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Karthu Anilchandran Geethampili

karthuanilchandran@gmail.com

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Philosophy paper: Redefining Traditional Epistemology: The Role of Standpoint Theory in
Indigenous Feminism

Redefining Traditional Epistemology: The Role of Standpoint Theory in Indigenous Feminism

The discourse of philosophy has long been and stubbornly remains dominated by the white narrative. Privilege often conceals itself, challenging our recognition of the subtleties of the social hierarchy when we theorize knowledge through a supposedly ‘objective’ and ‘value-neutral’ perspective of traditional epistemology. In a society where power is divided into strata based on gender, race, etc. our social positions shape what we know. Emerging from the roots of Marxist theories, standpoint epistemology thus gives voice to the marginalized who can criticize the status quo as outsiders within being part of the existing system. In this essay, I therefore argue that standpoint epistemology would give us a framework for accepting and identifying the oppressed in an oppressive world, which may not be possible by adopting traditional epistemology. We will see this through the eyes of Indigenous Feminism. This discourse can help rectify the institutionalized, latent, and habitual white supremacist ideologies that have shaped philosophy’s development for centuries, which still undermines other facets of the human experience.

I

Traditional epistemology has focused on identifying the evidence or justification someone has for their knowledge claims. It is centered on individualism and the aim of achieving certainty, influenced by Descartes’ theory of how people can establish a right connection with the world by deriving conclusions only using one’s cognitive states (Kukla, 2021). This fear of error in pinpointing the ‘true knowledge’ can be correlated to the fear of situatedness. Although various epistemological debates have concluded that knowledge can be fallible, traditional epistemology still continues its search for objectivity and impartiality.

It is time that we proceed with the epistemological project, recognizing the social positions, interests, motivations, and the identity of the ‘knower’ as essential factors. The ‘epistemology of ignorance’ functions to erase or render what was previously available, thereby marginalizing some forms of knowledge. This practice does not take into account the experiences of minorities (MacMullan, 2015). Traditional epistemology tends to present knowledge as abstract, universal,

and detached from social position. It usually does not frame ignorance or denial of oppression as tied to privilege. On the other hand, standpoint epistemology, influenced by Marxist ideas of class consciousness, argues that marginalized groups can develop critical insights into power structures because of their social position. Nancy Hartsock (1997) applied this to women, claiming their structural location under patriarchy grants them epistemic advantage, while Patricia Hill Collins (1986) described Black women as ‘outsiders within,’ able to critique dominant knowledge from both inside and outside, which we will look at shortly.

Standpoint epistemology argues that the components of our social identities influence the resources we access, affecting our position to ‘know’. We will now look into the three main theses. The situated-knowledge thesis argues that knowledge acquisition is fundamentally a social practice. Achievement thesis claims that individuals achieve standpoint through the process of ‘consciousness-raising’. Lastly, the epistemic privilege thesis informs us that position of powerlessness or marginalization can be a source of epistemic advantage (Toole, 2021). These theories contradict the conventional understanding of knowledge. Traditional epistemologists are skeptical about granting significant authority to ‘agency’ as advocated in the situated-knowledge thesis. Consciousness-raising exposes the value-laden character of dominant epistemic standards, revealing how privilege obscures oppression and complicity. Yet, by enabling critique and transformation of those very standards, it challenges the notion that their value-ladenness is ineliminable. The privilege thesis then challenges the aperspectival model, i.e., for evidence (E) to be valid in supporting a particular knowledge claim (P), it must be accessible and applicable to any epistemic agent, regardless of the individual (Kukla, 2006). I will elaborate on how these assumptions of contemporary epistemology will not yield to the achievement of ‘true’ knowledge and how standpoint epistemology theses offer a more promising alternative.

II

The traditional canon fails to highlight epistemic injustice, which systematically denies individuals from marginalized groups the recognition and credibility of their knowledge. Firstly, let us consider the argument that individual epistemic self-discipline is the right approach, the idea that individuals alone should monitor and correct their epistemic practices to counter oppression. To clarify this, I will engage with Indigenous feminist perspective. The education of

Indigenous people is a relatively new development in Australian institutions. Since its inception in the early 1970's, it was justified as a response to the need to 'acknowledge' Indigenous differences in the context of year-long oppressions. The primary methods of acknowledgement involved modest increases in the proportion of Indigenous faculty and students; in other words, the goal was to bridge a void at universities by merely 'representing' cultural diversity without altering the status quo. Instead, it was considered an opportunity of 'redistribution' (Bunda et al., 2012). Technically, the institutions have constructed an Indigenous reality in a non-Indigenous language, by and for a non-Indigenous audience, without consulting the Indigenous people.

A white man cannot perceive the world through the lens of an Indigenous woman. Intersecting oppressions has 'situated' them in different power relations, which affect the social, historical and material conditions they share consciously or unconsciously (Robinson, 2013). It is impossible for a white man, or even an Indigenous man to present a seminar paper within the conventions of the patriarchal academic system while attempting to question its underlying knowledge structure. Simply because the patriarchal authority has always shaped their lives, and no matter how hard the others try, they cannot encapsulate an Indigenous woman's experience. We must recognise the social situatedness of the epistemic agent matters in forming what we know and limiting what we can know.

Now, we will aim to substantiate that this particular standpoint is achieved and that knowledge is not inherent. Drawing from Foucault's perspective, feminist theories have argued that a means of achieving knowledge began with the emergence of standpoints. Understanding the genealogies of power/knowledge is essential to challenge the conventional notions of domination and victimization. The concept that modern forms of power not only suppress individuals but also actively participate in shaping them has caused a move away from conventional liberation-based political methods (Armstrong, n.d.). They develop when individuals who are marginalized and relatively invisible from the perspective of the epistemically privileged become aware of their social position regarding injustice and socio-political power and start to speak up (Bowell, n.d.). This process can also be termed as 'self-awareness', and once individuals achieve this, they frame questions differently, prioritize issues differently, and define problems differently (Ardill, 2013). As a common example drawn from the literature on epistemic injustice, before the term

‘sexual harassment’ was coined, someone may have seen something similar and mistakenly believed it to be harmless or innocent flirtation. However, because we have been equipped with a feminist standpoint, we can understand these situations as unacceptable workplace behavior. We acquire this knowledge by critically evaluating our social conditioning. The critical reflection on gender as a social construction and how personal experiences of oppression are linked to institutions, cultural norms, and values are part of the feminist use of consciousness-raising, which is increasingly seen through an intersectional lens (hooks, 1994). Working with individuals facing similar situations enables the development of different epistemic resources which can be applied to better engage with and comprehend the world from a different outlook. Therefore, it acknowledges the ‘subjectivity’ of knowledge and how one’s social position shapes what is considered ‘objective’. This facilitated what Haraway (1988) calls ‘power-sensitive conversation’. This live interaction of women from different backgrounds creates a meta-dialogic environment in which various knowledge-generating agents engage in conversation with each other. So, if we were to adopt the universalism of traditional epistemology, we would not be aware of the intersectionality of the identity of Indigenous women, the historical injustice faced by the Aboriginal community and the diversity of Indigenous cultures, languages and knowledge systems. In other words, traditional epistemology’s standards flatten out difference, making it impossible to see or value the complex realities they face.

Finally, we will look into the most controversial of all three, epistemic privilege thesis. Traditional epistemology has vouched for logic and deductive reasoning as the reliable method for acquiring knowledge. This contradicts the claim that standpoints are epistemically privileged and the evidence they possess would not be available to everyone. In the academic discourse, it is usually the ‘whiteness’ who has tried to deconstruct the colonial legacy and tried to ‘empower’ the Indigenous narrative. However, we fail to realize that they do not embrace First People’s sovereignty simply because they lack the necessary knowledge.

All Indigenous women have in common the experience of living in a society that resents them. Yes, they do have diverse cultural backgrounds, but they are familiar with the ongoing denial of their sovereignty, the politics of dispossession, the shared history of colonization, and the experience of living in a patriarchal, prejudiced, dominant society (Collins, 2009). They are

constantly in the loop of identifying and re-identifying their self through the eyes of both the whites and their own culture. This phenomenon is what W.E.B Du Bois (1903) called the 'double consciousness'. They are constantly aware of how the dominant perceives them while simultaneously maintaining their own self-identity. It is not about transitioning from one state to another but existing within the tension of these identities. This puts them in a position of epistemic privilege.

Epistemic privilege not only comes from their knowledge of injustice but also from their social positions. In an academic environment, Indigenous scholars are typically portrayed as native informants who share their 'experience' rather than imparting knowledge. Their acquired knowledge is frequently disregarded because it is improbable, subjective, and lacks epistemic integrity. This, as theorized by Miranda Fricker (2017), can also result in hermeneutical injustice. The lack of hermeneutical resources for the audience to understand her testimony can prevent the oppressed from being understood. But in reality, they can provide us with the insider/outsider perspective where both the knowledge unite giving us a comprehensive picture (Bowell, n.d.).

III

The unease of traditional epistemologists might stem from the realization that there might not be a universal, objective or aperspectival way of knowing things. This disrupts the foundations that have been in place for years. Critics of standpoint epistemology have tended to assimilate it to objectivism, ethnocentrism and relativism. They argue that standpoint claims challenge fundamental assumptions of the scientific worldview and are not objectifying enough. Conversely, standpoint epistemology, in fact, offers 'stronger objectivity' (Harding, 1992). It advocates for a more robust and inclusive conception of objectivity that surpasses traditional notions of neutrality and incorporates the historical and social contexts in which knowledge is created.

Even if we embrace standpoint epistemology over the traditional one, there is a potential risk that we may presume a group shares a single standpoint, a criticism often raised. The most privileged perspective within the group could unjustly be considered the supposed shared standpoint,

effectively becoming the ‘representative voice’. This concern was notably raised in feminist standpoint literature, where more privileged voices sometimes dominated, and eventually, the theory could be ethnocentric. However, this is a misinterpretation as feminist standpoint theory does not claim one group’s superiority, but instead, the emphasis is on readdressing inequality. Feminists have adopted Foucault’s examination of power/knowledge, particularly focusing on how knowledge claims are justified, to construct a theory that does not rely on generalizations from Western, white, heterosexual, and middle-class feminist experience (Armstrong, n.d.). This is where standpoint is more significant to me than ever. If we did not give agency to the knower, we would never be able to understand the inter-subjective relationship between white feminists and Indigenous women. According to Nakata (2007), the Indigenous standpoint produces knowledge suitable for First Australians to navigate the ‘cultural interface’. This is because white Australia and Indigenous people have a historical, intertwined structural relationship of domination and resistance.

Traditional epistemology avoids relativism by claiming universal, context-free knowledge, but this erases oppression and difference. Standpoint epistemology, though open to charges of relativism, argues that marginalised standpoints have epistemic advantage, turning situatedness into a strength rather than ‘anything goes.’ Therefore, relativism is not a better solution, either. It undermines knowledge by suggesting that all perspectives are equally valid, which could then potentially perpetuate existing power imbalances and inhibit social progress (Tanesini, 2018). This rough summary offers a glimpse of the standpoint but does not reveal the complexities and challenges involved in its precise formulations, which cannot be easily dismissed. If we assess people’s beliefs only from their own limited perspective, we would not have any basis to convince those in positions of authority to consider the viewpoints and knowledge of marginalized groups or individuals.

In conclusion, it is time for traditional epistemology to acknowledge that the current regime of knowledge is elitist and prejudiced toward certain cultures and races and incompatible with recognizing how the dominant has influenced the production of knowledge. Recognizing the limits opens the door to understanding and including traditionally suppressed voices. While standpoint epistemology has its own constraints, it provides a socially conscious lens through which we can engage with the world and each other.

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