do not want to essentialize the social facts about the location of a particular group, in order to grant (iii) and consider this group more epistemically reliable than others, we need to valorize, generalize, and idealize those very facts. Thus, social facts must be considered as normative requirements, which inevitably convert any difference into deviance and create conditions of exclusion (see, for example, Bar-On 1993). We may be able to discard essentialism, but not its consequences. On the contrary, if we deny the possibility to valorize, generalize, and idealize the social facts about the location of a group, we must also renounce the grounding of the epistemic privilege of this group. If such a group is not more epistemically reliable than others, then there is no reason to consider its knowledge more epistemically reliable.

In point of fact, another option is still available. We may want to say not that a marginalized group is privileged or more epistemically reliable than others, but only that it is epistemically “advantaged” because it gives rise to better hypotheses, accounts, or explanations. To put it another way, we may want to shift our attention from the context of justification to the context of discovery, and to stress the importance of standpoints in discerning new problems, as well as in setting novel research agendas. For instance, Harding holds that “the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought – for everyone’s research and

⁷ In fact, once we have rejected essentialism, what “being a woman” means can be only understood from a first person perspective, given that, of course, we succeed in conferring any meaning to “being a woman” (see, for example, Garavaso & Vassallo 2007, and Vassallo 2009b).

scholarship – from which humans’ relations with each other and the natural world can become visible” (1993, p. 54). Even agreeing with such a shift, we should consider that we cannot ground the epistemic advantage of a marginalized group without understanding its location within the society, and thus without essentializing (or at least idealizing) the social facts about its location. Clearly, the specter of essentialism (or, in any case, its unattractive consequences) appears again. Otherwise, all marginalized groups must be considered epistemically advantaged to an equal extent, and their knowledge of the world must stand at the same level.

Furthermore, another difficulty arises and puts into question the very opportunity to embrace any feminist standpoint epistemology of sciences. It is still commonly held, at least among some scientists and philosophers of science, that a new theory or hypothesis becomes knowledge only once it is justified (i.e., when it is tested by the scientific community and corroborated within the context of justification). If one accepts this rule and simultaneously rejects the idea that women are more epistemically reliable (in the context of justification) for merely recognizing that they are advantaged only in formulating new theories and hypothesis in the context of discovery, then one is compelled to deny that women could play (differently from men) any special role and have any particular significance in the production of new justified scientific theories or hypotheses.

Let us focus now on the last attempt to defend feminist standpoint epistemologies of the sciences. It has been argued that we may simply turn to focusing on the epistemic value of the experience of marginalized people (i.e., particular members of a marginalized group), without making any substantial claim about marginalized groups. Regarding the above proposal Harding explicitly writes: “Women’s lives (our many different lives and different experiences!) can provide the starting point for asking new critical questions about not only these women’s lives but also about men’s lives and, most importantly, the causal relations between them” (1993, p. 55). Such a proposal is quite interesting because it rejects essentialism, but following its path simply forces one to abandon the very notion of standpoint, since “a standpoint is an achievement, the result of analysis by more than one person who, in the first instance, occupy a particular location in a political order” (Potter 2007a). According to standpoint theories, not individuals, but communities or social groups (e.g., women or one of a subgroup of women) produce knowledge and are epistemically advantaged, reliable, or privileged. And those groups, as we have seen, must recognize themselves as a group and understand the reasons not only of their marginality, but also of their epistemic advantage, reliability, or privilege. Moreover, the adoption of a standpoint should be “struggled for” by a marginalized and subordinate group, and should carry with it a historically liberatory role for this group. If we renounce the characterization of women as a group (either homogeneous or fragmented), then there is no longer any reason to use the notion of standpoint. Hence, there is no longer any reason to defend any feminist standpoint epistemology of sciences.

4. Tentative conclusions

One should commend standpoint epistemologies of the sciences for having defended the idea that knowledge is situated and having stressed the epistemic importance of the social location of those who possess the knowledge. Moreover, standpoint epistemologies of the sciences rightly held that not a single epistemic subject is able to produce scientific knowledge independently from other epistemic agents, and they played a pivotal role in unmasking scientists' sexist and androcentric biases that obstruct the strong objectivity of the sciences. However, we have seen that if one is to defend the notion of standpoint, it is necessary to face a twofold dilemma. On the one hand, if standpoint epistemologists want to argue for the epistemic privilege or advantage of women's standpoint, they need to ground it in biological or social facts (e.g., cognitive style, common experiences, work conditions), ignoring the fact that each woman has her own particular identity. This assumes the existence of a feminine "nature" and thus embraces essentialism (or at least its consequences). On the other hand, if standpoint epistemologists prefer to renounce the notions of epistemic privilege or advantage, they have to consider all standpoints at the same level. Both options are clearly unwelcome in the philosophy of the sciences.

In fact, it is the notion of standpoint that, once it has been accepted, catches its defenders on the horns of the dilemma discussed above. The obvious solution is simply to abandon the very notion of standpoint. In fact, we do not need to appeal to it to stress the importance of pluralism, to recognize the presence of perspectival biases, and to defend the necessity of more democratic and less sexist practices in sciences. Hence, it is possible to achieve the strong objectivity of the natural and social sciences without bringing into play the notion of standpoint and all its related problems. There is no reason to endorse any feminist standpoint epistemology of sciences to maintain that testing the empirical adequacy of a scientific theory from different points of view (e.g., those of women and other marginalized people) makes it easier to find inconsistencies, ambiguities, empirical inadequacies, and so forth (see, for example, Harding 1988). We do not need to suppose that some perspectives are more reliable or advantaged than others, because it is the very presence of various, and perhaps even conflicting, perspectives on the world that democratizes the natural and social sciences and may eventually yield to their strong objectivity. Finally, abandoning the notion of standpoint, it would be more straightforward to reconsider and re-evaluate all of the differences among women, and hence revise, deconstruct – and perhaps even obliterate – the very concept of "woman."

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