



Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: A Critical Response to Kristen Intemann

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Introduction

Feminist philosophy of science investigates how gender, power, and social context influence scientific inquiry. Two major approaches, feminist empiricism and standpoint theory, seek to improve science by making it more inclusive and attentive to social influences. Feminist empiricism relies on traditional empirical standards while recognizing that social values can shape research. Standpoint theory argues that marginalized groups can have unique epistemic advantages due to their social positions. In her 2010 paper, Kristen Intemann proposes a merger between these views into what she calls *feminist standpoint empiricism*. While this proposal offers insight, the argument for merging standpoint theory and feminism empiricism also relies on problematic assumptions. This paper argues that Intemann's examples do not adequately support her claims, and her critique of feminist empiricism misrepresents its mechanisms for dealing with values. Ultimately, this paper argues that the merger Intemann proposes is not necessary. Instead, feminist empiricism can be strengthened from within to address the concerns she raises.

I. Reconstructing Intemann's Argument

Kristen Intemann's paper attempts to trace the development of feminist empiricism and standpoint theory over the past quarter-century and argues that the most defensible aspects of each tradition now converge in ways that justify merging them into a new framework—feminist standpoint empiricism. She begins by acknowledging that both traditions have responded to criticisms and evolved significantly from their earlier formulations. As a result, many of the initial polarizations between the two, particularly those emphasized by Sandra Harding's influential distinction between “bad science” and systemic oppression, have become increasingly blurred.

Contemporary feminist empiricism, according to Intemann (2010), is now characterized by three main features: contextualism, normativity, and a commitment to social epistemology. First, it is contextualist in its view of theory justification: scientific claims are justified within particular contexts of assumptions, values, aims, and methodologies. Theories are not universally applicable or justified according to fixed criteria but are judged by how well they serve the contextual goals of a research project. Second, feminist empiricism is normative: it recognizes that cognitive values and the aims of science themselves may depend on social and ethical commitments. Scientific goals, such as eliminating gender bias or promoting human flourishing, are not neutral but reflect the values of a given community. In other words, science

ought to allow dependence on social and ethical commitments. Third, feminist empiricism stands for a social epistemology that locates objectivity not in the isolated individual but in critically structured communities of inquiry, where diverse perspectives are seen as a crucial check and balance against bias (Longino 1990, 2002; Anderson 2004).

Despite these shared commitments, Intemann argues that feminist empiricism and standpoint theory still diverge in important ways, particularly regarding the role of diversity and values in achieving objectivity. Feminist empiricism values diversity because it helps correct individual or localized bias. For example, Longino argues that exposure to a plurality of views makes it easier to detect unjustified assumptions and background beliefs, especially those shaped by dominant ideologies. In this view, diversity increases the likelihood that research communities will be able to engage in transformative criticism—a process by which claims are assessed, debated, and either revised or rejected based on input from a variety of perspectives or social positions (Longino 2002, 128).

However, Intemann points out that feminist empiricism lacks a clear account of *which* values or perspectives should count as epistemically beneficial. Without such a principled account, the inclusion of some values could be problematic. Her most notable example of this is her questioning whether members of the Flat Earth Society should be included in the research of astronomy. If all social values are admitted into scientific discourse for critical scrutiny then empiricism would need to accommodate even those values that are epistemically harmful. This leaves it vulnerable to the criticism that it cannot distinguish between values that promote epistemic progress and those that hinder it. Intemann references this as a key tension in feminist empiricism: while it supports the inclusion of social values, it lacks internal criteria to exclude those that are epistemically damaging.

Here, Intemann believes standpoint theory offers crucial advantages. Unlike feminist empiricism, standpoint theory makes strong claims about the epistemic advantage of marginalized groups. It argues that social positions influence not only what individuals experience but also what they are likely to understand about social reality. In particular, members of marginalized groups are often placed in positions where they must learn both the dominant perspective and their own, thus giving them a broader, more critical understanding of social structures (Hill Collins 1991; Wylie 2003). Standpoint theory, in its contemporary form, does not assume that all oppressed people automatically have epistemic privilege. Rather, it argues that marginalized social locations tend to generate experiences and knowledge that are systematically excluded by dominant scientific paradigms.

Intemann incorporates recent developments in standpoint theory to emphasize that a standpoint is not simply a social location but an achieved critical consciousness. This critical consciousness arises from collective reflection on lived experience, often in response to systemic injustice. It is not automatic or guaranteed. The distinction here is crucial: standpoint theorists no longer argue that all women or all marginalized people hold inherently better knowledge, but that when these experiences are critically analysed and shared within epistemic communities, they often expose blind spots in dominant research frameworks.

From this, Intemann argues that standpoint theory provides feminist empiricism with a mechanism for adjudicating which values are epistemically beneficial: those that emerge from critically engaged, marginalized perspectives are more likely to reveal entrenched biases and promote objectivity. In other words, standpoint theory justifies the inclusion of specific values—not because they are widely held or politically convenient, but because they emerge from social positions that are structurally more likely to reveal distortions in knowledge production.

One of Intemann's central motivations for merging the two theories is her concern that without standpoint theory's account of epistemic advantage, feminist empiricism cannot explain why some forms of diversity matter more than others. If empirical adequacy and critical scrutiny are the only criteria, then empiricism has no principled reason to favour feminist values over, say, neoliberal or conservative ones. This makes it difficult to explain why the participation of marginalized groups should be prioritized or even why it is desirable beyond general pluralism. It does not account for particular groups being able to offer unique insights or correct distortions.

Moreover, Intemann critiques the empirical mechanisms by which feminist empiricism proposes to regulate value inclusion. While empiricists like Longino emphasize the importance of social mechanisms such as uptake of criticism and equality of intellectual authority, Intemann argues that these do not go far enough in grounding epistemic normativity. They may prevent obvious forms of exclusion, but they do not justify why certain epistemic agents should be given more weight or why certain perspectives matter. Without a theory of epistemic advantage, empiricism is left hoping that its mechanisms will generate justice and objectivity, rather than offering a theoretical reason to expect that outcome.

Consequently, Intemann proposes "feminist standpoint empiricism" as a way to resolve this tension. The new synthesis would maintain empiricism's commitments to evidence, critical testing, and empirical success, while incorporating standpoint theory's recognition of the epistemic significance of social location and critical consciousness. In this hybrid view,

diversity is not merely instrumental but epistemically substantive. The inclusion of marginalized perspectives is not simply about fairness or bias correction; it is a constitutive part of what makes science objective. In other words, instead of using values as tools to generate critique, values are seen as epistemically significant, meaning, holding certain values can led people to detect assumptions and question dominant perspectives. This combined with empiricism holds for a much stronger theory.

Intemann's synthesis echoes the suggestions of earlier scholars like Elizabeth Anderson, who argued that value judgments play legitimate roles in science when they contribute to empirical adequacy and social responsibility (Anderson 2004). Likewise, Helen Longino herself acknowledges that some values are better than others in promoting the goals of science, especially when those goals include exposing social bias (Longino 1996). However, Intemann claims these commitments remain underdeveloped unless empiricism adopts standpoint theory's explicit account of epistemic advantage.

II. Problems with the HIV Researcher Example

To illustrate the epistemic advantage of standpoint theory, Intemann offers a well-known example: a female biomedical researcher from sub-Saharan Africa working in the U.S. on HIV vaccines. Her marginal social position, Intemann claims, gives her with insight into how Western scientific assumptions fail to translate to her home context. For instance, failing to account for local refrigeration capabilities or gendered barriers to vaccine access.

However, this example is lacking. It can be argued that the researcher's insight arises from her professional training, domain-specific expertise, and culturally situated knowledge, not from marginalization specifically. It is unclear whether being marginalized is a necessary or sufficient condition for these insights. The example, in fact, highlights the relevance of local knowledge and interdisciplinary experience, not necessarily a standpoint derived from oppression. Also, her ability to recognize flawed assumptions may derive from exactly the kind of diverse criticism that Longino mentions within empiricism: diverse perspectives are epistemically useful because they increase the pool of alternative hypotheses and expose hidden biases. And that is not because they are morally superior or inherently more accurate.

It is also worth questioning whether standpoint theory provides a reliable guide for evaluating such cases. Would a privileged researcher who has worked extensively in the field, situated within local communities, and gained awareness of contextual constraints lack epistemic knowledge by virtue of her social position? It seems to me the obvious answer is no. But Intemann does not address such counterexamples. Nor does she explore examples outside

the medical and development context, such as in theoretical physics or pure mathematics, where marginalization may not generate meaningful epistemic advantage. Although she does mention that in those areas these ideas are less relevant.

In short, the example supports the value of diverse experience but does not necessitate standpoint theory.

III. Misunderstanding Feminist Empiricism

A large part of Intemann's argument rests on the claim that feminist empiricism lacks internal criteria to distinguish helpful from harmful values. She suggests that empiricism would have to accommodate even the ridiculous values of tobacco companies or Flat Earthers. But this characterization unfairly distorts feminist empiricism.

Feminist empiricists like Longino, Nelson, and Anderson argue that for a value to play a legitimate epistemic role, it must survive critical scrutiny and be empirically valid. Therefore not all values automatically qualify. Only those that promote open criticism, diversify inquiry, and improve empirical performance do. In other words, empiricism does not accept any value uncritically. Rather, it treats values as revisable background assumptions subject to communal scrutiny. If tobacco-funded research fails peer criticism or produces unreliable predictions, its values are rightly excluded.

Longino, for instance, emphasizes *transformative criticism*, which means that values must pass through a critical process in a community that has a framework to recognize bias and uptake criticism. Similarly, Anderson proposes that value-laden assumptions are acceptable only if they contribute to the epistemic aims of the research and withstand rational debate. These mechanisms ensure that empiricism does not fall into relativism.

Intemann overlooks these internal safeguards and instead distorts feminist empiricism as lacking epistemic standards. Her critique would be more forceful if empiricists really did treat all values as equal, but they do not. The very problem she attributes to empiricism is already addressed by its own emphasis on critical community practices.

IV. The Risks of Standpoint Theory

While standpoint theory offers valuable insights, it also presents certain epistemic challenges. One concern is that it may implicitly treat perspectives arising from marginalization as inherently more reliable, which can conflict with the fallibilist nature of scientific inquiry. If marginalized positions are treated as automatically more accurate, criticism becomes harder,

and dissent may be delegitimized. This is not merely a theoretical worry. In practice, standpoint claims have sometimes fostered intellectual gatekeeping where disagreement is dismissed as stemming from privilege.

Standpoint theory also presumes that lived experience of oppression yields epistemic advantage, but this generalization is problematic. Members of oppressed groups can internalize dominant ideologies, hold unexamined beliefs, or simply disagree with each other. Social location does not guarantee critical insight. Standpoints are not automatic; they require reflection and collective analysis. But if that is so (which Intemann had argued already), then what matters epistemically is the process of critique, not the standpoint itself.

Feminist empiricism, by contrast, does not support any particular position. It values diversity as a source of critical tension, not authority. This makes it better suited to maintaining pluralism within science. While empiricism acknowledges that power influences knowledge, it resists the temptation to turn social identity into epistemic authority.

V. Objections

One possible objection is that critical empiricism still depends on dominant epistemic norms, which can marginalize differing perspectives. But this critique overlooks that critical empiricism demands that those norms be changed. Longino explicitly argues that the norms of science must themselves be open to revision when challenged by excluded voices. In this way, empiricism remains self-corrective.

Another objection is that some critics argue that *only* standpoint theory takes seriously how political power struggles (like oppression, marginalization, etc.) affect the production of knowledge, especially in science. But critical empiricism also sees political struggle as important, it just doesn't link better knowledge to someone's identity. Instead of giving someone special authority because they are marginalized, it aims to improve science by encouraging better reasoning and open debate across diverse communities.

Conclusion

Kristen Intemann's proposal for merging feminist empiricism and standpoint theory under the banner of "feminist standpoint empiricism" emerges from a laudable attempt to combine the strengths of both traditions. However, her synthesis rests on a problematic example, a misreading of feminist empiricism, and a risky overvaluation of standpoint epistemology. The better path lies in revising and fortifying feminist empiricism from within. By reaffirming its

commitment to evidence, critical discourse, and social inclusion, feminist empiricism remains the most promising approach to achieving objectivity in science without surrendering to essentialism or epistemic hierarchy.

References

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