

PHY OF PHYSICS: STANDPOINT THEORY, PRACTICAL AIMS, AND THE OBJECTIVITY OF HUMAN-INSENSITIVE SCIENCE

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JUNE 21 2024

MOTIVATING QUESTIONS

- Are feminist epistemology privileged epistemic standpoints for theoretical physics
 - ▶ if yes, then when?
 - ▶ if no, then what can produce strong(er) objectivity?
- How can we arrive at normative feminist critiques in theoretical physics?

BEST CASE THEORISTS

Not all theoretical physics applies here

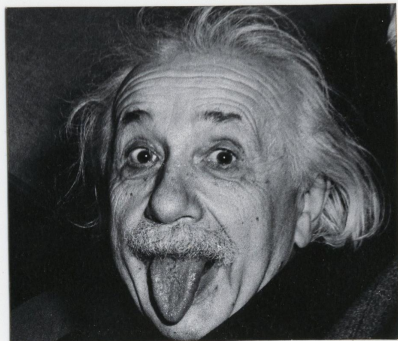
- Inductive risk: eg accuracy vs portability
- very specific applications and motivations
- pluralism: more diverse fields, grounded in practical aims
- contextual values: easy of use, cost, accuracy, safety



WORST CASE SCIENTISTS

Focus on the case which has been least successful in producing actionable critiques

- 'Human insensitive' research
- ambiguous at best applications
- Enlightenment specter: 'Gentleman's science'
- Reductionism, simplicity, fundamentality, global understanding



STANDPOINTS

- All knowledge is developed from within some individual's perceptions
- Social privilege distorts perspective
- *relevant* socially marginalized perspectives
→ more epistemic authority on a topic



Figure:

<https://hennessy.iat.sfu.ca/wp/stc2018/2018/03/04/what-is-standpoint-theory/>

KEY POINTS

- Epistemic standpoints are conceptual frameworks for evaluating the world, not identities
- *privileged standpoints* are always privileged *for a specific kind of knowledge because of identifiable advantages* item
We should expect a *predictive assignment*, not only a reconstruction or compatibility

STANDPOINT AND SCIENTIFIC OBJECTIVITY

Conventional View: science is objective when carried out by unbiased observers who do not allow social-cultural beliefs to affect their research

Harding: weak objectivity treats science as a "value-free, disinterested, impartial, Archimedean arbiter of conflicting agendas," (Harding 1991 pg.10)

- This is not believable
- Science is always for a definite goal, *for the benefit of a group*
- 'gentleman's science' is a project of domination and subfusion

HARDING'S CRITIQUE OF WEAK OBJECTIVITY

"If values and interests that can produce the most critical perspectives on science are silenced through discriminatory social practices, the standard, narrowly conceived conception of scientific method will have not an iota of a chance of maximizing either value- neutrality or objectivity. Such a conclusion has the effect of turning equity issues into scientific and epistemological issues, not only moral and political ones. "(Harding 1991 pg 41)

STRONG OBJECTIVITY

“feminist theory about science must be seen as inside the process of science, where it can help scientists explain the social conditions in both scientific institutions and the surrounding society that tend to encourage empirically more adequate beliefs; identify background assumptions that tend to distort the results of research; conceptualize and design research in ways that avoid powerful cultural biases; interpret and select data to produce the most reliable evidence for and against hypotheses.” (Harding 1991 pg.74)

- Strong objectivity: Adopt epistemic frameworks from the social sciences to probe the practices of research: esp. feminist standpoints

PERCEPTION, PEDAGOGY, AND PRACTICE

- Typical understanding of: public perception → pedagogy → practice
- imperfect agreement between pedagogy, public perception, and practices
 - ▶ eg. discussion, collaboration, alternative accounts integral in theoretical physics
 - ▶ collaboration and social cohesion, marginalization and chilly climates (Urry 2008)
- cognitive values: disagreement on whether to critique the assignment of masculinity (Urry 2008) or their perpetuation in physics (Bug 2003 reading Rosser)
- Historical trends and motivations guide scientific research
”(Harding, Longino)

BUT PHYSICS!!

“The support of “pure science” might more reasonably be seen as a make-work welfare program for the middle classes in the service of elites.”” (Harding 1991 pg. 93)

- ▶ formalism require interpretations, metaphors (Harding 1991, Bug 2003)
- ▶ Constitutive beliefs: Reductionism (Whitten 2012), positivism (Harding 1991)
- ▶ superficial reliance on the context of justification (Harding 1991)
- ▶ Bias to impractical research (Whitten 2012) and/or dubious technological justifications (Harding 1991)

Mathematical formalism (usually) need interpretation(s)

- assignment of theoretical constructs to phenomena: SM particles to observed energy emissions
- physical processes and theories understood through analogies to human concepts
- Gedankenexperiments
- This account: agnostic to measurement/model/theory realism vs compatabilism or other anti-realism commitments

RETHINKING ANALOGIES, ANALOGY MULTIPLICITY

- theoretical constructs are stable not universal
 - ▶ light is: particle/wave/excitation of a field
- theories have multiple interpretations and methodologies
 - ▶ QM: density matrix formalism, textbook approach, even wave theory
 - ▶ QIT: generalizations (GPT, operator algebras), specializations (Bohmian mech, hidden variable models)
 - ▶ Competing derivations of QM/QFT: path integral formulation, second quantization
- gedankenexperiments and metaphors are contested questionably sincere
- realist interp: convergence or translatability give increased confidence in theoretical constructs

RETHINKING ANALOGIES: ADVANTAGED STANDPOINTS?

- The context of justification allows for alternative constitutive values to be assigned
- What is lost is determinist connection between the commitments of a theory developers and the analogies settled by consensus
- analogy pluralism and translatable insulates against subjective bias

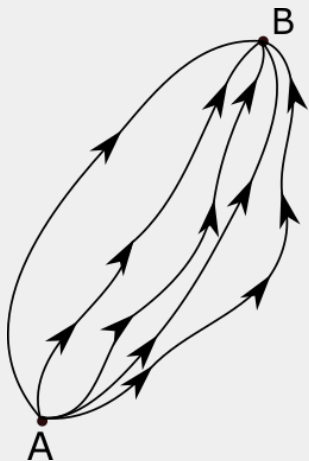


Figure: Path Pluralism or classical path dominance

- Reductionist hypothesis: all natural processes reduce to a simple set of relations governed by simple, mathematical relations
- minimize assumptions, constants, etc
- usually the priority, fundamentality, hierarchy position of 'fundamental' research is questioned (Anderson 1974, Whitten 2012)

RETHINKING REDUCTIONISM

- Critique reductionism \leftrightarrow fundamentality
- Reductionism as 'first order approximation'
- less reductionist disciplines usually study emergent properties of broadly reductionist phenomena

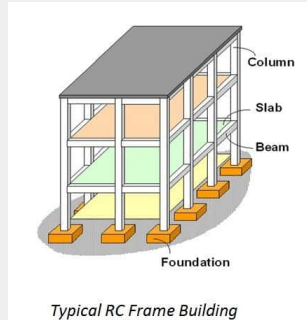


Figure: Reductionism as framing to study emergent behaviour

CONSTITUTIVE BELIEFS: HIERARCHY

- Hierarchy in science still ranks relative merit of a field
- relies on relative 'practical merit' of a discipline

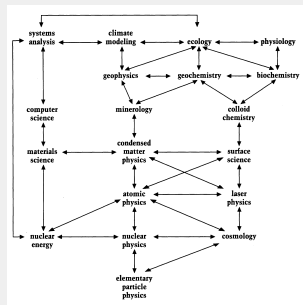


Figure: Hierarchical ranking of physics (Whitten 1996)

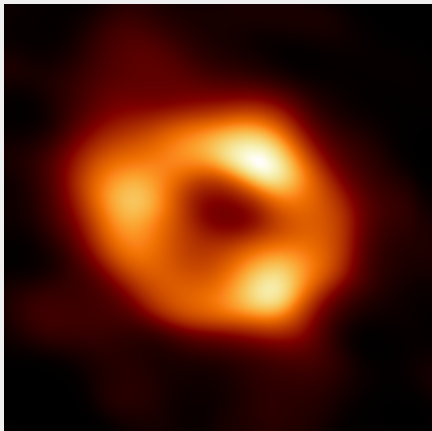
TECHNOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATIONS AND FUNDING SOURCES:

- Theorists disvalue work for industrial/near-term applications
- Curiosity, wonder through empirical knowledge
- The public seems to agree
- Yet most funding relies on some technological promises



TECHNOLOGICAL JUSTIFICATION: WHY ISN'T THEORY ART?

- Funding structures represent have enormous social force
- physicists don't perceive any agency to change this
- theory as art, theorists as skilled and creative workers under public patronage



TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

- strong standpoint theoretic case for feminist values in physics practices rely on:
 - ▶ cognitive biases
 - ▶ reliance of practicality of science
- analogies: tools for epistemic pluralism
- context of justification: allows for plurality of contextual values
 - ▶ problematizes feminist theory as a privileged epistemic standpoint
- reductionist hypothesis: scaffolding to support more detail-oriented research

NORMATIVE CLAIMS

- rethink analogies and reductionism
- abandon practicality commitment: theorist as artist
 - ▶ public patronage
 - ▶ decoupling of physics from tech funding
 - ▶ reliance on strong social systems which can support expensive artistic/scientific endeavors
- abstract theory research reliant on robust social systems
- theorists obliged to the material labor which supports their work (Prescod Weinstein 2019)