

Scientific Knowledge: Situatedness and Intersubjectivity without Standpoints

Maria Cristina Amoretti
University of Genoa, Italy
e-mail: cristina.amoretti@unige.it

Nicla Vassallo
University of Genoa, Italy
e-mail: nicla.vassallo@unige.it

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ABSTRACT. We have already argued not only that essentialism is detrimental for epistemologies and philosophies of sciences, as well as sciences themselves, but also that feminist standpoint epistemologies of sciences inevitably yield essentialism, or at least its undesirable consequences (Amoretti and Vassallo 2010a, 2011, forthcoming). Although abandoning feminist standpoint epistemologies seems to represent the straightforward solution, matters are more complicated. Some of the tenets of these epistemologies, in fact, can hardly be disregarded, such as those underlying the situatedness and intersubjectivity of scientific knowledge. Thus, the specific aim of this paper is showing that it is still possible to retain the above characteristics – namely situatedness and intersubjectivity – even while rejecting the very notion of standpoint.

1. Introduction

Elsewhere, we have extensively argued not only that essentialism is detrimental for epistemologies of sciences, philosophies of sciences, and sciences themselves, but also that feminist standpoint epistemologies of sciences inevitably yield essentialism, or at least its undesirable consequences (Amoretti

and Vassallo 2010a, 2011, forthcoming). Although abandoning feminist standpoint epistemologies of sciences seems to represent the best solution, matters are not so straightforward. Some of the tenets of these epistemologies, in fact, can hardly be disregarded, such as the tenets underlying the situatedness and intersubjectivity of scientific knowledge. Thus, one should first establish whether it is still possible to retain the above characteristics even while rejecting the very notion of standpoint.

2. On Standpoints

Feminist standpoint epistemologies of sciences place their emphasis on the situatedness of scientific knowledge: our understanding of the natural and/or social world also depend on our specific perspective on it. More precisely, these epistemologies underlie the significance of our particular social location in modeling, not only our epistemic point of view as subjects of knowledge but also our own objects of knowledge; in other words, they point out that the dichotomy between the subject and object of knowledge is annihilated because they are shaped by the same social forces.¹ Overcoming the dichotomy between the subject and object of knowledge, scientists may represent the natural and/or social world in a way that is neither influenced by individual interests and prejudices nor affected by androcentric metaphors and conceptualizations of nature and/or society. To cite a famous example, Barbara McClintock has proven that by minimizing the distance between subject and object and by 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.

Furthermore, feminist standpoint epistemologies of sciences hold that there is no single epistemic subject able to produce scientific knowledge independently of other epistemic subjects, and thus, they underline the pivotal role of the notion of intersubjectivity. This notion is particularly evident when we think about 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, they are legitimated intersubjectively. It is the whole scientific community (or one of its subgroups) that takes up a new hypothesis and eventually attributes to it the status of knowledge.

¹ It is worth noting that maintaining the situatedness of knowledge per se does not rule out the possibility of objective knowledge, but it certainly raises new questions about the very notion of objectivity (Anderson 1995b; Tanesini 1999).

The standpoint of women can be a valuable resource for natural and/or social sciences for at least three reasons (Potter 2007, pp. 148-151). First, if we assume such a standpoint, we may be able to identify new scientific problems and new research agendas, because these problems and research agendas drastically differ from those that appear in dominant androcentric frameworks. To put it differently, the standpoint of women may enrich the context of discovery, because adopting a different perspective on the natural and/or social world may facilitate the posing of novel questions as well the recognition of puzzles and even facts previously unseen and unconsidered.

Second, because women scientists have no interest in perpetrating a sexist and androcentric description of the world, finding new approaches and experiments to test or attempt to falsify already established scientific theories is easier for them. More specifically, the standpoint of women can play a crucial role in the context of justification, contributing to the production of new scientific knowledge, or at least to finding justified hypotheses and theories as well as accounts of nature and society that are less distorted compared with those produced by dominant androcentric groups.

Third, the standpoint of women may help ensure the strong objectivity of the sciences (Harding 1991, 1993). To obtain objective results – i.e., results not biased by individual interests, prejudices, personal values, etc. – the scientific community generally agrees to adopt particular methods and standards. Still, these methods and standards are often considered too weak to grant objectivity. However, embracing the standpoint of women may contribute to revealing widely (although perhaps unconsciously) 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" or 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" (Bleier 1984; Fausto-Sterling 2000; Fine 2010; Spanier 1995; Vassallo 2009). Unmasking these sexist and androcentric biases may be helpful not only for increasing and assessing the quality of the objectivity of scientific research but also for extending and intensifying the opportunities to comprehend the natural and/or social world.

Women scientists have indeed the kind of dual vision that yields a better epistemic position both on the natural and/or social world. On the one hand, women scientists are "outsiders" and thus can understand their own situation in a way inaccessible to the dominant group (i.e., male scientists). On the oth-

er hand, they are also “outsiders within”: because 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 dominant group of male scientists.

In other words, by discovering biases that are held by the entire scientific community, women scientists may gain less partial and more empirically adequate knowledge of the natural and/or social world. Hence, the standpoint of women may contribute to disclosing methods, models, and metaphors as well as discursive resources that, when they are sexist, androcentric, and immersed in cultural ideals of masculinity, can constrain our research and compromise a genuine understanding of the natural and/or social world.

3. Without Standpoints

Given the above considerations, to evaluate whether the rejection of feminist standpoint epistemologies of sciences may or may not be a promising solution for epistemologists and philosophers of sciences, one should determine whether it is possible to save their great merits even while renouncing the very notion of standpoint. We believe it is possible, and we will now examine why.

At the outset, we do not need to theorize about the notion of standpoint to prove that our scientific knowledge of the natural and/or social world is socially situated, and we do not need to belong to a specific standpoint to have a particular perspective on the natural and/or social world or to recognize perspectival biases (Campbell 1998, 2001; Longino 1989, 2001, 2006; Nelson 1990).

To recognize the social dimension of scientific knowledge and to evaluate how crucial the role of intersubjectivity is in the sciences, it is sufficient to analyze real scientific practice, that is, how new scientific hypotheses and/or theories are produced, tested, and eventually accepted and justified. Today, almost all serious scientific research is in fact pursued by large panels of scientists with a variety of expertise (Amoretti and Vassallo 2010b; Hardwig 1985; Vassallo 2011).²

If our aim is to identify new scientific problems and research agendas as well as new methods and experiments to test scientific hypotheses and/or the-

² This fact became evident in the second half of the past century with projects such as the Manhattan Project and the Human Genome Project.

ories, we do not need the notion of standpoint; we only need to democratize the various sciences and improve the interactions within and across communities of scientists, thus allowing people with different social backgrounds, cultural traditions, and personal skills to effectively cooperate in a collective scientific endeavor (Anderson 1995a, 1995b; Longino 1990, 2001). Pluralism would be the best tool to ensure the strong objectivity of the sciences: there is no need to assume that some perspectives are more reliable, privileged or advantaged than others (as feminist standpoint epistemologies of sciences actually assume); rather, it is sufficient to recognize the epistemic authority of every possible point of view (Janack 1997). It is the very presence of various and even conflicting perspectives on the natural and/or social world that improves critical scrutiny, that contributes to the appreciation and unmasking of scientists' sexist and androcentric biases, and that may eventually enhance the strong objectivity of the sciences (Amoretti 2010). Consequently, it is worth mentioning that recognizing the epistemic authority of different scientific inquirers – i.e., the importance of epistemic inclusion – becomes not just a moral but also an epistemic matter.³

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