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*Objectivity, Perspectivity and Difference:
Issues in Feminist Epistemology*

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OBJECTIVITY, PERSPECTIVITY AND DIFFERENCE

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EXPERIENCE - (An Introduction)

This thesis rose out of a desire to assert the role and importance of experience in knowledge. (By experience I mean here the lived experience of our personal and social existence in the world, not the more narrowly and simply conceived sensory experience of empiricism). As an undergraduate student of philosophy, it seemed to me that I was being presented with a picture of knowledge in which what was known, the 'object' of knowledge, (usually called 'P') was a proposition which somehow stood all alone and by itself; an independent, isolated 'fact': while the knower ('S') was a mere placeholder, an abstract 'subject' whose role was to 'do' the knowing without in any way shaping or mediating what was known, or having any relationship with it.

On this picture, 'S' is not a concrete or particular knower with limitations or advantages deriving from her history or situation, but an instance of a (theoretically)¹ universal human rationality: and thus similar to all other knowers, and replaceable. It did not matter who 'S' was (I mean that in a sense that includes her social and historical

¹Though supposedly universal, rationality was generally held to be a quality possessed mainly, only, by upper class white male westerners.

location, her previous experiences, her self-understandings, conceptual recourses etc) -all that mattered was that she proposed, rejected or assented to claims rationally; it being presumed that any other knower, using the same approved methods, would come to the same conclusions. The knowledge 'itself' would be 'there' somehow, independently of who asserted it, just waiting to be discovered/ accepted by rational minds.

This picture seemed at odds with the way things actually seemed to be. To me it did seem to matter *who* claimed what, *who* accepted or denied what. I mean 'who' not in some sense of essential identity, but as a short way of saying something very long and complicated about various knowers in their specific and complex situations. 'Who' thus includes knowers' social and political locations, their personal histories, the different experiences and ways of conceptualizing these experiences that they have been exposed to, and so on. Whether a knower is open to an idea, can agree with it, or even whether they can understand it, seemed to me to depend a lot on who the knower is in the above sense; and not simply, or only, or at all? on the rationality and justification of the claim conceived of in an abstract way as following proposition by proposition like a geometry rider.

The concept of experience is crucial here, because it is in relation to our previous experience and understandings that a claim is seen as likely, or relevant, or reasonable, or interesting or challenging or whatever; and treated accordingly. The reception of, and response to, a claim

depends not only on qualities relating to the claim 'itself', but to considerations about the knowers and their subjectivities as well. (Indeed it doesn't really seem to me that you can talk about the claim 'itself' as though it existed in isolation, or could be isolated from the context of its production or reception - in fact a claim in pure isolation would be meaningless:- it is the context that provides the constraints and possibilities, the probable interpretations and meaning).

'Who knows what' expresses a relation in which 'what' is known is to some extent dependent on 'who' the knower is, and when and where they are situated. This is usually acknowledged in cases of historical and geographical location - e.g. most people would accept that it would be unlikely/ impossible for someone in the Middle Ages to know certain theories about quantum mechanics for instance, or, (before the occurrence of widespread T.V. and other media of communication at least, and perhaps still) for people who have lived all their lives in a hot, dry climate to know (some) things known by those who live in cold, wet ones, and vice versa. It also seems reasonable to claim that it would be easier, or more likely, for these variously located people to know certain things than for others to do so. Thus it doesn't seem too controversial to say that in order to know certain things you must be in a *position* to know it, and that you must possess the 'background' knowledge required for further knowledge to make sense to you, to be acceptable to you.

In 'ordinary life' it does seem that we recognize a

link between our experience and position, and what we can or do know. For instance, if we hear a Tory M.P. saying how easy it is to live on Income Support (something we know to be false) and presuming that we rule out the possibility that they are lying to serve their own ends, and that we decide that they must merely be mistaken; our response is often to say "Well, how can *they* know? They've never tried to do so, they don't know what it is like. If they did have to, they'd soon change their minds." The same goes for male judges who blithely pronounce that rape is "no great trauma", or that if a woman says "no" she often really means "yes" - we feel "who are they to say what it's like, or what someone really means?- *they* are in no position to claim to know". We also sense that they *are* in a position perhaps *not* to know, or not to want to know, or which makes it hard to know, or which makes ignorance, denial or distortion easy or likely.

Conversely, we also recognize that some people *are* in a position to know, or are in a better position than others, comparatively. This does not mean, of course, that what they are claiming is *necessarily* right, but it does give their claim a certain reasonable credibility. Being in a position to know, whatever the particular sense of 'position' in use (more overtly political, historical or what ever) often translates into having or having had certain experiences, or an amount of experience in a certain thing - as in "I know what the view from the Alhambra is like because I've been there", "I know a lot about hitching, because I spent eight

years travelling around that way", etc.²

Experience is used as a criterion against which to evaluate claims. Thus, for instance, reading a book on childcare, you judge it in relation to your own previous beliefs and experiences of childcare - (does it affirm your experience or provide a convincing reinterpretation of it? Does it confirm impressions you too have had? Are its claims compatible with most of your own thoughts on the subject? Is it persuasive enough to change your mind about things?)³ We also evaluate claims in the light of any information we have about the author's experiences. For instance, discovering that the author of a book on childcare has never engaged in reasonably long-term, full-time child care; or has always employed a live-in nanny (which is quite often the case in fact) lessens their credibility in my eyes - it does not mean that they are necessarily wrong, but it puts more onus on them to be able to justify their claims, to be able to persuade me of their validity.

² see retrospective point in chapter 4 in relation to this

³ If you came across a book which ran counter to most of your experience; rejected, denied or ignored most of your beliefs and understandings; you would want to know how/ why someone came to write what from your point of view is such an incorrect/ misguided/ very annoying book. And typically you would look for facts about the author, and the context in which she was writing, which would help you to explain this. When/ if you discover that it was written by a doctor/ psychologist in 19whatever, when there was this big craze for 'scientific' or behaviourist models of childrearing (also seen in relation to the social/ political situation at the time) you feel better able to understand and evaluate her claims. You also become aware that your own beliefs and experiences have a location and context, and are not in any way 'natural' or universal, but a product of your own particular situation.

If we recognize that our knowledge is shaped and limited by our particular position in a complex social world; if we recognize that we judge and react to things in terms of our previous experiences, and evaluate the claims of others by what we know of their position and experience in comparison with our own, what follows? It does seem to me reasonable to emphasise that we come to know through our experience (broadly defined) - we cannot know what we have not 'encountered', perceptively, theoretically, reflectively, emotionally, sensually and so on. Our knowledge is a product of our involvement in and interaction with the world and other people. And depending on how we are located in that world and in relation to other people, we will come to know different things, and the 'same' or similar things differently; as depending on how we are situated, we will have different experiences; different possibilities will emerge for us to take up and act upon; and, exposed to different discourses, conceptual schemes and ways of making sense of the world, we will understand them differently.

Thus, it seems to me that we should pay a lot of attention to the experiential and situated 'nature' of knowledge; to considerations about knowers and the circumstances in which they know, as well as to what is known - as the latter is not an entity existing on its own that can simply be 'grasped' by anyone, anywhere; but something produced in, and dependent on, a context. *But*, I wish to emphasise that a recognition of the fundamental significance of experience entails a *critical* attention to experience.

Experience provides us a *route* to knowledge, an impetus to know or understand, a *provisional* ground from which to investigate, a criterion against which to test claims; but it does not provide certainty, or an unproblematic access to truth.

Because you experience something in a certain way it does not necessarily follow that your understanding of it is 'correct' or 'adequate', and although you judge things against your experience; that cannot be your *only* criterion, for a tension between your previous understandings and a further and challenging claim can reveal, in consideration, that it is your understanding of your experience that needs to be revised, rather than the claim rejected.

Experiences are particular, contingent and dependent on context. If you yourself have had certain experiences of childrearing, for example, you can't just assume that everyone else who has reared children has, or has had them; or, if they claim not to have had them, that they are wrong or lying or somehow deluded. Or, if you accept that they have not, you cannot assume that there is something 'wrong' or 'funny' about them, that they are an exception or special case; that *really* everyone who rears children experiences these things, or experiences them in a certain way. You have to recognize that child rearing occurs in specific circumstances, and that your experience is a product of those circumstances; the way childrearing *can* be in certain circumstances, not the way childrearing 'really is' abstracted from context.

This does not mean that many child-rearers won't have

similar experiences; that you cannot compare experiences of childrearing and the circumstances in which they occur and come up with interesting differences and similarities; or make provisional generalizations - but it does mean that you have to be very careful when you are doing so. You certainly can't extrapolate from your own limited experience to make universal claims, or substantive claims about the 'essential' 'natures' of phenomena, especially as it is so extremely difficult to categorize or compartmentalize our experience, to untangle all the different aspects and influences that are always interwoven in it. How do you separate out the 'childrearing' aspects of your experience from the 'living on State Benefits in Urban Britain in the early 1990's' aspects from the 'being white and female and middle class' aspects from the 'having such and such temperament and expectations' aspects and so on? What to you might seem a 'natural' and almost instinctual aspect of caring for children, something peculiar to childcare itself, could to someone from a different perspective, seem a novel or peculiar social custom, not intrinsic to childcare at all.

Furthermore, the 'having' of an experience does not ensure the 'correctness' or aptness of your understanding of it, or the claims that you base on it. Experience does not give unmediated access to truth- the truth of your interpretations of it does not follow unproblematically from some

*Jean Grimshaw makes a similar point in *Feminist Philosophers: Women's Perspectives on Philosophical Traditions* (Wheatsheaf Brighton 1986) p85

given nature of the experience 'itself', but depends on the context -in which it occurs and how it is understood in relation to it. A different or revised understanding of the circumstances in which some experience occurred will lead to a different understanding of the experience. For instance, if someone you know behaves in a distant, offhand way to you when you see them in the street; you might, in the absence of any more likely explanation, presume that they are being rude to you - you experience their behaviour as rudeness, and respond with anger or hurt. If you then find out that they were very preoccupied and worried about something you would decide that your first understanding of the situation was wrong or inadequate, and revise it accordingly.

Although the meaning of the experience is not given; although it is relative to knowers and contexts and ways of conceptualizing it, this does not mean that there cannot be any truth about a matter, or that there are *only* lots of different truths. As can be seen from the example above, some interpretations will be better than others, nearer the 'truth', even if the truer claim is itself provisional and likely to be superceded by another. And though there might indeed be lots of different 'truths', depending on perspective and means of conceptualizing, this does *not* mean that they are *necessarily* all equal, or incomparable, or that some might not be 'better' or preferable to others by various criteria.

If an experience is not 'given', it is certainly resistant to our constructions - it places definite constraints on interpretation. In the above case my acquaint-

tance could perhaps have been rude, or preoccupied, or temporarily distracted by something, or very forgetful of people; but she was *not* effusive in her acknowledgement of me, she did *not* chatter eagerly to me for hours, etc. (Nor, of course, was she piloting an aeroplane or lying unconscious in hospital, or whatever). If our experience does not provide us with certainty or obvious truths, it does provide us with something positive to direct and guide our understanding; it definitely places limits on what can be truthfully said (effectively ruling out almost all that we theoretically *could* say if practical considerations, the desire for effective and meaningful communication, and the desire to avoid delusion did not matter to us).

Yet despite what seems to me the 'obvious' and important part that experience plays in the production of our knowledge, it has been ignored, rejected or disparaged by many/ most of the widely held or influential theories of knowledge. Among traditional accounts, the rationalist strand in epistemology has emphasized the 'distracting' qualities of the senses; the fact that sensory perception can be deceptive; our understanding of our experience erroneous; and that they cannot provide us with certainty or secure foundations. On such a position it is argued that knowledge should thus ideally be pursued via detachment from, or transcendence of, the messy and confusing qualities of the sensory and the subjective; and proceed through the use of pure reason - the rational mind (being held to be different and distinct from the body) being able to escape the limits, perspectivity and uncertainty of physical

existence.

The empiricist strand has held experience to be a reliable source of knowledge, even of certainty; but has focused on sensory experience/ perception (especially observation) conceived of in a very problematic way. Empiricism (like rationalism) sees the 'subject' and 'object' of knowledge as separate; but with the subject now passively receiving brute sensory data from the environment without being implicated in its reception or construction. This data is presumed to be the same for all perceivers, unmediated by the knowers subjectivity. Building on this common and given foundation, the task of the knower is to apply accepted methods to this data to reach justified and valid conclusions. The 'lived' experience I am primarily concerned with is very different to 'sensory' experience as understood by empiricism (this is not to imply that I accept their picture of sensory experience - I actually think that sensory experience properly conceived would be very similar to the lived experience I am attempting to describe) - it is socially and historically located, contingent, perspectival, mediated, uncertain, non-universalizable. Most importantly, perhaps, the 'subject' is implicated in the knowledge produced.

But experience of this sort has commonly been denigrated as not providing 'real' knowledge - in fact as being an obstacle to the attainment of 'real' knowledge. Experience in this sense is often described as 'mere' anecdote and opinion; held to be particular, subjective and emotional - qualities which have traditionally been held as contamina-

ting of 'true' and 'objective' knowledge, which is supposed ideally to be universal, impersonal and abstract. Personal experience, with its contingency and perspectivity, is held to deal only in appearances, with how things *seem* (to us) which might not be, or is not, the way things 'really are'. 'Real knowledge' is believed to deal with 'reality', with the way things 'really are' behind and beyond appearances - with the way things supposedly are 'in themselves', 'objectively', unmediated by the knower's subjectivity or perspective. This reality/ appearance distinction⁵ (which does have its uses) often becomes more of a dichotomy, with the two concepts being seen as *opposed* - with 'appearances' being valued negatively in relation to 'reality', and being seen as the opposite of reality, i.e. *unreal* and delusory. Such a picture allows you appearance *or* reality, but does not allow an understanding of their interrelation - of appearance *as* reality, or of reality *as* appearing, for instance. A similar (and related) phenomenon has occurred in the conceptualization of subjectivity and objectivity, and it is to this that I now turn.

⁵This distinction is further emphasized in the social and political 'sciences' by the concept of 'false consciousness', which, while it accepts the social perspectivity of knowledge, argues that our subjectivity is the product of ideology and thus that subjectivity/ experience cannot provide us with 'real'/ 'true' knowledge, which can only come with an 'objective' theory that enables you to see the reality behind or obscured by the appearances. While there is something in this notion, its use can act to devalue personal experience, implying that whatever you think or feel your experience is, however you understand a phenomenon subjectively, *really* things are (quite often radically) otherwise, as only the (right) theory can inform us.

OBJECTIVITY

'Objectivity' has been seen as one pole of an opposition, that between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity'. There is a connection between this dichotomy and many other commonly accepted ones like reason/ emotion, universal/ particular, abstract/ concrete, mind/ body, male/ female, etc. All these dichotomies are seen as exclusionary (as one or the other, but not both), as isolable (existing in pure states, separate from and not implicated in their opposed term), and hierarchical, in that one term (the left-hand one in all these examples) is seen as positive or privileged, with the other being valued negatively in comparison. The left-hand terms have, in Western culture, been associated with ideals of masculinity, the opposed and devalued ones with femininity. The left-hand terms have also commonly been associated with 'real' knowledge, the right-hand terms with experience. These dichotomies suggest that experience is a very different sort of phenomenon to knowledge, its opposite in fact; and that terms associated with experience are not epistemologically significant, or if so only in a negative sense, as phenomena that detract from knowledge and should thus be guarded against. So subjectivity, emotion, particularity, the 'bodily', etc. are seen as distorting, distracting or confusing, obstacles to the attainment of knowledge; and as aspects which can or should ideally be avoided, excluded or overcome in the pursuit of knowledge.

Integral to this conception of knowledge is the separation of the knower from the known, and the separation of the knowledge produced from the context of its production. The concept of 'objectivity' has been used to hide the way knowledge is constructed in concrete social relations, rendering the knower an abstract or invisible 'subject', and the known an 'object' existing in itself, independently and abstracted from context. 'Objectivity' as commonly understood thus 'objectifies' - it renders what is known into an object, incapable of replying or reflecting back on the knower. Knowing seen thus becomes a non-symmetrical relation, without reciprocity, and without responsibility, as the knower is not implicated in the knowledge, or held accountable for it - rather the 'facts of the matter' speak for themselves'. Often the passive voice is used (as in 'it is claimed that...'), further disavowing the subjective constitution of knowledge, implying that no-one in particular is responsible for the claim. When a claim is acknowledged to have been made by someone in particular, the imputed passivity of the knower, the denial of subjective input, absolves the knower of liability, for, as Jennifer Ring says:¹ "my data made me do it".

Visual metaphors are very prevalent in theories of

¹Jennifer Ring *Modern Political Theory and Contemporary Feminism: A Dialectical Analysis* (SUNY Press Albany N.Y. 1991) p83

knowledge, and many critics, like Keller and Grontkowski² have commented on the way that using vision as an analogy permits an illusion of disengagement and separation; so that it seems that we are observing things from a distance, simply registering what is there, independently of us. This may indeed be so, but perhaps stems from a faulty understanding of perception - certainly observation is not passive and unmediated as such analogies often assume³. In actual fact attention to observation could, one would have thought, lead to an emphasis on the perspectivity and partiality of knowledge, its dependence on the observers constitution and position, and the conditions in, and media through which, it occurs. Yet despite (or because of?) this objective knowledge is held to ideally reflect 'The View from Nowhere'⁴ or 'the God's Eye View'⁵; not related to, or transcendent of, any particular point of view or perspective. 'Real' know-

²Evelyn Fox Keller and Christine R. Grontkowski, *The Mind's Eye* in Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka (eds) *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and the Philosophy of Science* (Reidel Dordrecht 1983)

³See Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges; The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective* in *Feminist Studies* Vol 14 no 3 Autumn 1988 for a very useful attempt to recoup visual images which emphasises the active and mediating nature of visual apparatuses, and the partial, embodied and situated nature of knowledge. Her article is an expression of the need to retain a (substantially revised) notion of objectivity, similar to my project and broadly compatible with it.

⁴Thomas Nagel's phrase - see his *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford University Press Oxford 1986)

⁵Susan Bordo's phrase - see her *Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-Scepticism* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (Routledge London 1990)

ledge is seen as aperspectival, non-subjective. As said before, subjectivity is seen as distorting or contaminating of knowledge, and the aim of objectivity is to eliminate the perspectivity of a knower's point of view, thus eliminating its subjectiveness and its partiality - partiality meaning both limit and bias.

~ Contrary to its own ideal of ahistorical, non-situated knowledge, 'objectivity', like all concepts, has its own history and location, having developed in particular social and political circumstances in response to a variety of concerns and aspirations. As Lorraine Code⁶ says, the very ideal of objectivity that argues for a suppression of subjectivity, is itself a product of subjective interests and motivations. She describes objectivity, as commonly understood, as having evolved out of a mixture of Baconian Science, Cartesianism, empiricism, and positivism. Fundamental to the developing notion of objectivity was the idea of detachment. I have already referred to the empiricist belief in the passivity of the observer, detachedly viewing objects from a distance and receiving unmediated sensory data, but Cartesian rationalism also emphasizes detachment - as in the separation of the mental from the corporeal, and the detachment of the human from the natural world which rendered 'nature' now totally devoid of mind and thought, an 'object' to be known under mechanical description.

⁶Lorraine Code *What can she know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Cornell University Press Ithica N.Y. 1991) p48.

Susan Bordo⁷ describes the Cartesian epistemological stance as based on clarity, dispassion, and above all *detachment* "from the particularities of time and place, from personal quirks, prejudices and interests, and most centrally, from the object itself", and sees this stance as developing from subjective considerations - from a desire to control discomfiting and disconcerting emotions, among them the doubts, fears and anxieties unleashed by scepticism.⁸ Cartesian epistemology is, she suggests, a defensive response to these anxieties (the anxieties not only of Descartes but of a whole ruling culture/ era emerging in the 'west' at that historical moment) - one partly motivated by a search for security, stability and certainty. Whatever one thinks of the more 'psychological' aspects of her theory, it is certainly the case that much traditional epistemological theory is not immediately understandable unless one realizes that what concerns these theorists is not so much *knowledge* as the quest for *certainty*, with many epistemological works being a curious mixture of radical (and often very impractical, un'reasonable' and 'unworldly') doubt, with what seems like an equally impractical, unreasonable and unworldly desire for certainty.

Descartes, for instance, after describing a radical doubt of (almost) all that is taken for granted, proposed that knowledge should be built on a secure foundation of indubitable first principles, following strict rules and

⁷Susan Bordo *The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought* in *Signs* Vol 11 no 3 1986, p451

⁸See Bordo, *ibid* pp439-456 and Code, pp50,51.

methods of inference (which still, however, needed to be guaranteed by a God). There should be no appeal other than to Reason itself (Reason being held to be universal and not limited by historical and other contingencies) - thus there could be no claims to knowledge based on 'opinion', 'prejudice' or 'tradition', the testimony of the senses, or any other source or authority, save that of Reason. Truth was to be pursued individually by isolated, autonomous knowers attempting self-transparency through what Richard Bernstein calls "solitary monological self-purification of all prejudice".⁹

The empiricist tradition is described by Code as holding observation claims about medium-sized objects as paradigmatic of 'objective' knowledge¹⁰ - with the attendant idea that we just 'come across' them without any input or preconception of our own shaping the encounter.¹¹ One can imagine that as 'objects' they fulfil their role in the standard knowledge equation easily, and that as medium sized they don't present us with the problems that very small or

⁹Richard Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics and Praxis* (Basil Blackwell Oxford 1983) pp16-20. (He too discusses what he calls the 'Cartesian Anxiety' lying behind objectivism. (and its twin, relativism).)

¹⁰See Code p36,37.

¹¹Code argues that knowledge of 'second persons' has at least as good a claim to paradigmatic status as knowledge of medium-sized objects. Certainly such a paradigm would have interesting and fruitful implications. Off-hand, just writing them down as they come to me, such knowledge could be seen as contextual, emotional, subjective, reciprocal, interested, evaluative, dialogical, dialectical, in process, changing, conceivable of degrees and means, not finite or absolute, and so on.

very large objects might do, due to difficulties arising from our relative size, which might highlight our own constitution and limitations. Objects of such a type, although initially observed perspectively, are held to be known aperspectively, or from all angles at once- thus we 'know' the block is six sided, it is *really* six sided, even though we only see three at a time, from where we are. Such objects are also supposed to be the same for all knowers - it doesn't matter who you are, all perceivers are supposed to be alike and interchangeable in their reception of sensory data. Claims about such objects are held to be open to public scrutiny and verification in terms of empirical testing and logical analysis and critique; knowers again being held to be alike in their possession of rationality. The task of epistemology is seen to be that of formulating rules for making valid claims and inferences from the initial 'given' grounds and all 'subjective' elements are supposed to be controlled or eliminated.

Part of the reason why subjective elements, like the often cited 'emotions, values and interests' of the knower, are supposed to be excluded in order to achieve objectivity, is that this is deemed necessary for the possibility of intersubjective verification (which is one aspect of what is usually invoked in any claim to 'objectivity'). Since people differ widely in their interests, values, political and moral beliefs etc; and since it is *presumed* that such phenomena are 'subjective' (in the sense of not being objective; not being open to public or empirical testing and

verification, not being 'factual'),¹² the presence of such elements is believed to make it impossible to verify knowledge claims, unless the 'subjective' content could somehow be separated out from the 'objective' and factual elements.

Israel Scheffler, in his defence of 'The Standard View of Objectivity'¹³ describes science ('science', especially physical science, or, more accurately, a certain (inaccurate?) *understanding* of science; being commonly held as a model of what knowledge should be like) as a "systematic, public enterprise controlled by logic and empirical fact"¹⁴, the purpose of which is to formulate truth about the natural world. The criterion of objectivity, he says, requires that all scientific statements may be tested by "independent and impartial criteria in converse with a community of scientists". Contrary to the somewhat unbelievable picture we are sometimes presented with - of scientists as impersonal, detached, neutral, unemotional, beings; almost machine-like (the effect of which is countered to some extent by the almost as common portrayal of scientists as eccentric, excitable, intuitive and slightly crazy geniuses) - Scheffler, thankfully and

¹² I myself do not accept the fact/ value distinction, especially if seen as in opposition. In so far as such a distinction is useful, it seems to me to be as a question of degree, as they don't seem to me separable; thus facts are evaluative and have subjective elements, just as values can be 'factual' and 'objective'.

¹³ Israel Scheffler *The Standard View of Objectivity* in Stuart Braun, John Fauvel and Ruth Finnegan (eds) *Conceptions of Inquiry* (Methuen & Co. London 1981)

¹⁴ Scheffler p253.

realistically does not require that scientists *themselves* be impartial and detached, only that the tests and controls used to judge their claims be so. He says "impartiality and detachment are not to be thought of as substantive qualities of the scientist's personality or the style of his (sic) thought; scientific habits of mind are compatible with passionate advocacy, strong faith, intuitive conjecture and imaginative speculation. What is central is the acknowledgment of general controls to which one's beliefs are ultimately subject."¹⁵

At first glance, this seems quite attractive and indeed there might be something to it, especially in the implication that objectivity is a means of facilitating critique and evaluation. But there are difficulties with it. Such a conception involves, as Scheffler admits, as conceiving oneself "as linked through potential converse with a community of others, whose difference in location and opinion, yet allow a common discourse and access to a shared world."¹⁶ While there is definitely a certain truth in this (far more than in the strongly relativist picture commonly offered in alternative), as regards social knowledge in particular, it does not take sufficient account of differences between people, the difficulties in communication arising from this; the way the 'common discourse' (if it exists) is in many ways the discourse of a dominating group; and the way such discourse ignores, devalues or distorts the experiences and

¹⁵ Ibid p254.

¹⁶ Ibid p253.

understandings of others' - the way the 'shared world' is structured by power relations which lead to it being experienced and understood differently by people situated differently within it. While I do accept that we occupy a 'shared world', we all occupy very particular parts of it; and I do not think that our understandings of the world from our different situations can necessarily be communicated as simply or unproblematically as Scheffler's account would seem to suggest.

Scheffler recognizes that individual scientists are not, and cannot be impartial. But on what grounds does he then suppose that public scrutiny can be impartial? Maybe there is at work an idea that in the public realm all the various individual particularities and partialities would somehow cancel themselves out. Perhaps, to use a visual analogy, while variously located people might have different perceptions of an object, depending on their perspective and distance from the object, when all these different perceptions are expressed and compared, it might be possible to collectively construct an understanding of 'the object' 'itself' that was 'impartial', in the sense both of not favouring one particular point of view (i.e. not being biased) and also in the sense of being more or less complete, fuller, (i.e. not limited).

As an ideal, this might be acceptable, but as an understanding of how 'science' or public scrutiny actually works, it is woefully inadequate. For the 'community of scientists' does not represent a sample of all the variety of viewpoints available on any matter, but comprises a very

narrow strata of similarly located persons - 'highly' but very particularly educated, predominantly privileged (and in the 'west' at least) 'white' and male. If among this community it doesn't matter 'who you are' (so long as you 'belong' in the first place), but whether your claim stands up to public testing, it is *because* of this similarity of circumstance, that allows 'scientists' to be seen as alike as knowers. And if scientists do understand themselves to be impartial in their collective operation, it is precisely because their similarity prevents them from recognizing their partiality, their difference from other knowers. And if they are deemed to have eliminated 'subjective' or perspectival elements from their claims, it is because the subjective and perspectival nature of *their* knowledge is invisible to them, taken for granted as natural or obvious - it is only in others that it becomes noticeable because of its difference. Similarly, the 'public' realm, while ostensibly open to all, has largely been closed to those who have not had the position or resources or opportunity to occupy it; and has acted to exclude or invalidate the claims of those 'outside' it.

If we were just talking of listening to other peoples claims, paying attention to them, taking account of them; then the problem with an account like Scheffler's would not be so acute; but his conception of objectivity calls for claims to be submitted to the scrutiny of the (ruling) community, and as such involves *evaluation*, not in the general sense of the judgement that is always involved in encountering a claim, but in the sense of a gate-keeping

exercise; of deciding whether a claim is going to be accepted by the community, whether it passes their test of what counts as knowledge and truth. As Patricia Hill Collins states,¹⁷ in making a knowledge claim one "must convince a scholarly community controlled by white men that a given claim is justified" and if that claim violates the fundamental assumptions of that community it is likely to be rejected and suppressed by their knowledge validation processes. Quite apart from the difficulties exposed, for instance, in white male scholars sitting in judgement on feminist or anti-racist critiques of their own sexist and racist practices and understandings, which make claims to 'objectivity' questionable at best; there are huge areas of knowledge where, even with the best, most reflexive and self-conscious will in the world, we just do not have the shared access onto phenomena that the standard conception of objectivity assumes.

Scheffler assumes "that the same things can be observed from different perspectives, and consensus on observation [be] reached without presupposing agreement on relevant theory", that we "observe together the phenomena bearing critically on issues which divide us".¹⁸ He assumes that we can agree as to the 'facts' and we only differ as to how they are interpreted/ theorized/ evaluated - supposing a two stage model of observation and interpretation, where only

¹⁷Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (Unwin Hyman Cambridge, M.A. 1990) p203.

¹⁸Scheffler p257

the second is open to contestation and the first is 'given' commonly to all 'observers' such that it "matters not who they are".¹⁹

Much knowledge is highly dependent on a certain point of view, a certain structural location, a certain subjective constitution, such that however open or well motivated we are, if we do not share that situation, we are not able to properly understand or share the knowledge produced in it. This applies to all knowledge, but is particularly relevant in the case of the more "subjective" or "experiential" types of knowledge - for instance knowledge of what something "is like". Men, for example, simply do not know what it is like to give birth.²⁰ This, I think is not really such a problem - unless one supposes (as it seems is indeed often the case) that one *should* be able to know everything; and so by extension propose that everything we can't know isn't worth knowing, or isn't real knowledge at all, which is probably why knowledge of what something 'is like' is often not considered 'real' knowledge. Accepting the partial and perspectival nature of knowledge means accepting that there are infinite amounts of things we don't or can't know; and

¹⁹ Ibid p253

²⁰ This is not to imply that there is one thing "that it is like" to give birth. Different women who have given birth will have different experiences and understandings of it, depending on the whole complex context in which it occurred. Knowledge of 'what it is like' for you, as specifically located, does not entitle you to claims about 'what it is like' really, or in essence, but perhaps does give you hints (in considering similarities and differences) to understanding better both others claims and your own self interpretations.

doing our best with what we can and do know. The problem comes in when some, either individually or in community, are called upon to "impartially" assess and critique the claims made by differently located others, in the name of objectivity. Can men 'impartially' evaluate claims made by women concerning pregnancy and child birth? Can white women impartially evaluate claims about racial oppression and discrimination made by black women?

It seems to me that Scheffler's conception of objectivity as submission to public and impartial evaluation could only work if it were applied to knowledge that was in some way 'objective' (in the sense of being aperspectival, impartial, impersonal etc.) *already*. To evaluate, compare or arbitrate between 'subjective' or perspectival claims in the way recommended, it seems to me that they would have to be 'cashed in' to a form that was more available to all; a kind of 'common denominator' that lay behind and supported all the subjective and perspectival impressions. And this common denominator would have to be 'the world' as it is inferred to be 'really' behind all the appearances, as seen from nowhere (or everywhere at once). Thus it seems to me that just applying Scheffler's 'impartial and independent' tests, is dependent, for its plausibility and appeal, on a conception of a non-situated, non-conditioned, unmediated knowledge; and the suppression or exclusion of knowledges that don't easily appear to fit this description.

Such a conception seems to me neither desirable or ultimately achievable. This is not to say that it does not have persuasive connotations. There is much that is attrac-

tive about standard conceptions of objectivity, (especially perhaps to subjugated groups). Among the positive elements is the notion that knowledge claims should be judged on their own merits, that the position and standing of those making a claim should not be a factor affecting its evaluation - that a claim is not true or valid because someone (powerful) says so; or invalid because it is made by someone in a relatively inferior position - which one can see could be appealing to those in subordinate positions who would otherwise be disadvantaged by their lack of authority. Scheffler speaks of "recognizing no authority of persons in the realm of cognition"²¹. The rejection of 'Authority', whether of church, royalty, state or whatever, can be seen as radical and liberating, as can the rejection of 'tradition' and 'prejudice', with the corresponding promise of change and progress, fairness and justice. The Universality of Reason, with its (theoretical) equality of knowers as rational beings (and in the empiricist versions as perceivers of sensory data) again can seem a very positive and 'progressive' notion.

Alison Jaggar²² describes the notion of objectivity, of "knowledge which is value free and independent of the social context in which it originates", as having its roots in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Western Europe; the period of the Rise of Capitalism, the development of the Protestant Ethic, and the foundation of modern science. The

²¹ Scheffler p253

²² Alison Jaggar *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Rowman and Littlefield Totowa N.J. 1988) p360

philosophies of Descartes and Galileo, she says, made a clear demarcation between mental and physical being. The former was held to be the realm of value and purpose, while only the latter, the physical world, was held to be susceptible to mechanical explanation and thus to be the domain of science. Science could thus be seen as value-free and 'objective', and so to have a defined area of inquiry unhampered by interference from church and state. In the nineteenth century Max Weber made a similar claim for the objectivity of social science as a value-free enquiry. Jaggar points out that in both cases "the claim that science was value-free was made for the conscious political purpose of defending the scientists from the charge of subverting existing social values"²³. As a tactic these claims to objectivity served their purpose at the time, but what was once progressive, is now seen by many as serving reactionary purposes.

What was once a way for the rising middle classes and others of escaping and undermining the authority of Church, State or nobility, has become a way for the new ruling classes to preserve their own power. The same claims to neutrality, impartiality and universality under whose name they pursued their cause now serve as a means for concealing their own interests and partiality, and for discrediting and disarming the claims of others. However attractive the ideal of objectivity might initially appear, its appeal (in present form) is delusory and disabling.

²³Jaggar p360

As various philosophers of science and sociologists of knowledge have argued, there can be no 'value freedom', no inquiry that is restricted solely to 'objective facts' unaffected by subjective, moral or political considerations. Alvin Gouldner,²⁴ for instance, while accepting the historical importance of the assertion of freedom from political and moral pressures that lay behind claims to value freedom and objectivity, argued that that claim had become a promise not to 'rock the boat' or make critical statements, and was in fact, now serving to uphold the status quo. Claims to detachment and neutrality serve not to remove values and interests, but merely to hide them. He (like Gunnar Myrdal²⁵) argued that a knower's interests and values should rather be made explicit and expressed openly and honestly; Myrdal arguing that doing so would "avoid bias but not one sidedness".

Karl Mannheim²⁶ also argued that ethical presuppositions and evaluations were inseparable from science - without them there would be no questions, no framework, no impetus, interests or direction. He further emphasised the dependence of conceptualization on social position; how membership of specific groups and classes determined the

²⁴ See Alvin Gouldner *Anti Minotaur: The Myth of a value-free Sociology* (abridged) in Stuart Braun, John Fauvel and Ruth Finnegan, (eds) *Conceptions of Inquiry*

²⁵ See Gunnar Myrdal *Objectivity in Social Research* (London Duckworth 1970). Also Michael Lesnoff *The Structure of Social Science* (Allen & Unwin London 1974) chapter 6

²⁶ See Karl Mannheim *Ideology and Utopia* (London Routledge and Kegan Paul 1960). Also Michael Lesnoff *The Structure of Social Science* chapter 6.

presuppositions which mould individual's descriptions of social reality, and again argued that these be raised to consciousness and made explicit. He argued for a distinction between error and the unavoidable one-sidedness and perspectivity of beliefs (which could nevertheless be true, but not absolutely or eternally so- there being no absolute truth existing independently of a knower's social position, no possibility of detachment and neutrality.)²⁷

Others, like Norwood Hanson²⁸ have pointed out that all knowledge and observation is 'theory laden', theoretically informed and mediated. The standard conception of objectivity assumes that the 'facts' 'discovered' by scientists/

²⁷ (Mannheim also held a rather problematic notion of the role of the intelligentsia as synthesizers of these various perspectives into the most comprehensive and explanatory view of the world available at any one time; but that need not detract from the rest of his argument.) I am also slightly concerned by the above writers' proposals that knowers' 'values and interests' should be made explicit and expressed openly and honestly. While I totally agree that these 'interests' and 'values' should not be hidden or disguised, I am concerned that talk of explicitly expressing them might somehow implicitly accept the fact/value dichotomy they (and I) wish to reject; by in a way assuming or implying that the two are separable, that one can know which elements of one's beliefs are 'factual', and which are politically or morally evaluative, and so declare the latter having isolated them from the rest of one's claim. I think that 'facts' and 'values' are actually far more entwined and mutually constitutive than such a picture supposes. It all depends on what 'made explicit' means. If it implies a process whereby one's presuppositions are, as Mannheim says, "raised to consciousness" or exposed through continual criticism and reflexion, then I would go along with it; though bearing in mind that such a process can never be final or absolute, and is always provisional and incomplete.

(See bit on Gadamer later on)

²⁸ See Norwood Hanson *Observation as Theory-laden* in Stuart Braun, John Fauvel and Ruth Finnegan (eds) *Conceptions Of Inquiry*

knowers exist 'out there', independently of the knower and unmediated by her subjectivity. These 'facts' are in theory available to all, and not dependent on any particular position or perspective; open to public testing and verification. Hanson argued, against a conception like Scheffler's, that any appeal to 'empirical facts' only succeeds where the disputing parties already share the same conceptual organization of experience. He claimed that there is a sense in which two observers may not see 'the same thing' even though they are visually aware of the 'same' object.

It is not that they both observe what is 'given' and then interpret it differently - Hanson opposes a sense-datum account in which interpretation is imposed on 'brute' observation: interpretation is not a later or separate occurrence, but operant in the initial act of perception. Seeing is not a passive reception of photons or whatever, but an active organization of visual data - without which that data would be meaningless. What we see depends on our previous knowledge, experience and theories; it is never free from interpretation, organization, shaping by prior assumptions. Perception is always a product of the perceiver and what is perceived - we never perceive a thing 'as it is' independently of our perception of it. The perceiver has to be taken into account too.

If appeal to 'the facts' does not carry the weight it was presumed to (among empiricists/ positivists at least),

Thomas Kuhn^{2*} emphasised the way that appeal to criteria standardly accepted among a scientific community (e.g. accuracy, consistency, scope, simplicity, fruitfulness, predictive capacity) can never conclusively establish the adequacy of one theory over another, either. Individuals differ in how they apply these criteria or in how they interpret them - they may give them different weight, value some over others, or criteria may conflict in their implications. Two scientists fully committed to the same list of criteria might nevertheless reach different conclusions. Not only the criteria, but considerations about the individuals and groups who apply them - their previous experiences, their beliefs and interests, the conceptual schemes to which they have been exposed, their personalities as well as social, historical and political factors, have to be taken into account. Thus theory choice depends on 'subjective' and evaluative as well as 'objective' factors, and these subjective features cannot be ignored.

The traditional view of objectivity argues that 'real', objective, knowledge avoids or transcends the subjective and does not reflect any particular viewpoint. This conception of knowledge is rejected by Marxist critics, who argue that on the contrary all knowledge comes from some particular perspective, and that all thought reflects the circumstances of particular groups as they are situated within society - that what you come to know is conditioned by your social

^{2*} Thomas Kuhn *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press Chicago 1962)

location. Alison Jaggar³⁰ describes Marxism as seeing human beings "as existing necessarily in dialectical inter-relation with each other and the non-human world". Knowledge develops "as part of human activity to satisfy human needs. Rather than viewing knowledge as the purely intellectual construct of a detached spectator, therefore, Marxism sees knowledge....as socially constructed, and the expansion of knowledge as a social product....[S]ince knowledge is one aspect of human productive activity and since this activity is necessarily purposive, the basic categories of knowledge will always be shaped by human purposes and the values on which they are based. For this reason, Marxists conclude that even so-called empirical knowledge is never entirely value free. The conceptual framework by which we make sense of ourselves and the world is shaped and limited by the interests and values of the society we inhabit."

People's ideas will depend not only on the society which they inhabit, but their position within that society. Marxists see society (since the inception of class society) as being divided by class - by the relation different groups bear to the current mode of production, and see people's knowledge as being mediated by their location within class society. The prevailing set of ideas will not reflect the experiences, values and needs of all in society, as due to class divisions these will not be the same, and indeed will often be conflictual. Instead it will tend to reflect the interest of the ruling class - serving to justify and

³⁰ Jaggar p358

perpetuate the status-quo, obscuring some aspects of social life, ignoring others, actively suppressing potentially subversive ideas and observations. Though this reflects the power of the ruling class to control ideas and deny a voice to other classes, it is not simply a conscious plot in their part - the very structure of society will tend to confirm the ruling ideology. For instance "[I]n capitalist society ... individuals are forced to compete with each other to survive, and the apparent universality of competition seems to confirm the view that humans are naturally aggressive and selfish".³¹

Complementing and building on critiques like these, feminists have argued that far from being neutral or universal, most scientific, philosophical and other theories have been written from the point of view of men (specifically white western and usually privileged). Even Marxism, (although many of the basic notions behind the Marxist critique of objectivity and other liberal-connected concepts are shared by, or are acceptable to, many feminists) reflects the experiences, interests and concerns of (certain) men. As Sandra Harding argued³² male theorists only study the things that they have found important and significant (often for preserving their privileged position vis-a-vis others). They ask the questions that appear problematic from *their* position, within their experience -

³¹ Ibid p359

³² Sandra Harding in her *Preface* to Sandra Harding (ed) *Feminism and Methodology* (University of Indiana Press Bloomington 1987)

the questions that white Western middle class men want answered - (in ways that leaves their position and 'masculinity' intact). They ignore, or do not acknowledge, deny or devalue, the experiences, interests and concerns of others and how these are related to their own; which leads them to construct a partial and perverse understanding of social life - not only of 'humanity' or women's lives, but of theirs also.

(Their understanding is distorted not because it is partial and gendered (all understanding being partial/perspectival) but because it falsely claims to be universal and ungendered, and rejects the perspectives of others that could correct or complement their own). In presenting their theories as neutral, universal, non-subjective; male theorists do not take into account their social location, their specificity, how their knowledge claims are constituted and mediated by their situation. As Dorothy Smith points out³³, because the knower is separated out from what is known and deleted or hidden, the linkage between the knowledge claimed and the conditions of its construction are lost. These conditions are taken for granted or ignored, and their relation to what is claimed is never analysed or made explicit, thus preventing any reflexivity. Instead, what is known is objectified - presented as standing alone and unrelated, as an 'object' with no subjective constitution. I will provide a more detailed description and discussion of

³³Dorothy Smith *Womens' Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology* in Sandra Harding (ed) *Feminism and Methodology*

the work of Harding and Smith in further chapters on standpoint theory. First, I wish to consider the work of Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, two feminist theorists who criticize the standard view of objectivity, and argue for the importance of experience and subjectivity (sentiments I share) but with problematic implications that I would not want to endorse; and which initially set me on the course of exploring the possibility of a revised conception of objectivity.

STANLEY AND WISE - A Subjectivist Response

[Stanley and Wise's *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*¹ was published in 1984. (A revised edition is due to be published in Spring 1993- I'm not sure to what extent the new edition will differ in content or emphasis from the first). In *Method, Methodology and Epistemology in Feminist Research Processes*² published in 1990, Stanley and Wise reply to some criticisms of their earlier work, and comment upon it retrospectively in the light of other works of feminist epistemology that they became aware of, or which have appeared since they wrote *Breaking Out*. In this later article they identify their position as an expression of a standpoint epistemology (informed by deconstruction). Points concerning this later or revised stance will come up when I discuss standpoint theory, further on; in this section I shall concentrate on the first version of *Breaking Out*.]

Stanley and Wise are very critical of mainstream social science and academic research. Besides the obvious sexism of conventional social science, they object particularly to 'Grand Theory', and positivist and structural approaches

¹ (Routledge and Kegan Paul London 1984)

² Chapter 2 in Liz Stanley (ed) *Feminist Praxis: Research, Theory and Epistemology in Feminist Sociology* (Routledge London 1990)

which see human action as shaped and determined by 'social forces', structures and institutions; and which provide abstract, universal explanations for social phenomena without taking seriously people's everyday experience and practice. Stanley and Wise argue that many contemporary (mid 80's) feminists involve themselves too much with traditional ideas of objectivity. (They do not explicitly define what they mean by objectivity - I think that they use the term in the sense that implies detachment, universality, non-particularity and so on; the opposite of the 'subjective', seen in the sense of something personal, involved, interested, particular.)

They argue that conventional accounts of knowledge present artificial divisions and dichotomies such as subjectivity/ objectivity as though they existed as pure and separate states, with objectivity being characterized as both a desirable and typically male attribute. This notion of objectivity is unrealizable and misleading, and has been used to justify and perpetuate male sexist thought through techniques which transform the subjective (e.g. "I think") into the 'objective' (as in "it is thought") thus hiding the subjective and partial nature of their claims. Contrary to its own claims, the notion of objectivity is the creation of male subjectivity, and is neither 'objective' or value free. Quoting Adrienne Rich, they claim that "objectivity is the term men have given to their own subjectivity"³. A person's consciousness and experience cannot be "left out" of their

³See Stanley and Wise *Breaking Out* p49

thought or research - it has "a crucial impact on what we see, what we do, and how we interpret what is going on"⁴. Instead of being hidden from view or disguised through claims to objectivity, it should rather be capitalized upon, and made an integral and explicit part of any research process, they argue.

Stanley and Wise also object to what they feel is a growing and rigid orthodoxy in (then) contemporary feminism (especially Marxist feminism) which they see as abandoning the crucial feminist insights such as 'the personal is political' and the emphasis on the importance and validity of experience, for an approach which claims to tell people the one real, objective 'truth' about their lives; labelling any who don't recognize it as 'falsely conscious'. They say that many feminists are "slipping back into what [was] previously rejected - 'expert' and theoretical approaches which are seemingly divorced from personal experience"⁵. They argue that attempts to "get beyond" experience devalue the subjective in favour of universalized and structural theories. Such approaches equate change with structural change, downgrade women's own understandings of their lives, and dismiss personal practice and change. Stanley and Wise argue that in fact such 'objective' theory doesn't actually escape subjective experience, it just multiplies and then generalizes them out of all recognition, and then suggests that we should reject our own understanding of our exper-

⁴ Ibid p50

⁵ Ibid p106

ience if it doesn't fit in with the theory.

Stanley and Wise say that talk of "going beyond" the personal suggests a false distinction between experience and theory - all people derive theory from, and construct explanations of, their experience, in order to understand it. Rather than "going beyond" the personal we should instead go back into it, to explore and explicate our experience. "Feminist theory ought to be much more concrete, connected and everyday."⁶ They don't insist that *all* general and structural analyses should be rejected, but claim that a feminist approach should recognize and begin from the variety and complexity of direct personal experience. Obviously social scientists and researchers do not share exactly the experience of others, and Stanley and Wise reject attempts to deduce or predict people's feelings by a process of 'fictitious sympathy' that is not based on shared experience. Ideally people should present their own accounts of themselves and their understanding of what is going on, by examining these in their context. Researchers should thus make themselves more visible and more vulnerable.⁷

There is a lot about this that is valid and useful, I think, as it stands - but Stanley and Wise *also* insist on "the essential validity of personal experience" which cannot be "invalidated or rejected" because if it is felt, then it is felt, and if it is felt then it is "absolutely real for

⁶ Ibid p106

⁷ Ibid p166-168

the women feeling or experiencing it"⁸. They recognize that we do not *just* experience things, that we necessarily attempt to understand what we are experiencing as it occurs, in terms of our previous beliefs and experiences. What an experience *is* depends on how we interpret or, (as they would

⁸ Ibid p53

say) construct it - its meaning must depend on the context in which it is located. But they then go on to argue that "different states of consciousness aren't just different ways of *interpreting* the social world. We don't accept that there is something *really* there for these to be interpretations of - our differing states of consciousness lead us into constructing different social worlds".⁹ Not only is there no one true way of seeing or understanding reality, but there is no one real 'objective' reality, although they accept that people operate on the assumption that such an objective social world exists. Instead different people inhabit different but co-existent realities which they then negotiate through interaction.¹⁰ Furthermore, even if such a thing as 'truth' exists, say Stanley and Wise, it is undemonstrable. Truth is "a belief, a social construct, in the same way that 'objectivity' is; and both are constructed out of experiences which are, for all practical purposes, the same as 'lies' and 'subjectivity'".¹¹ There "are many (often competing) versions of truth. Which, if any, is 'the'

⁹ Ibid p131

¹⁰ In their later article *Method, Methodology and Epistemology* Stanley and Wise claim that neither they "nor other academic feminists argue against the existence of a material objective reality 'out there' independent of individual constructions of it"(p42) though they still describe "the existence of *different* overlapping but not coterminous material realities" (p41)

¹¹ Stanley and Wise *Breaking Out* p174

truth is irrelevant," they say.¹²

Though there is perhaps a sense in which there is something to what they say about the construction of 'reality', it needs a lot of qualifying. Taken as it is presented, with the kind of emphasis they place upon it, the implicit relativism (especially the "irrelevancy" of the truth) is disturbing. Given Stanley and Wise's objections to conventional ideals of research and objectivity, there seems no necessity or good reason for lapsing into a kind of subjectivism, and indeed it seems very problematic from a feminist point of view. Feminists usually claim that their perspectives are a *better* way of understanding or constructing the world, not *just another* way, one of many which are all different but potentially equally valid. Feminism is a *criticism* of, and challenge to 'conventional' sexist conceptions - it implicitly carries with it the idea that there is something inadequate about these conceptions, and that a feminist understanding is somehow 'nearer the truth' (however you construe that).

And to hold that something is better, more adequate or satisfactory, you need something on which to base this claim, something against which to evaluate competing claims; which has to be more than just 'this is how it seems to me'; even though how it seems to you has to be taken into

¹² Ibid p109.

In *Method, Methodology and Epistemology* they say that although there is truth, or truths, judgements of truth must always be made relative to the particular framework or context of the knower. They espouse what they call 'relativism' but renounce 'radical relativism' which they describe as denying both the existence of truth and any external material reality.

account, incorporated, and explained by any satisfactory 'theory'. Stanley and Wise say, for instance, that conventional social science is sexist. So on what do they base this claim? They say that while they have rejected 'truth', 'better' and 'worse', they judge things by their feelings and experience - they say that their beliefs are 'preferable' because they flow from their own understandings and experience.¹³ They say "Our grounds for criticism involve feeling, belief and experientially based knowledge... if something is contradicted by our experience then we choose our experience, if something runs counter to our beliefs then we choose our beliefs, and if we feel something is wrong then we choose our feelings"¹⁴. They believe all criticism does this, but "dishonestly, presenting it as something else." I think this does have a lot of truth to it, certainly far more so than a picture of knowers rationally and logically inspecting claims proposition by proposition and accepting or rejecting them in a quasi mathematical fashion - criticism does involve what they say, but this cannot be *all* it involves, for we can be *wrong* about our experience, beliefs and feelings: there must be something against which we can critically examine, them as well, at the same time as we utilize them in judging other claims.

'Subjective' experience, though crucial, is insufficient 'on its own' as *how* something is experienced is not

¹³ Ibid pp173,177

¹⁴ Ibid p11

'given' - our understanding does not follow unproblematically from some intrinsic 'nature' of the experience 'itself', but is dependent on other features of the context in which it occurs; and may indeed be inadequate or false - it certainly cannot be uncritically accepted at 'face value', or used as our *only* criterion or measure. Consider the example I gave earlier, where I experience someone as ignoring me on purpose, and later reinterpret that experience. What I felt at first was undoubtedly *real*, but it was nevertheless to some extent 'wrong' and I consider my later understanding as *better* for all sorts of reasons: looked at in a wider context, or in light of further information, it 'fits' better, has more explanatory power, is more consistent or coherent or whatever. Though there are here two interpretations, or constructions of 'reality', I don't consider that there were two alternative realities, the one in which the other person was rude, and the other in which she was not; I consider that there was one, in which she was preoccupied and at first I understood it mistakenly. There seems no point in insisting in *different* realities - I want to know how to relate to the other person in future, and to do that I need to know how she *actually, really* behaved then, so that I can respond appropriately.

Stanley and Wise do describe Feminism as a challenge to what is seen as 'mundane', 'routine' and 'factual'. "Feminism questions this, says it isn't inevitable, and can and must be changed."¹⁹ It "disturbs and threatens what is

¹⁹ Ibid p133

taken for granted as the one real objective reality"¹⁶. I agree, but would argue that it does so by demonstrating that the taken-for-granted isn't 'objective' 'reality', and that 'feminism' while perhaps not *the* 'real objective reality' is certainly a better conception of reality, and that it supercedes or replaces the conventional one. How else could it be a challenge or threat?. A feminist conception of reality is not just a separate reality for feminists - it is supposed to be relevant to, and make a claim on, everyone, to some extent. Certainly non-feminists are supposed to be affected by it in ways that it is doubtful that 'just another' way of seeing things could accomplish.

Some of Stanley and Wise's objections to 'truth' and 'reality' seem to stem from a dislike of other people telling women what they should, or really do, feel or think. "Feminists.... shouldn't tell other women what to be, how to be, how to behave"¹⁷ they say. This seems to me very unlikely to succeed in practice (just saying it contradicts its own advice) and, were it actually possible, a very misguided policy to adopt. Women can be right-wing, racist, bigoted, cruel and just plain wrong about things, and just as feminists oppose politically, ethically and 'factually' unsound beliefs in sexist men, they should oppose them in feminists and other women. Stanley and Wise emphasize that what you feel is 'real' in terms of its consequences, that you will act upon what you feel. This is indeed so, and

¹⁶ Ibid p133

¹⁷ Ibid p8

thus, for example, a woman who feels that other cultures or races are inferior will act upon these beliefs to the detriment of others. Surely we would want to argue that her beliefs and behaviour are wrong, and surely we should want to persuade/ convince her and others that this is so; and that she/ they should revise or change their beliefs and behaviour accordingly. And it seems to me that to do this, you need conceptions of 'truth' and 'reality' that are stronger, less relativist, than Stanley and Wise's; that allow you to successfully argue that some claims are 'better', more 'true' or 'right' than others, and that conceive of reality in a wider, both more explanatory and constraining sense than their picture of us all inhabiting our own little realities.

This is the major difficulty with a position like Stanley and Wise's. While I agree that women's experiences, feelings and understandings have largely been ignored and discredited by approaches which devalue both women and the 'subjective' and elevate misleading and distorting ideals of 'objectivity' in their place - going to the other extreme and insisting in the 'essential validity' of women's experience, and insisting that no interpretation or construction is better or worse, is hardly satisfactory. While Stanley and Wise claim to be critical of the subjectivity/ objectivity dichotomy, they seem in fact to perpetuate it themselves by their insistence on the subjective at the expense of any conception of objectivity, any consideration of phenomena beyond 'direct experience', or any critical examination of that experience itself.

As I have said before, experience is in no way given, it has to be organized, conceptualized, understood in some way, even at the most basic level in order to experience it as something, in order is 'know' what is going on; in order to be able to respond. There are no actions or phenomena which simply speak for themselves - they have to be given meanings. People do not experience things in a passive way, just absorbing sensations or information; they organize and analyse their experience as it occurs to construct meanings, ideas, theories, which will then affect the way other things are experienced and interpreted, and so on. While Stanley and Wise do accept that behaviours and states can come to be interpreted differently, that they can come to mean something different from what they previously meant, and so can be experienced differently,¹⁸ they do not, in my opinion, give enough weight to this, owing to their insistence on "the essential validity of personal experience".

In one sense of course, personal experience is valid - if you have experienced something in a certain way, then you have that experience to proceed from, to explicate and explain, which can ideally be very useful and productive of understanding. But the having of a certain experience does not mean that your understanding is necessarily 'right', or immune from criticism or questioning. If, for instance, you say "I feel sad" and you are not lying or deluded or trying to deceive yourself; then I would, to quite an extent, have to accept that you felt sad, because *in a sense* what you

¹⁸ Ibid p122

feel is what you feel, and you have privileged access to it, though it is quite difficult sometimes to know quite what you feel, how to describe or classify it - do you, for instance, feel tired or irritable? - the distinction is important because it will effect the way you act in response.' (I need not, however, necessarily accept your understanding of *why* you are sad, or the circumstances in which you feel that way etc). But what you feel depends on how you interpret the situation. If you interpreted the situation differently, you might feel differently within it. For instance, you might once experience a wolf-whistle as a compliment and feel flattered, you might later experience it as a threat or an insult, and feel angry. In the first case you *really* feel flattered, in the other you *really* are angry, and no-one can say otherwise, but your experience is not fixed or inevitable - it does not follow from, say, something about hearing wolf-whistles, but from the circumstances in which they occur and how you understand them.

Experiences are not discrete entities existing in themselves, but gain their 'nature' and meaning from their position in the overall context in which they are located, - this context being both material, structural, and 'objective'; and 'subjective' in the sense that it includes experiences, beliefs, understandings and feelings. Stanley

'There seems to me to be a difference though, in the degree of privilege accordable to different types of self-knowledge. While you can be said to have a certain amount of privilege as regards your feelings, you have less as regards 'knowing what you are doing', for instance. (see later)

and Wise do accept that experience is 'contextually grounded'. But their insistence that there is no 'objective' reality in which experiences are grounded - that instead women inhabit *different* realities in which their experiences occur or are constructed, leaves the impression that experience is somehow given, that its interpretation or meaning follows somehow obviously or unproblematically from its 'unique' or 'specific' 'nature' (each experience stemming from its own reality without mediation.) But it seems to me that feminists, in particular, should be wary of accepting experience at face value. While recognizing that women's experiences have been ignored and devalued, we should think very carefully before simply accepting them as they seem, or celebrating them, as many feminists have done, sometimes seeming to assume that because female experience have been dismissed by 'malestream' thought, that it is somehow 'outside' it, uncontaminated by 'patriarchal' influence.

Stanley and Wise, for instance, say that "women's experiences constitute a different view of reality, an *entirely* different 'ontology', or way of going about making sense of the world"²⁰ (my emphasis). "Women sometimes construct and inhabit what is in fact an *entirely* different social reality"²¹ (my emphasis again). While I accept that women have experiences which are different to those of men of an otherwise similar social location, and I would agree that a feminist conception of reality differs from the

²⁰ Ibid p117

²¹ Ibid p117

dominant one, we have to keep in mind that our language, the concepts we use, the ideas and information available to us - everything we use to make sense of our experiences, as well as the experiences themselves - are a product of a capitalist, white, male dominated society. We, and our experiences, are just as much a part of that society as men and male experiences, and while not accepting the devaluation of female experience we need to examine that experience critically.

We cannot just accept women's experiences as self-validating - to understand why we experience things in the way we do, we have to 'go beyond' that immediate experience, to the context in which it arises, and then examine them in relation to each other. Stanley and Wise do say that they favour "an approach which is concerned with exploring in great detail why and how people construct realities in the way they do",²² but the major emphasis of their book is on the essential validity of experience, and not on questions of why it is as it is, how it comes to be so; nor on the contexts that shape and limit such experiences. In fact, I would argue that their opposition to 'objective' approaches largely prevents them from adequately exploring such contexts. If everyone's experience is valid in terms of actually being felt or experienced by them in that way; if their understandings are reasonable in terms of the beliefs they hold, and there is no underlying reality which somehow influences or structures such beliefs and experiences, then

²² Stanley and Wise p112

it is hard to see how one could even provisionally 'anchor' any such exploration, where one could base oneself in such a sea of competing but valid constructions of reality.

This seems to me actually to go against the insights of the claim that 'the personal is political'. In sharing and exploring their own experiences with other women, women came to realize that their experiences or problems were *not just* personal, that their feelings of anger or frustration or depression or whatever were not, say, the result of their own personal inadequacy as they had been led to believe; *nor* necessarily just the result of the particular circumstances that they found themselves in, but that there was something shared, connecting and underlying all these personal experiences - a wider context which somehow structured all these experiences, and gave them meaning. As Anne Seller says, "[e]ach individual's experiences, as a considered given, cannot show what is going on. As an isolated individual, I often do not know what my experiences are. There can be no argument for subjectivism... but rather for an intersubjectivism, which begins with individual experiences, but instead of multiplying them, seeks to understand them through conversation"²³.

This is another of the difficulties with Stanley and Wise's approach - insufficient concentration on the inherently social nature of experience. The lack of emphasis on context in the sense of some 'underlying reality' that

²³ Anne Seller *Realism Versus Relativism: Towards a Politically Adequate Epistemology* in Morwenna Griffiths and Margaret Whitford (eds) *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (MacMillan London 1988) p180

shapes or constrains our experience, the presentation of experience as unproblematic, almost given, and as specifically 'personal'- all lead to the impression of women as isolated individuals inhabiting separate and insular realities. And though Stanley and Wise speak of these realities as being negotiated through interaction, one gets little sense of communication; of, to use Anne Seller's words 'conversation', of a process by which one can examine one's own experience in light of other's (and indeed perhaps reinterpret, reconstruct it in that light). Even at its most personal, most individual level, experience is social. The contexts in which human experience occurs and its meanings are social, as are the concepts we use to interpret and make sense of it. "Even the vocabulary of introspective self awareness is learnt from others, and has a necessarily collective character. Individual self consciousness is a product of social reflection and negotiation."²⁴ Concentration on experience as 'personal', can, unless suitably qualified, work to undermine an awareness of how far it is social and structured; how far understanding yourself involves and includes understanding others and the social context of which you are part. Viewing people's consciousnesses as essentially separate and discrete, inhabiting and constructing different individual realities, obscures the extent to which we all inhabit a common 'reality', how far we can or do communicate, that "even the most intimate self-

²⁴ See Len Doyle and Roger Harris *Empiricism, Explanation and Rationality* (Routledge and Kegan Paul London 1986) p82

examination is also intelligible and illuminating for others"²⁵.

Stanley and Wise put so much emphasis on personal experience, in part, I think, because it has been so rejected by both mainstream and many feminist theorists. But while this dismissal and denigration of the 'personal' and 'experiential' needs reassessing, it cannot be done at the expense of the social and structural - both because such an approach would be as inadequate for understanding our social lives as one that was wholly structural, or conventionally 'objective', and because we cannot properly attend to our experience unless we see it as structurally shaped and located. As Dorothy Smith argues, "the determinants of women's daily experience are not to be found *in* that experience, but elsewhere in the political, economic and social order",²⁶ and without knowledge of that order we will be unable to properly comprehend our experiences. She says that "the sociologist" (she is a sociologist) "cannot understand the nature of her experienced world by staying within its ordinary boundaries of assumption and knowledge"²⁷ but has to posit a socio-economic order 'in back' of different people's experiences in order to be able to account for them and the relation between them. "It is not possible to account for one's directly experienced world or how it is related to [those of others] who are differently

²⁵ Doyle and Harris p99

²⁶ Dorothy Smith *Women's Perspective* p85

²⁷ Ibid p94

placed by remaining within the boundaries of the former"²⁸.

In their later article *Method, Methodology and Epistemology* Stanley and Wise respond to a charge of 'individualism' by arguing that "a focus on less than large collectivities and categories" does not mean staying in a pre- or non-social sphere. They insist that individuals do not exist except as socially located beings and that social structures and categories can be 'recovered' by analysing the accounts of particular people in particular material circumstances."²⁹ I would agree with this claim, but think that doing so requires more recognition of, and attention to, the social and structural than they give in *Breaking Out*. While there are some things that can only be known through personal experience, subjectively, (like what it is like to see a sunset); there are others which cannot be grasped solely by attention to the particular, or individual or the subjective (such as the workings of the international economic order) - which nevertheless affect everyone of us greatly and need to be comprehended if we wish to understand our experience (and especially if we wish to realize the possibility of effecting change.) What is needed is an approach which understands people's different experience *in relation* to social structures and categories and vice versa.

Doyle and Harris argue that "perhaps the most important reason for emphasizing the social context in which the individual decides to act, is the possibility that what

²⁸ Ibid p94

²⁹ Stanley and Wise *Method* p43

people think they are doing may not be what they are really doing."³⁰ Stanley and Wise would say that telling 'people'/ women that whatever they might think they were doing, *really* they were doing something completely different, is arrogant and paternalistic.³¹ Against them I would argue that we *do* need something like a concept of 'false consciousness' (though perhaps used more carefully or sophisticatedly than 'false consciousness' has often been used)³². Doyle and Harris cite the example of people who, perhaps hearing some rumour about their bank, all wish to withdraw their money. "What the depositors individually think is the significance of their action - safeguarding their money - is not what they are collectively doing, which is bringing about the collapse of the bank....the collective significance of their actions is opaque to them, though not necessarily to others". "[T]he superior self-understanding which would have enabled the depositors to act with greater rational autonomy and responsibility was of a sort that could only be possessed collectively. The predicant of the depositors is essentially a social one...this social character must at least potentially be reflected by any improvement in human self-awareness".³³

³⁰ Doyle and Harris p158

³¹ See Stanley and Wise *Breaking Out* pp106-8

³² See Sabina Lovibond *Feminism and Postmodernism* in *New Left Review* no 178 1989 pp27,28 for a nice comment on the present (postmodern) rejection of the concept of 'false consciousness'

³³ Doyle and Harris p99

While I share Stanley and Wise's objections to conventional notions of objectivity, and their belief in the centrality and importance of 'subjective' experience, I don't think that it is politically advisable, or even possible in practice, to slip into a kind of subjectivism where we just accept 'subjective' feelings, impressions and understandings at face value. The social and collective nature of belief and action makes them very problematic as regards their meaning and significance. What might seem relatively 'obvious', straight forward' or 'common-sense' to an individual knower/ actor (or group of knowers) might appear very different when seen in relation to social structures, collectivities and institutions, and the cumulative effect of many people's behaviour. It seems to me that often (not necessarily always) the more 'subjective' understandings will not really be adequate, and that a wider, more 'objective' (in some, but not the conventional, sense) would be preferable; - that in order to make some kind of claim towards 'truth', things do have to be seen in the light of, and be supported by, the larger context. Looking at things in isolation, uncritically, or unreflexively is often to get them 'wrong' or to have a distorted or mistaken comprehension of them. To understand the significance of your experiences, what they mean, even to know what you are doing, to have any control over the outcome of your actions, you have to see your experience and beliefs in relation to the social context in which you are situated, and be aware of the collective nature and consequences of much human action. You have to aim for something 'beyond' immediate

experience or 'subjectivity', something like a notion of 'objectivity' (minus its faults) while still taking seriously, incorporating and accounting for 'the subjective'.

OBJECTIVITY RECONSIDERED

I have devoted so much space to Stanley and Wise because *Breaking Out* is one of the original, and one of the most important works devoted to discussing questions of experience and objectivity from a feminist perspective. If my discussion has largely been critical, it is because I feel that an appreciation and consideration of the sometimes problematic nature of their approach can help in pointing the way to one which does not suffer from these particular difficulties, while still retaining the positive and useful aspects of much of their work (which, I think, are not necessarily dependent in the relativist or subjectivist elements of their position). Lorraine Code makes very similar criticisms of Belenkey et al's *Women's Ways of Knowing*,¹ whose approach she sees as exposing the inadequacies of any subjectivist/ relativist position and highlighting the need for some sort of concept of objectivity, but I will not repeat her points here as it would reproduce much of the foregoing argument against Stanley and Wise (though her arguments against the essential-

¹See Code p251-262 where she discusses Mary Belenkey, Blythe M.Clinchy, Nancy R.Goldberger and Jill M.Tarule (eds) *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice and Mind* (Basic New York 1986)

lism and universalism of *Women's Ways of Knowing* would not apply to Stanley and Wise, who are much more attentive to difference and contingency.)

A consideration of Stanley and Wise's position highlights the difficulties that arise if one (justifiably) rejects the conventional notion of objectivity, but does not replace it with one more "usable" (as Donna Haraway puts it).² Though subjectivity and experience are central to our knowledge of the world, and cannot be ignored or rejected as they are by conventional notions of objectivity, neither can we take up the opposite position and valorize subjective experience at the expense of *any kind* of 'objectivity'; replace objectivism with a subjectivism that is just as dependent on the dichotomy it claims to deny as its opponent is. Experience cannot simply be accepted at 'face value'; as it is experienced, understood by us; but needs to be critically examined. This critical process has to involve exploration of the context in which the experience occurs and against which it is understood; as how the experience *is* to us, is dependent on the context and our understanding of it, such that any change, revision or expansion in the latter will correspondingly modify or transform our experience and how we understand it. Experience has to be seen in relation to the structures, institutions, codes and concepts which shape it, and the social and collective character of action and meaning has to be emphasized and constantly borne in mind.

²See Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges*

Further, we need to retain a workable distinction between truth and falsity. To accept, with Stanley and Wise, that there can be no Absolute Truth, no One True Story; does not compel us to agree that there is no truth or falsity, or that all claims are equally valid. All claims to truth may be partial, perspectival and mediated, but within any context some claims will be better or worse, truer or more false than others. We also need, I think, to oppose a relativism which would limit truth to the context in which it is claimed; which would restrict truth to an internal matter, unrecognisable and unassailable from 'outside'. I would argue for a concept of truth that applies across contexts; that allows criticism, comparison and evaluation between perspectives - a 'wider' truth that avoids the politically disabling or reactionary implications of what Sandra Harding calls "judgemental relativism".³ We have to be able to criticize, challenge and persuade others, to argue that they are wrong, as well as to recognize when we are wrong, and this involves or depends on some concept of what is 'true' or 'real' or 'actual', and that what is true or real for me also applies or has some claim on you, and vice versa.

We need some concept of 'reality', and this reality

³See Sandra Harding *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women's Lives* (Open University Press Milton Keynes 1991) pp139-140,152. She distinguishes this from "cultural relativism", which she describes as the sociological or historical claim that what is thought reasonable in one culture/ subculture/ time might not be so in another. "Judgemental relativism" denies the possibility of grounds for judging between competing claims/ perspectives.

must, I think, be seen as wider, more inclusive or unitary than Stanley and Wise's individual realities, or the closed, internal 'realities' of various communities or language games envisioned by relativist approaches. We need a concept of reality that is encompassing, connecting, explanatory - that supports and relates our different experiences, while not claiming to be Reality as it Really is, unmediated through limited and situated knowers. I think we do need to preserve some sort of distinction between appearance and reality, while not seeing the two as opposed or exclusionary; in that how things seem to you, or what you think of as the significance/ meaning of your experiences or actions, might not 'actually' be how they 'really' are ('really' with a small 'r' as opposed to Absolute Reality - still an appearance, an appearing reality. The two are rather internally related, or mutually dependent, in that how things seem *is* part of reality; and reality as we know/ experience it *is* a reality that appears to us.)

I think subjectivity and objectivity have to be seen in a similar way, as mutually dependent and ultimately not separable. Rather than seeing them as opposed terms we should recognize that all knowledge involves an interplay of both these aspects, which though to some extent distinct, are dialectically related. As Jennifer Ring says, we should see them as "moments, aspects of the same phenomenon - each of which is descriptive and meaningful, but only in relation to the other"⁴. All knowledge is both subjective and

⁴Ring p123

objective - you can't have one without the other. All knowledge includes some element of subjectivity - something has to be subjectively felt, perceived, encountered, experienced etc. in order for a knower to consider, explore, analyse, theorize or come to know something. But subjective experience, or even perception, does not 'speak for itself', come to us in already given form, but has to be understood/ experienced 'against' or in relation to something 'objective', something 'exterior'⁵ both shaping and constraining our experience/ interpretation. We need some element of objectivity ('objectivity' here implying a reference to a supporting context or background, a consideration of intersubjectivity and relative location, an attitude of reflexion and 'distance' - my conception of objectivity will emerge slowly throughout this work) in order to understand, and even, minimally, to experience, our subjectivity (at all) - but that 'objectivity' is itself dependent on our subjectivity in being able to know, to encounter otherness, experience distance, reflect on itself etc. So there can be no 'Pure' 'subjectivity' or 'objectivity'; though there is perhaps a continuum, from knowledge that is more subjective (like seeing sunsets) to more objective (like theorizing large scale economic systems) - neither one, however, exists in isolation or abstraction.

⁵ _ not wholly 'exterior', in the sense that it, too, is understood/ experienced subjectively; nor 'exterior' in the sense of something completely 'outside', but in the sense of being a background to what is more 'interior', or at the forefront at the time, - that against which things are seen.

Thus, I think, we need to keep hold of a concept of objectivity, as the other (complementary and necessary) moment to subjectivity in the process of knowing. But the conventional notion of objectivity will not do as it stands. It employs a conception of what the world 'is Really like', as 'seen' (by who?) from 'nowhere', unconditioned and unmediated by perspectivity or particularity; impartial and universal. As we are all situated and inherently limited and partial knowers, such a conception is neither accurate or possible. Nor will it do as an (ultimately unattainable) ideal, like Truth or Happiness, which, it is often argued, can worthwhilely be pursued while keeping in mind the impossibility of achieving the goal in any absolute sense. For the conventional notion relies on the denigration and suppression of subjectivity and experience, the separation of 'subject' and 'object', knower and known; and the objectification of the latter. It makes the knower invisible, and absolves 'him' from responsibility and accountability for 'his' claims. Because the knower is invisible, there is no linkage back to the conditions, the situation in which the knowledge is produced, and thus no possibility of critical examination by others of the context in which particular claims are made, no possibility of self-critical reflexivity on the part of the knower. These aspects of the conventional notion of objectivity make it morally and politically as well as 'empirically' or theoretically unacceptable.

Yet like Donna Haraway in *Situated Knowledges*, I am

still "holding out for a feminist version of objectivity",⁶ and for basically the same reasons; chief among them being the desire to keep hold of some notion of reality which can be appealed to in a way that is more than an "act of faith", as she puts it; a desire to avoid any politically disabling espousal/ acceptance of relativism or pluralism; and a desire for accountability and responsibility, for *critical* knowledges. And these notions are implicit in, or compatible with, 'objectivity'; even the standard notion of objectivity, (it is, for example, what is attractive about an account like Scheffler's). Although there is in objectivism a denial of responsibility for knowledge claims (the abstract/ invisible subject; the "data made me do it" etc.); there is also within the concept of objectivity a recognition of the need for accountability, and critical examination.

This notion of criticism is, I think, the fundamental one feminists (or anyone) should preserve and promote. Helen Longino⁷ speaks of a process of "transformative criticism" to which claims are subjected; and in the light of which, modified or improved. And although I don't think her account

⁶See Haraway's *Situated Knowledges* (the quote is from p578)

⁷See Helen Longino's *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton University Press Princeton 1990)

of objectivity is adequate as it stands⁶ (leading to roughly the same sort of position as Scheffler's, with similar difficulties as regards 'community appraisal', 'evidence' etc) I think the phrase itself is usefully descriptive of the positive thesis of objectivity; which calls for intersubjective examination and criticism of claims. (Sometimes indeed more 'relativist' accounts of objectivity almost equate it with intersubjectivity, without the more realist underpinning of positions like Scheffler's and Longino's. I do not think that intersubjectivity on its own is enough to provide objectivity, but it certainly is part of what is involved in any claim to objectivity, and usefully emphasises the *social* 'nature' of knowledge, the way we are accountable for our claims to others, and dependent on them in the construction and improvement of our understandings and self-understandings. It also points to a wider context or background, to connections and relations between knowers; and to recognition of the fact that knowledge is not just an individual or personal matter, of how things seem to me, but involves, has to include and take account of, how things seem to others.)

Knowing cannot proceed in isolation, but depends on others responding, challenging or confirming our claims. But though knowledge depends on intersubjective input and development, and gains (some of) its objectivity from its

⁶See Ismay Barwell's *Towards a Defence of Objectivity* in Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (eds) *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (Routledge London (forthcoming)1994) pp9-22 of manuscript for a critical discussion of Longino's "minimalist" account of objectivity and the problems it incurs.

intersubjective nature; its objectivity cannot reside solely in that - there has to be some further or wider 'reality' to *some* extent independent of social/ intersubjective factors that constrains or acts as a check to intersubjective claims or evaluations. I want to hang onto some kind of conception of objectivity that would allow the possibility of beliefs/ claims being intersubjectively produced, tested and verified, and yet turn out not to be objectively so - a conception that would allow intersubjectively affirmed beliefs to be challenged, compared against, or seen in relation to, an 'objective' reality and found lacking. I want to be able to hold that a 'community', just like 'individuals', can be 'wrong'; that there is more to objectivity than a community's say-so; that the claims of individuals/ minorities/ subjugated groups could be 'intersubjectively' rejected, refuted or denied and yet be 'right' and objectively corroboratable and confirmable. There has to be some conception of a 'world' both supporting and limiting what can be truly said by individuals or communities - one wider than, and not fully dependent on, the particular practices and 'language games' that are constructed/ conducted within it.¹⁰

'not reality 'in itself' but a perceived/ experienced/ known reality

¹⁰ Thomas Nagel (see next chapter) says that he sees a "close connection between objectivity and intersubjectivity" (*The View from Nowhere* p63), though objectivity always points beyond mere intersubjective agreement and needs, he says, to be qualified by a commitment to realism and external reference (p108). Depending on what is meant by 'realism', 'external' and 'reference' I would agree.

While we do not experience/ know the 'world' as it is in 'itself' outside of any mediation/ construction through and by us; I do think we need to hang on to the idea that what is known, what we are in relationship/ interaction with, is a world that while definitely being 'for us', is in some sense 'in itself for us'. (See section on Merleau-Ponty later.) Unless 'the world' is conceived as playing some 'active' part in knowledge, unless it is seen as some kind of *limiting* (and 'motivating') notion, the world basically drops out. Unless there is some conception of an 'objective' (though 'subjectively' experienced and constructed) world shaping and constraining what can be known; unless knowledge is seen as a *relationship* between knowers and a world in which neither is entirely independent or totally separable; then the way is open to dualism, idealism and relativism. As Sean Sayers says, to be agnostic about the existence of a world that is known, or to merely acknowledge the existence of 'the world' but allow it to play no active part in our knowledge is a "pointless sap to materialism", "an idle and empty notion".¹¹

We also, I think, need to hang on to the idea of a world that is 'common', however multiply/ differently experienced, understood or known; some idea that we all inhabit the 'same' (in some sense) though open and multidimensional, complex and ambiguous world - one that cannot be absolutely known or reconciled; that permits of incommensurability and

¹¹ Sean Sayers *Reality and Reason: Dialectic and the Theory of Reason* (Basil Blackwell Oxford 1985)

conflict and contradiction; but yet allows us to relate, connect and compare our experiences and understandings, and with reference to which enables us to locate and position, to orientate, ourselves and others. For, knowledge being a *relation*, encountering anything sensually, conceptually, theoretically entails being in some relation to/ with it; and therefore being somehow connected to, interacting with, it - it therefore also being important to acknowledge and examine this relation to explore the manner of its presenting and mediating of our knowledge. This applies both to 'the world' and to our knowledge of other people (who are, after all, part of 'the world') and therefore should be a requirement of 'intersubjective' accounts as well.

One huge difficulty with intersubjective/ community accounts is what counts as 'intersubjective', what counts as a 'community'? - what are the minimal requirements for membership/ inclusivity, how large does it have to be, how exclusive can it be? Where are the boundaries, are they crossable? What if one's 'community' is one in which one's beliefs are unconventional/ rejected - can one form an alternative community within/ without the ruling community? Can one appeal outside that community for support and verification? Who decides who belongs where, under which rules; where the boundaries shall be and on what basis? For instance, are 12 BNP members a community? Are all its members? Can they intersubjectively verify and confirm their own beliefs; or are they a misguided minority within a wider community which refutes their beliefs? Who decides? If a group of BNP members is confronted by a smaller group of

anti-racist protesters: do they each inhabit their own exclusive communities, do the protesters form a minority opinion within that current situation, or are they representative of a larger community that (ideally) rejects racist beliefs - and if so how is this community appealed to? Who can I, who do I have to, appeal to for intersubjective evaluation and confirmation of my beliefs; who can I, who must I exclude?

The whole question is enormously complicated. If accounts like Scheffler's have not paid adequate attention to just who their 'public' or 'scientific' communities actually include, and who they exclude or silence; what and how they omit and distort; how these 'communities' are constituted and at whose expense and disadvantage:- if membership of such theoretically open communities has been undemocratic, non-egalitarian and discriminatory, hiding and denying the partial and interested nature of its membership - the answer is not necessarily to attempt the universal, impartial ideal such theories often appeal to.

For often it seems to me that *not* everyone 'qualifies' to 'speak', or at least not in the same way, or with the same weight. Do white South Africans have the *same* 'right', the same basis on which to speak on Apartheid as the black South Africans who have suffered it? Do (male) obstetricians have a 'right' to pronounce on where/ how women should have their babies, especially one equal or greater than that of the women themselves? Would/ should a black South African have to place her claims before white South Africans for critical evaluation? Do I want to have my decisions about my

health/ body/ fertility appraised/ approved by male (or female) doctors? On what basis can/ do I critically evaluate the claims of others who have experienced things that I have not, who know things I don't, can't, would not perhaps want to? It seems to me that there is a definite case for some people being more in a position speak/ know/ criticize, to challenge or evaluate the claims of others; that we are not all equal as knowers or critics - though this is something that can only be decided contextually and provisionally within each particular social/ historical circumstance, and will change from situation to situation, and indeed within each situation as different aspects are emphasized and different considerations brought to bear.

One thing that seems clear to me is that intersubjective verification cannot be simply a question of majority agreement, even supposing the difficulties about the inclusiveness and size of a community's constituency could be solved. (In the example above the 'rightness' of a community's opposition to racist beliefs cannot be dependent on it being a majority opinion, for we could easily think of cases where things were the other way round and we would yet want to hold the minority belief more valid, more objectively supported and confirmed.) Objectivity or truth cannot come down to a question of numbers, of how many believe this and how many believe that. Nor, I think, can we allow intersubjective evaluation of claims to be solely an internal or intracommunity affair - it has to involve input from 'outside'. If this seems to contradict what I just said (as it would allow, say, a white South African to examine/

challenge the claims of a black South African [if we presume that they do not, in fact, inhabit the same community, that is] though of course it also allows criticism and challenge to travel the other way, which is obviously desirable) - I don't really think that it does, necessarily. For doing so should, I think, not be on the basis of 'equality' or 'sameness' or 'universality'; of us all supposedly being equal/ replaceable as knowers/ critics - similarly/ equally experienced, similarly/ equally located, similarly interested - but on the basis of a close attention to 'who' we all are (both 'us' and 'them'): to where and how we are located; to how we are connected/ distanced; to how our beliefs are conditioned and mediated; as well as to the claims 'themselves'. And if conducted in this spirit I think that extracommunity intersubjectivity is not only possible but positively desirable.

I will return to this later in relation to questions of 'difference' and relativism. For now, I wish to return to the point I was making earlier - that to an acknowledgement of the significance of subjectivity has to be added the need to critically explore and examine that subjectivity; not to necessarily accept things seem to you, or are declared to be by others. If the old notion of objectivity included an unsatisfactory conception of subjective experience as inherently confusing or delusory, of appearance as unreal and illusory, which we should, I believe, reject; we cannot either just accept things as they initially seem to us, in any uncritical way. And this questioning approach must extend to the claims of others. One of the most positive

aspects of the old notion of objectivity was its rejection of Authority - the idea that any claim, made by anyone, was up for scrutiny and could be rejected if it didn't stand up to examination - that a claim was not made acceptable simply by the authority or position of the person who made it. This is not to say that I accept the idea that 'only the claim 'itself'' is significant; that it should 'stand or fall on its own merits', or that considerations about the person who made the claim, their position and relation to what is known, should not be taken into account. I don't believe that claims should be examined in isolation and abstraction from the context of their production and the situation of their producer - what I *do* reject is the idea that position *necessarily* confers Authority. At the time the notion of objectivity was developed, it was in opposition to the Authority of God or King, Church or State; and while this would still (usefully) apply, (in theory at least) it would also, for instance, include rejection of basing claims *solely* on a certain 'identity' or type of experience.

In the introductory chapter on experience I spoke of claims having a *certain* credibility because of the position or experience of the knower, of a person's position or experience being used as a criterion by which their claims are judged. It might have appeared that in so doing I was making some sort of argument for Authority - "its true because I say so"/ "I've done it/ been there so I know, and you just have to accept my word for it". But in arguing for the importance/ recognition of a knower's position or experience, I was not wanting to imply that they *guaranteed*

truth, or could not be challenged; but that attention to them made the knower visible (and vulnerable) to scrutiny along with her claim; that attention to experience exposed the links between what was claimed and the context in which it was claimed, and how this shaped or mediated what was known. I see attention to position and experience then, as facilitating evaluation and critique, not forestalling it, as Authority does.¹²

So - we have to combine the positive, critical aspect of objectivity with recognition of the subjectivity and perspectivity of knowledge. An adequate conception of objectivity has to be able to include experience, embodiment, engagement and emotion; it has to recognize that all knowledge is situated, contingent and partial; mediated and conditioned by the context in which it is produced. The old conception of objectivity prohibits such a combination, as it sees aperspectivity and nonsubjectivity as necessary requirements for objectivity, with relativism as the only alternative. But relativism is itself dependent on the same

¹²Hans-Georg Gadamer has defended 'authority' against the Enlightenment 'bias' against it; emphasising the positive, enabling aspects some manifestations of authority can produce, and that recognition of authority does not have to be seen as implying an uncritical acceptance of an authority's claims, but a reasonable, critical and conscious taking up of the insights or benefits it can offer owing to its authoritative position. While I fully agree that some manifestations of authority can be positive, I think that they are so not *simply because* holders of authority have/ or are in, a position of authority, but because of further, though related, considerations which can be defended and argued for on a position like mine. (See Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (Sheed and Ward London 1975))

sorts of assumptions as objectivism¹³ (for example assumptions that judging between competing claims, whether understood 'objectively' as 'in themselves' or 'relatively' to different contexts, requires reference to some universal or neutral framework if it is to succeed or be possible). We need accept neither 'alternative' as we cannot, I think, any longer realistically or justifiably accept their assumptions.

And once we reject the possibility (or *desirability* - for it is our perspectivity, our situatedness, our subjectivity that *makes possible*, not merely does not prevent, our knowledge)- of aperspectivity, universality, the suppression of subjectivity etc; then it doesn't seem to me that the combination of "socially situated knowledge" with objectivity is "an impossible one", as it is often described.¹⁴ Donna Haraway goes as far as to say that feminist accounts of objectivity, of the kind sketched in her essay - of "how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, ... *and* a no nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world, one that can be partially shared..."¹⁵ in fact "require a deceptively simple manoeuvre within inherited Western analytic traditions, a manoeuvre begun in dialectics but stopping short of the needed revisions."¹⁶

¹³ Many writers have commented on this - see Richard Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* for instance.

¹⁴ See discussion in Harding *Whose Science?* pp139-142

¹⁵ See Haraway *Situated knowledges* p579

¹⁶ Ibid p592

I think that she is right about this but while many feminist theorists would share her belief in this project (Sandra Harding for one), Harding acknowledges that many feminists think "that the notion of objectivity is so hopelessly tainted by its historical complicity" in the service of dominant groups "that we cannot make it function effectively and progressively in alternative agendas".¹⁷ Susan Hekman, for instance, says that the feminist critique of 'masculinist science' "must abandon objectivity along with the other trappings of enlightenment science".¹⁸ She sees any attempt to reclaim, revise or rework enlightenment concepts like objectivity as doomed to failure as she sees them as integral to 'masculinist' conceptions that "relegate women to inferiority".¹⁹ (I would argue that they only relegate women to inferiority if you accept the very assumptions that you are refuting - the equation of 'women' with 'the feminine' with 'the subjective', 'the emotional' and 'the bodily' (seen in opposition to the masculine, the objective, the rational and mental); with non-knowledge and inferiority.) As to claims that attempts to revise the concept of objectivity represent "an unworkable epistemological eclecticism"²⁰ (a criticism she often levels at those who do not whole-heartedly espouse a

¹⁷ See Harding *Whose Science?* p157

¹⁸ See Susan Hekman *Gender and Knowledge* (Polity Press Cambridge 1990) p131

¹⁹ Hekman p129

²⁰ Ibid p81

postmodern approach)²¹ - does this not imply a kind of holism, coherence and closure that a postmodern position would normally be very wary of, and one with no room for subversion or resistance from within?

I don't think that Feminism can be *wholly* within conventional 'enlightenment' categories, (whatever that means) *or* wholly postmodern, nor do I see why it should be. Feminism, like postmodernism, has developed from, and in response/ reaction to Enlightenment conceptions and categories; - in a sense it *is* a revision/ reworking of enlightenment conceptions. Certainly it, or postmodernism, could never be something *entirely* new or different, unrelated to enlightenment thought. Thus I would question whether 'the Postmodern' represents such a radical break from the Enlightenment as to be almost 'outside' or beyond it, as Hekman seems to suggest.²² In fact, 'postmodernism' can seem very dependent on Enlightenment conceptions - firstly as a point of reference/ difference; for example, in illustrating what Postmodernism *is not*, and then, (in many more unsubtle forms at least) as almost being a mirror image of Enlightenment categories, one that accepts many of the most problematic enlightenment assumptions, but merely inverts them; and

²¹ Though I am doubtful if her understanding of the 'postmodern' is one all those who identify their positions or who are identified as 'postmodern' would be happy with - for instance she constantly describes/ identifies (almost equates) it with 'hermeneutic', which to my mind is not the same thing at all. And while Rorty, perhaps, would be quite happy with such a description; not all those whose approaches she commends, like Foucault, would be.

²² See for instance Hekman pp134-5

so preserves them while perhaps disguising them.²³

The Western enlightenment tradition (defined broadly and openly) is what late twentieth century Westerners have to work with/ begin from; by virtue of being located when and where 'we' are. We do not individually choose or adopt it; we may be unsatisfied with some/ much of it; but it is the conceptual/ social/ political/ historical background in which we are situated, and from which we proceed.²⁴ We can, however, work to amend, modify, improve our perspectives from where we are situated (most fruitfully in response to insights/ criticisms from others differently located, whose claims cause us to question and revise our own). 'Enlightenment' thought is not as monolithic and unitary as it is often represented as being. It contains many strands and emphases, some of which are at odds with others - the egalitarian, liberating impulse versus the discriminating and dominating one; the self-critical against the self-justificatory; the unifying or dividing; and so on - it is just as complex and contradictory as most things, and certainly is not one tight, coherent whole whose different elements cannot be unpicked, discarded or reassembled in other ways. A critical engagement with enlightenment thought is not an all or nothing affair; indeed accepting all or nothing of it would be impossible.

'Within' this tradition there are numerous critiques of

²³ See Harding *Whose Science?* pp186-7; Bordo *Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender-scepticism* pp142-144 for examples of this.

²⁴ See bit on Gadamer later on, which relates to this

objectivist notions of objectivity, and other conceptions of objectivity than the standard stereotypical version - not wholly different of course, having developed in relation or response to the 'mainstream' notion and its perceived inadequacies; but ones that nevertheless represent alternatives to, or improvements on, it. I shall in the next sections discuss two of these conceptions of objectivity; that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, writing from a 'continental' phenomenological-existentialist position, influenced by Marxism; and that of Thomas Nagel, from within the Anglo-American analytic tradition; whose approaches both, in their different ways, point the way to a more adequate conception of subjectivity and objectivity. But before I do so, I wish to make one final comment on Susan Hekman's arguments against any revision of objectivity or other 'enlightenment concepts'. She constantly, and critically, describes 'enlightenment' science as 'masculinist'²⁵ which it probably is (my hesitancy is due to doubts about the term - see footnote) - but then so, and for the same reasons, is 'postmodernism', and almost all of the theoretical perspectives past or current in the 'west'. (They are not *only* 'masculinist' of course, they do not only presume, defend and aim to preserve discrimination and privilege on the basis of 'gender', but on the bases of 'race', class,

²⁵ See e.g. Hekman *Gender and Knowledge* p124-135. I am not quite happy with this term, and not quite certain what it is meant to imply: how does it relate, for example, to 'sexist' or 'androcentric'? Is there in it some idea of it being an 'opposite' to 'feminist'? - for I don't think there is/ can be (within present gendered power relations) a 'male' equivalent of feminism.

culture, international economic location, and so on). Yet among all these 'masculinist' perspectives some will be 'better' or 'worse', for different purposes, than others - some can be recognized as being more promising politically, more 'accurate' in describing certain phenomena or tendencies, less amenable to use in justifying oppression, less distorting of social relations or whatever - and it is these, as feminists, that 'we' should utilize, critically, in developing our theoretical understandings.

Sandra Harding argues that we "cannot afford to 'just say no' to objectivity"²⁶ - it has a valuable political history, and invoking the notion of objectivity has been useful in exposing regularities, tendencies and facts that powerful interests would rather conceal or deny. Without something like objectivity to distinguish between how people "want the world to be" and how it 'is', we would be left with a situation where "might makes right" (to a greater extent than it does now). Although the notion of objectivity has served elites, it has also been used to criticize their claims. Like all notions, objectivity "contains progressive as well as regressive tendencies,"²⁷ and it is, she says, "important to develop the progressive and block the regressive ones".²⁸

²⁶ Harding *Whose Science?* p160

²⁷ Ibid p161

²⁸ Ibid p161

THE VIEW FROM HERE, OR NOWHERE? - Thomas Nagel

Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere*¹ is "both a defence and critique of objectivity"². In some ways his conception of objectivity has a lot in common with standard conceptions - he describes objectivity as "The View from Nowhere", a "detached" and "impersonal" view, one that is "centerless", "external" and "self-transcendent". Yet in other ways it is very different, in that instead of removing/ abstracting the knower and objectifying the known, Nagel very firmly places the knower in the world she knows and then treats *her* as an object of knowledge, as well as her knowledge and the world she is contained in; - in a way he objectifies the subject (while aiming still to preserve her subjectivity.) Nagel's position is both promising and problematic. To some extent a lot of my doubts about it hinge on exactly how he means the terms and phrases he uses, how literally his metaphors are to be understood. Taken one way I can go along with them, taken another way they can have disturbing implications - it depends on how 'generous' or 'critical' a reading I am giving him at the time. Although in what follows I will give voice to some of my concerns about his description of

¹Thomas Nagel *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford University Press Oxford 1986)

² Ibid p5

objectivity; it will generally be a 'positive' interpretation, in that I hope to bring out what I think is most useful and promising in his conception, and not dwell too much on its negative aspects. Nagel's position is, I think, an improvement upon the standard conception; and although it is not in itself 'the answer' / what an adequate concept of objectivity would be like, it does point in the right direction. Thus my discussion of him is in some sense an acceptance of aspects of his position that I can share, or see as being part of what an adequate conception of objectivity could / would involve, rather than being a rejection of his position for not being that adequate conception itself.

Nagel describes the "physical" pursuit of objectivity (he sees physics as the science in which people have achieved the greatest 'objectivity', the greatest detachment from a personal or even human point of view) as developing in stages. We have perceptions (of colour, say). We then come to see that these are "caused by the action of things on us, through their effects on our bodies, which are themselves part of the physical world."³ The next stage is when we "realize that since the same physical properties that cause perceptions in us through our bodies also produce different effects on other physical things and can exist without causing any perceptions at all, their true nature must be detachable from their perceptual appearance and need not resemble it."⁴ The third step is "to try and form a

³ Ibid p14

⁴ Ibid p14

conception of that true nature independent of it's appearance either to us or to other types of perceivers. This means not only not thinking of the physical world from our own particular point of view, but not thinking of it from a more general human perceptival point of view either: not thinking of how it looks, feels, smells, tastes or sounds. These secondary qualities then drop out of our picture of the external world, and the underlying primary qualities such as shape, size, weight and motion are thought of structurally".⁵

How far Nagel is merely describing, or actually endorsing, this view of 'physical' objectivity I'm not quite sure. As a description of how 'science'/ objectivity is supposed to proceed, according to the conventional view, it stands; as a description of how it actually does/ should proceed it is quite problematic, especially the stuff about the 'true' nature of things which must be 'detachable' from their perceptual appearances, a conception of a 'true'

⁵ Ibid p14

nature 'independent' of its appearance.⁶ This conception of physical objectivity is very like the 'lowest common denominator' sort of picture I said a conception like Scheffler's relied on - one where all the subjective or perspectival aspects had been cancelled out, till what was left was the pure 'reality' behind it all, the view from nowhere indeed. It is assumed by proponents of conventional objectivity that this view would somehow ideally be available to every one; no matter where/ how they were situated; and something of this appears in Nagel's assertion that although our senses

⁶Yet even this conventional view of objectivity can, I think, be rephrased or reworked along the lines of "We have certain perceptions/ impressions/ beliefs. We then come to see that these are products of our interaction with the physical/ social/ conceptual world, of which we are a part. The 'next stage' is where we realize that since other people/ creatures interacting within 'the same' (to some extent) world/s have different perceptions/ impressions/ beliefs of 'the same' (in some sense) 'things', that how things seem to us might not be all, or an adequate conception of, how things 'are' (though I don't think that 'what they are like to us' is simply 'detachable', or that how things are 'really' exists independently of appearances. So the 'third step' to me would not be one of forming a conception of a thing's 'true' nature independent of all appearance; but of modifying, revising our conceptions of how things seem to us in the light of what others say they are like to them. To stick with colours, what I find useful or enlightening is not some 'physical' description of how things 'really' are 'in themselves', without perceivers, without colours, without visual appearances of any kinds (for they too are dependent on us) - being a perceiver such notions have little meaning for me and are basically unimaginable (what would an unperceived world be like *to me*) - but rather hearing how things 'apparently', (as far as I/ we can grasp/ guess/ understand it) seem to other perceivers, with different sense organs and sizes and speeds; which emphasises the contingency and relativity of our own perceptions, how they are dependent on our constitution and perspective, and might need to be re-understood (as well as hinting at endless other ways of perceiving/ conceiving the world)

"provide the evidence from where we start"⁷ this very objective/ physical understanding could be possessed by us "even if we had none of our present senses so long as we were rational and could understand the mathematical and formal properties"⁸ of this conception. "We might even", he says, "in a sense share an understanding of physics with other creatures to whom things appeared quite different perceptually - so long as they too, were rational and numerate".⁹ So you have a picture of physics as the most basic and fundamental, non-subjective, non-perspectival, non-human? form of description and communication between 'rational' beings; which is one, I think, many people would like to accept.

I am very sceptical about claims that physics grasps 'reality' as it 'really' is minus appearances - to me the understandings of physics merely deal with *different* appearances to our everyday ones, the ones you create when you relate to things in the way that physics does. Physics provides another perspective, another way of 'looking' at things, but isn't itself perspectiveless. (I also have doubts as to whether 'rationality' is as context-free and 'neutral' as this picture might suggest). But what Nagel's description does bring out, however, is that the impulse to objectivity arises from recognition of difference - that other people/ creatures have different perspectives etc to

⁷ Ibid p14

⁸ Ibid p14

⁹ Ibid p14

ours, which leads us to a questioning and revision of our initial understandings - and this is something that I think must be kept hold of, as it does not appear again in Nagel's discussion of objectivity, even though I think his position needs, or implicitly relies on it.

Yet despite his apparent acceptance of this picture of 'physical' objectivity and its equation of the 'true nature' of things with independence from all appearances, Nagel describes this "bleached-out physical conception of objectivity"¹⁰ as encountering difficulties "if it is put forward as a method for seeking complete understanding of reality"¹¹. "Physics is only one form of understanding"¹² he says, and the physical conception of reality is not exhaustive of what there is. "Although there is a connection between objectivity and reality - only the supposition that we and our appearances are parts of a larger reality makes it reasonable to seek understanding...in this way - still not all reality is better understood the more objectively it is viewed. Appearance and perspective are essential parts of what there is, and in some respects they are best understood from a less detached standpoint"¹³. Nagel wants to resist the tendency "to identify the idea of the world as it really is, with the idea of what can be revealed, at the limit, by

¹⁰ Ibid p15

¹¹ Ibid p15

¹² Ibid p52

¹³ Ibid p4

an indefinite increase in objectivity"¹⁴. "[O]bjectivity does not correspond to reality" and "it is not always the best mode of understanding"¹⁵. The pursuit of objectivity can "lead away from the truth if carried out in the wrong way or with respect to the wrong subject matter".¹⁶

He says "there are things about the world and life and ourselves that cannot be adequately understood from a maximally objective standpoint.... A great deal is essentially connected to a particular point of view, or type of point of view, and the attempt to give a complete account of the world in objective terms detached from these perspectives inevitably leads to false reductions or to outright denial that certain patently real phenomena exist at all".¹⁷ The phenomena of consciousness, and "the irreducibly subjective character of mental processes"¹⁸ pose, for Nagel, the clearest challenge to the physical conception of objectivity. Nagel denies the possibility of reducing the mental to the physical, but he also doesn't want to abandon the idea of objectivity entirely. Instead he suggests that the physical is not the only possible interpretation of objectivity.¹⁹ Since the "way the world is includes appear-

¹⁴ Ibid p91

¹⁵ Ibid p91

¹⁶ Ibid p91

¹⁷ Ibid p7

¹⁸ See Thomas Nagel's *What is it like to be a Bat?* in Thomas Nagel *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1979)

¹⁹ Nagel *The View from Nowhere* p17

ances and there is no single point of view from which they can all be fully grasped"²⁰ he suggests we should instead "admit points of view and subjective experiences to the real world"²¹ and so "go beyond the distinction between appearance and reality by including the existence of appearance in an elaborated reality"²². Nagel says he still wishes for "a unified conception of the world"²³ but if such a conception cannot be achieved by eliminating perspectives, he asks "to what extent it can be achieved if we admit them".²⁴

The aim of the pursuit of objective knowledge is, says Nagel, "described in terms that, taken literally, are unintelligible: we must get outside of ourselves, and view the world from nowhere within it. Since it is impossible to leave one's own point of view entirely without ceasing to exist, the metaphor of getting outside ourselves must have another meaning".²⁵ He says the basic step towards objectivity is simply the step of conceiving the world as a place that includes the person I am, within it... conceiving myself from outside, in other words".²⁶ He describes the more objective view as one by which "we place ourselves in

²⁰ Ibid p25

²¹ Ibid p54

²² Ibid p18

²³ Ibid p17

²⁴ Ibid p17

²⁵ Ibid p67

²⁶ Ibid p63

the world and try to understand our relation to it....".²⁷
In doing this "we alter our relation to the world, increasing the correctness of certain of our representations of it by compensating for the peculiarities of our point of view".²⁸ We must not abandon the idea of a point of view, but "think of ourselves as one point of view among others".²⁹ He still describes this process as one of gradual detachment from our initial standpoint/s, something he sees as indispensable in advancing our understanding of the world and ourselves; but we "can't get out of ourselves entirely",³⁰ we still *are* the persons we are subjecting to examination and criticism; and the aim is now ideally not one of *escaping* the subjective, but of being able to preserve and reconcile the subjective while still pursuing objectivity. "The hope is to develop a detached perspective that can exist with and comprehend the individual one".³¹

He says objectivity develops "from the idea that there is a real world in which we are contained, and that appearances result from our interaction with the rest of it. We cannot accept these appearances uncritically, but must try to understand what our own constitution contributes to them. To do this we try to develop an idea of the world with ourselves in it, an account of both ourselves and the world

²⁷ Ibid p98

²⁸ Ibid p91

²⁹ Ibid p20

³⁰ Ibid p6

³¹ Ibid p86

that includes an explanation of why it initially appears to us as it does. But this idea, since it is we who develop it, is likewise a product of interaction between us and the world, though the interaction is more complicated and more self-conscious than the original one.... However often we may try to step outside of ourselves, something will have to stay behind the lens, something in us will determine the resulting picture....".³²

This, I think, is the passage in which he best describes his position, or, what I regard as the best version of his position. (Sometimes it is a bit hard to decide exactly what his position is; what it does and doesn't include and involve, as when he speaks of 'objectivity' it sometimes isn't clear whether he is speaking of it in some inclusive sense (any conception of objectivity), 'physical' objectivity (which excludes the mental/ subjective/ perspectival) or his 'Nagelian' alternative which attempts to preserve the subjective. So that when he speaks of "self-transcendence", a "centerless world" etc., you are not quite sure how to take it - as it would be under the conventional understanding of objectivity, or in some modified sense that would make it compatible with a view in which the knower's presence and subjectivity did not drop out.) I think that there are problems with some of what Nagel says which arise from him wanting to keep a lot of these conventional notions (in what sometimes amounts to an attempt at a quasi 'view from nowhere') alongside his knower

³² Ibid p68

inclusive objectivity; but I don't think his position needs to incorporate these notions - in fact I think it works much better without them. So for now I will continue to describe the basic, most useful and satisfactory, form of his position.

Nagel says the "fundamental idea behind both the validity and the limits of objectivity is that we are small creatures in a big world of which we have only very partial understanding, and that how things seem to us is dependent both on the world and on our constitution. We can add to our knowledge of the world by accumulating information at a given level - by extensive observation from one standpoint. But we can raise our understanding to a new level only if we examine that relation between the world and ourselves which is responsible for our prior understanding, and form a new conception that involves a more detached understanding of ourselves, of the world and of the interaction between them. Thus objectivity allows us to transcend our particular viewpoint and develop an expanded consciousness that takes in the world more fully....Every objective advance creates a new conception of the world that includes oneself, and one's former conception within its scope; so it inevitably poses the problem of what to do with the older, more subjective view, and how to combine it with the new one.... we cannot forget about [our] subjective starting points... we and our personal perspectives belong to the world".³³

Much of what Nagel says is concerned with the possibi-

³³ Ibid pp5,6

lity of integrating the 'subjective' and 'objective' standpoints, and how they modify and limit each other. (He says that although he speaks of the 'objective' and 'subjective' for convenience, the distinction "is really a matter of degree, and covers a wide spectrum".³⁴ By 'subjective' he means a more immediate, personal, 'internal' and less reflexive perspective, one very dependent on the particularities and specifics of our individual lives. By 'objective' he means an attitude that is more 'detached' and reflective, one that views one's experiences not only from 'inside', but 'externally', "as events in the world" - a higher order conception of ourselves. He sees objectivity as proceeding rather like a series of concentric circles (he tends to speak in terms of 'levels') so that what might be 'objective' compared to a more 'subjective' view, might be more 'subjective' in relation to one yet more 'objective'). The problem we are faced with is, he says, that of how to combine or reconcile the 'subjective' and 'objective' perspectives - how to develop and modify them so that each takes the other into account,³⁵ not in any reductionist way, but at "full strength".

"The satisfactoriness of a new external perspective depends on whether it can place the internal perspective within the world in a way that enables one to occupy both of them simultaneously, with a sense that the external perspective gives access to an objective reality that ones subjective

³⁴ Ibid p5

³⁵ Ibid p3

tive impressions are impressions of. Experience is not the sole foundation of our knowledge of the world, but a place must be found for it as part of the world, however different that world may be from the way it is depicted in experience".³⁶ Though sometimes a unification of objective and subjective views may be possible, often we get an interplay of "two uneasily related types of conception"³⁷ and the effort to reconcile them "is essentially incompletable".³⁸ Where they cannot be integrated, Nagel thinks we should not "assign victory" to either, but hold onto the opposition without suppressing either aspect, with the hope that the tension will generate something new.³⁹

While there is no limit to the process of pursuing objectivity, in the sense of a final maximally objective standpoint, the knowledge gained by pursuing any degree of objectivity will always be limited and provisional. Objectivity will always be incomplete - all views contain a "blind spot"⁴⁰ (from where the viewer is looking) and however we expand our views, something will always remain beyond explicit comprehension or examination. We can never get entirely 'outside' ourselves - the 'external' standpoint, as far as we can occupy it, is "*our* standpoint as much as the

³⁶ Ibid p77

³⁷ Ibid p4

³⁸ Ibid p4

³⁹ Thomas Nagel p6

⁴⁰ Ibid see p128

internal one is".⁴¹ We can never abandon our point of view - only alter and improve it. Although he recognizes "our contingency, our finitude, and our containment in the world",⁴² Nagel believes we should combine this with an "ambition of transcendence, however limited may be our success in achieving it".⁴³ For "even if objective understanding can only be partial, it is worth trying to extend it, for a simple reason. The pursuit of a an objective understanding of reality is the only way to expand our knowledge of what there is beyond the way it appears to us".⁴⁴

As I mentioned before, Nagel describes objectivity in terms of being 'detached', 'impersonal', 'transcendent', 'external', 'centerless' and so on - adjectives which could very well be applied to conventional 'View from Nowhere' type objectivity. I'm not quite sure how to respond to this, whether to object to or reject this, or not. Obviously no-one can be completely 'external' or 'centerless', but Nagel knows this himself - complete detachment, externality etc are not compatible with the modified version of objectivity he is trying to describe; one that is essentially partial, limited and incomplete. So I must presume that he means that an objective state is *more* detached etc than a relatively more 'subjective' one, which sounds reasonable enough to me.

⁴¹ Ibid p118

⁴² Ibid p99

⁴³ Ibid p99

⁴⁴ Ibid p26

Objectivity, as I understand it, involves a process of reflection, and reflection is usually more 'detached' in the sense of not being so immediately involved in an experience - it is usually a *later* process, one removed from the initial experience by a certain temporal distance (this distance in fact being an important and productive factor in understanding in that it often enables you to see things more 'in perspective' or 'in context', as it is often put). And to the extent that time/ distance dull the immediacy of subjective experience, reflection can be less intensely 'personal', in one sense, though I don't think it is less personal in the sense of being less dependent on a particular perspective (which might be what he means), and I don't think it can ever be *impersonal*.

I, too, have described objectivity in terms of 'going beyond' the immediate, the apparently given or obvious, the way things seem; and as far as 'going beyond' implies 'transcendence', then I suppose objectivity does involve some (limited) transcendence, though it is not a word I would use myself. 'Centerless' is a bit more tricky. Nagel speaks of a "recognition that ones position in the universe is not central",⁴⁵ of "placing ourselves in a world of which we are not the center".⁴⁶ This seems O.K. if it is a reminder that we occupy very small, particular, and contingent bits of the universe, that it does not radiate out from around us (or anyone) for us (or them) to view and

⁴⁵ Ibid p210

⁴⁶ Ibid p19

comprehend from some perfect vantage point. Yet however non-'central' our positions in the world might be (from whose point of view?) we view it from a very definite somewhere within it, and that somewhere is very like a centre to us, in the sense that it is the viewpoint from which we start, and which (according to Nagel's own position) we can never completely escape. Agreed, the world is not laid out especially to be understood from this or any particular point of view, but I would not really describe the world we understand as being 'centerless'.

Nagel describes an objective view as an 'external' one. Obviously, given what he says about not being able to entirely step outside ourselves, by 'external' he does not mean 'completely from the outside'. Yet he does see it as *more* external than the relatively more 'internal' more subjective view. It involves seeing the world not only from where we are, but seeing where we are as one place (among many) in the world. It involves placing ourselves in the world as we place others - in a sense it involves seeing ourselves as we see them, as (almost like) objects situated in the world, as we might appear to them. How do we gain such an 'external' perspective on ourselves? We can't just move about occupying different places in the world (to the extent that this is possible), (along the lines of Nagel's accumulating information or experience at a given level); for wherever we were, we would still be ourselves, looking out from 'inside' at the world and others, - though such changes in context might be quite productive of insight or problematique, and could certainly be utilized in the

construction of a more objective view (indeed they could provide the material or impetus for producing one). Nor could we merely adopt the view that others have of us 'from outside' - we could not 'be' them in any way, see ourselves as they do from their position; nor would it do to *simply* accept their report of how we seem to them - for useful and informing as it might be, it would still be (a different) view 'from inside' (theirs) and not Nagel's more external and objective one.

Nagel describes the process of achieving a more objective view as one of 'stepping back' from one's initial impressions of the world, and forming a new view that has not just the world, but ourselves as we are placed within it and our initial impressions, as its objects; and then exploring the relations between them so that we can see how our views are conditioned by our position in the world. Our new views and understandings of the world and ourselves can then be subjected to a further objective examination and so on. It's rather like the waitress/s on the tomato ketchup bottle, each seeing the previous views of herself on the bottle 'from outside' but never her current viewing self; but with a big difference - in Nagel's view (and mine) each 'objective' examination modifies or alters the previous views so that the pictures would never be quite the same,⁴⁷ although the initial views would never 'drop out' but remain preserved in all the others, but understood differently. Yet the problem still remains - how do we step back? -

⁴⁷and thus the waitress herself would be a bit different each time she looked back at the picture on the bottle

especially as, if we take the metaphor literally (if you try to sketch it out, say) there now appears to be two or more of us; or is the currently most objective 'observer' us, and the preceding versions just - what? history?/ parts of the world?/ objects of knowledge? In a sense these all might be so, but that can't be all there is to it, for in Nagel's position we should ideally be able to occupy all of these standpoints simultaneously - *be* the more 'subjective' knowers that we are more 'objectively' examining and criti-

cising.⁴⁸

The trouble with metaphors, although they are indispensable in extending our thought beyond the linguistic resources at our disposal, is that I never know quite how 'literally' to take them, how far the difficulties I often perceive are to do with perhaps unintentional or non-essential implications of the metaphors used, and how far

⁴⁸ Nagel actually describes this process as a sort of splitting of the self, so that in his position, there are in a way, if not different copies or versions of ourselves, at least different 'parts' of us involved in higher and lower order knowledges. He speaks of an "objective self", which "engages in various forms of detachment from and opposition to, the rest of us" (p65). What happens in the pursuit of objectivity, he says, "is that a certain element of oneself, the impersonal or objective self, which can escape from the specific contingencies of one's...point of view, is allowed to predominate"(p9) and through this one detaches from the rest of oneself and forms a more objective conception of the world. He says that although he sometimes speaks of it as though it were a distinct part of the mind, while "it shouldn't be given a metaphysical interpretation, this way of speaking is not altogether innocent. In some sense, I think [he says] the same faculty or aspect of us is involved in the various functions of objectivity, and I think it is something real"(p66). The sceptical 'part' of me (see I am talking like that too, now) finds all this very iffy, especially as a claim on which to base a philosophical position. And yet, on a more 'ontologically' curious 'level' (more echoes of Nagel) - the 'part' of me that loves books on popular science, the 'unknown' or esoteric etc, I don't find this notion totally implausible. It does often seem to me that there are aspects of 'myself' that are more self-critical - from comfortably reflective to uncomfortably carping - and it does seem to me in my own experience that aspects of what one considers one's 'self' (and perhaps which until then one was not aware of as discrete aspects) can become temporarily suppressed or inactivated, or made prominent or reinforced - so I suppose his claim is possible. Be this as it may, though, I wish to leave aside Nagel's 'objective self' as too problematic a proposal for the moment, and see if a position like his can proceed without one.

they are fundamental to the idea or position itself.⁴⁹ I am also unsure as to when terms are consciously being used metaphorically, or whether they are simply being used as an institutionally accepted way of describing things. 'Stepping back' is not particularly Nagel's phrase - it is a term often used when speaking of 'looking at things' more reflectively, or objectively, 'in perspective' or context - in a sense Nagel is just articulating a commonly held understanding of what something like objectivity involves. What would happen if we didn't 'step back' as such, but attempted a more objective view from where we are standing? (and therefore did not equate objectivity with a specifically 'external' view)?

A concern for any conception of objectivity along the lines of Nagel's (or mine) is to explain how it is that a knower comes to pursue objectivity - not just how they (hopefully and to some extent) go about achieving it, but why they embark on the process in the first place; given

⁴⁹I use visual metaphors for knowledge as I do think they have the advantage of bringing out the perspectival aspects of knowledge, and don't think that they necessarily suffer from all the defects imputed to them (e.g. the gaze as objectifying, etc) But obviously all metaphors have their limitations as well as their possibilities; and are, like all concepts, the product of a certain location - apart from particularities of language, culture and history, visual metaphors assume sight. This assumption is too implicated in my understanding for me to disentangle here - I would (and do) need to learn a lot more from people who are not sighted, or who speak languages unrelated to mine, to become aware of the way these assumptions condition my understanding of knowledge. For the moment I continue to use visual analogies (provisionally) until I find a more satisfactory way of expressing and communicating these things, while acknowledging that vision is not the only, and probably not the best, metaphor to use.

that they could (to some extent - as no knowledge or attitude is ever *wholly* subjective, or involves *no* element of objectivity) stick with a more 'subjective' approach. Obviously, if you assume that *all* appearance is delusory, all subjective impressions confused, and that knowledge and truth can only be obtained by discovering 'objective' reality as it really is behind all appearance and stripped of all subjective mediation; then you have a motive and an impetus. But if you don't share that assumption (and it is a very large one - would you not have to explain *why* a knower should assume that in the first place) the pursuit of objectivity doesn't seem as imperative and necessary. You could, in theory, just pootle along quite happily as you are doing, 'seeing' the world as you do. What makes you suddenly start to question the way it seems, rather than accepting it as 'given' or natural (which, to my mind, is the start of a more 'objective' attitude.)

Nagel says the "pressure to make an objective advance comes.... from the incapacity of the earlier view of the world to include and explain itself - that is, to explain why things appear to us as they do. This makes us seek a new conception that can explain both the former appearances and the new impression that it itself is true."⁵⁰ I do think that something like this is involved in producing a new (more objective) conception of a phenomenon, but this cannot be the initial 'pressure' to create a new conception; because earlier views of the world usually *can* explain why

⁵⁰ Ibid p78

things appear as they do, and unless we have some reason to question them, we usually can go on accepting these explanations. Something has to come along that challenges the earlier view, (and most importantly, that is *accepted as a challenge* to the earlier point of view, not 'explained away' or rejected on the terms of the earlier point of view; nor 'allowed' to exist separately on different terms, but without affecting the initial view). One way in which this can occur is the one Nagel mentioned earlier in his description of 'physical' objectivity - an acknowledgement that although things seem/ are a certain way to 'us', they seem/ are different to others who are differently positioned or constituted,⁵¹ (but which crucially does not rest at a recognition of difference, but proceeds to a questioning of our own views and an exploration of why they are different to others, how they are related). [See section on

⁵¹ (Nagel then described 'physical' objectivity as pursuing a conception of the 'true nature' of things behind the different appearances, as seen 'from nowhere'. I think his own 'View from Here' sort of position still hankers after some sort of access to a 'View from Nowhere' that explains why things appear as they do 'from here'.* I would argue instead that an acknowledgement of difference, relativity, perspectivity, and an exploration of their implications for our own understandings, can enable us to form a modified/ improved 'View from Here' that is in some sense a better conception of reality (as known from Here) without appealing to how it 'really' is unmediated by any knowers.)

* See e.g. Nagel (p62) "I throw [myself] into the world as a thing that interacts with the rest of it, and ask what the world must be like from no point of view in order to appear to [me] as it does from [my] point of view". (To me, the world wouldn't 'be like' anything from 'no point of view' - it requires a point of view to be like something). Also Nagel (p70) where he talks of altering our conception of the world so that it is not longer just the view from where we are "but in a sense a view from nowhere".

'difference' for a discussion of these issues.] Another way that tension or contradiction can arise in an earlier view of the world, is when knowers experience a disjunction between the way things seem to be, and the way they are supposed to be; between the way they 'are' and the way they are described to be. I will discuss this further in the section on standpoint theory, so I will not go into it here. However I briefly wish to point out what attention to 'difference' or 'disjuncture' alert us to about Nagel's picture of objectivity.

Nagel's knower seems essentially solitary (though of course she could not be, as the 'nature' and development of her knowledge is dependent on her social context and other knowers.) Nagel probably presumes the social, but when he describes various perspectives it is in terms of the 'individual', the 'human' and the 'non-human/ other creaturely. Ignoring the 'non-human' for now,⁵² there seems to be a lot of possible perspectives between the 'individual' and the 'human' that are missing from his account. To take the 'disjunction' referred to above: if the pursuit of knowledge was simply a matter of individual effort and self-improvement, it seems unlikely that a knower would construct or accept a view that contradicted, or wouldn't adequately explain or account for her experience, or that if she somehow did, that she would take it seriously for long. Similarly at the level of the 'human', it is

⁵²(which is not to imply that I think that consideration of the perspectives/ experience/ perception of other creatures is not important or useful)

unlikely that 'humans' (presumed in Nagel's picture to be essentially similar, a homogeneous category) would do so either. But the world is not only a 'physical' world (as Nagel's comments seem to assume) but a political and social one, one that is structured by differences of power, of access to resources, of ways of categorizing and valuing etc. In considering difference, the only one Nagel seems to take into account are those of constitution (e.g. differences between 'humans' and bats or martians, maybe). But the ways things seem/ are to us, are not only due to differences of constitution, but to differences of situation; not only in the sense of geographical location, but in the sense of where we are positioned along/ among various structural axes. Nagel does not acknowledge differences of power or privilege, of social and political location; something which is necessary if you are to see why 'disjunction' is possible; and if you are to be able to deal adequately with difference. You have to conceive of knowledge claims as not only describing the way the world 'is', but the way it is desired to be (or desired to be understood); as serving not only to explain, but to justify and legitimate, as serving not only to express ideas, but to suppress others.

Nagel doesn't mention inequalities of any sort. It's not that his position *precludes* it, or that an acknowledgment of such structures and power relations is incompatible with his position - indeed I think that something of the sort is (or can be held to be) implicit in his position. He speaks of seeing ourselves as placed in the world and

exploring how that position conditions our knowledge. He speaks of examining the relations between our knowledge, the world, and ourselves as we are placed in it. One could easily add a social/ political dimension to his position in that our 'place in the world' is a historical/ political one, and the relations explored will have to be social and economic and so on - in fact a lot of the attractiveness and plausibility of his account for me probably comes from an implicit acceptance of that kind of reading of his position. Such a version of his position would, I think, be richer, and allow access to other resources for criticizing and improving our perspectives than those he describes. It is largely the input from different or challenging perspectives, along with changes in our own situation or experiences, that causes us to question our accepted understandings and construct new ones. While we can never see ourselves from 'outside', others can; and although their views, on their own, are not *necessarily* any more valid or 'objective' than ours, perhaps a critical and reflexive interplay between the two can serve as a basis for more objective ones.

MERLEAU-PONTY ON PERCEPTION

Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote from a very different philosophical location to Nagel's. Merleau-Ponty was an existentialist and phenomenologist influenced by Marx and Husserl, among others. As an existentialist, he stressed that we always find ourselves already caught up in a world as finite and situated participants, and thus cannot view the world from outside, but must start from our actual situation, our concrete experience, and try and illuminate it. As a phenomenologist he rejected the dichotomy between appearance and reality, and was concerned with things as they appear to us in our experience, with all their attendant complexity and ambiguity, and not with how they might be 'in themselves' independently of us. And unlike Sartre, who wrote from a very similar tradition, he did not concentrate on the reflective knowledge of pure or self-consciousness, but in the bodily, the pre-reflective and pre-personal - on perception, the level of our most fundamental interaction with and knowledge of, the world.

To the 'traditional' philosophies of Plato and Descartes etc. perception poses problems which have to be overcome or transcended in pure thought. Merleau-Ponty claimed that the separation of mind from body, subject from object, knower from world, inherent in these theories

distorts our actual experience of being in the world. To hold these theories, we have had to discredit our experience. Merleau-Ponty opposed this disparagement of experience and wanted to reinstate the link between consciousness and the body, between subject and object, knower and world. Human beings are, he said, both object and subject, a 'body subject' (though he did not use that precise term himself most of his translators and commentators do)¹. This body-subject does not 'know' the world in the way a pure consciousness was supposed to. As Sonia Kruks says² "[f]irstly, it is 'situated' knowledge. Our body is *in* the world, and thus cannot know the world from a distance but only from our own time and place. Our knowledge of the world varies as our situation within it alters and there can be no a-temporal, no absolute or objective knowledge. Secondly, bodily knowledge differs from that of a constituting consciousness in that it is in the first instance 'perceptive' knowledge and not the knowledge of reason. Unlike the latter, it does not arise through contemplation, but through intentionality when we act. Our fundamental experience is that of our bodies. We come to know the world and to realize our interconnectedness with the world through our bodies, and this knowledge is sensual or perceptive before it is conscious. The body is the contact point which makes possible the dialectical relation between man(sic) and the world, in which each sustains the other." This 'tacit

¹ See footnote (2) in Sonia Kruks *The Political Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Harvester Press Brighton 1981) p23

² Ibid see pp 10-11

cogito' - "a pre-conscious 'knowing' of ourselves and existence"³ is the basis of our knowledge - that which grounds and sustains reason and philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty mounted a critique of both Empiricism/ Positivism and Idealism/ 'Intellectualism', emphasising what these two approaches have in common. Though they differ in many ways, each to Merleau-Ponty was a form of "the natural attitude" or "objectivist thinking" which, he says, reduces "all phenomena which bear witness to the union of subject and world, putting in their place the clear idea of the object as *in itself* and the subject as pure consciousness. It therefore severs the ties that unite the thing and the embodied subject..."⁴. He criticized Empiricism/ Positivism as "atomistic and deterministic"⁵ positions which ignore people's involvement, adaptation and intentional interaction with their environment. Such approaches reduce sense and perception to "a matter of stimulus-response", see gestures and actions as "movements explicable in terms of nervous functioning" and reduce the body to an object which "mechanically receives, transmits and reproduces the qualities of the outside world". But because the body is made machine "subjectivity loses its anchor and becomes a disembodied consciousness surveying the world" as if from nowhere. Since the bodies of others are also now machines we

³ Ibid p11

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge and Kegan Paul London 1962) p320

⁵ See Kruks p5

can "at best infer the existence of other [disembodied] consciousnesses"⁶ and solipsism creeps in. The idealist 'alternative' divorces people from the world and their bodies, setting up a dualism of mind and body, subject and object etc; asserting the primacy of consciousness and reducing the world to its object. While the empiricists overlook their own role in perception, the idealist merely reverses the empiricist position and "subordinates everything to a constituting ego".⁷

Merleau-Ponty wanted to escape both empiricism/ positivism and idealism - he wanted to make philosophy more relevant, more concrete, more concerned with lived human existence within the world. He argued that experience is "neither a mechanically determined process nor a purely fortuitous construction"⁸ - human beings are neither causally determined things nor undetermined consciousnesses⁹. What he wanted to capture was the meeting point of 'existence' and consciousness and show how they were interdependent - that neither was primary or the cause of the other, but moments of a totality, of a dialectical and circular process. His notion of the 'body-subject' - "always already intentionally related to the world"¹⁰ which it assumes and modifies, is an attempt to resolve the subject/

⁶See Monika M. Langer *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception* (MacMillan London 1989) p16

⁷Ibid p72

⁸Ibid p xvi

⁹See Kruks p6

¹⁰Langer p66

object duality. He sees this basic dialectic of a perceiving body and what he calls the "primordial world" as supporting conscious life; and then a further dialectic between people which brings into being 'the social world'.¹¹ Other people "are bodily beings,... grounded in the same dialectic with the 'primordial' world,"¹² and though their perceptions will not be identical to ours as we each perceive the world from a unique situation, our perceptions will overlap considerably, interweave with each other to form "common areas of meaning - an 'interworld' between us".¹³

Since all knowledge and all forms of human co-existence takes place within the horizons opened up by perception, phenomenology's concern must be with the pre-reflective world in which we are already engaged prior to reflection,¹⁴ and must aim to "draw our attention to the always presupposed and actually present background of our actual experience".¹⁵ This "does not render us the given as it appears to common sense or naive science... [but] subverts the reifications of the natural attitude by showing that the given is constituted in a primordial dialogue between body-subject and world.... [This given] has a history and is part of a whole network of relations, it is profoundly

¹¹ See Kruks p13

¹² Ibid p14

¹³ Ibid p14

¹⁴ Langer pxv

¹⁵ Ibid pxvi

dynamic".¹⁶ This pre-reflective background to our conscious relationships cannot ever become entirely explicit or be fully clarified by analysis. It can only be brought to our attention - we cannot tear our experience and knowledge free of it".¹⁷ The task of philosophy is not, and cannot be, "to eliminate the confused or ambiguous from our thinking... The world *is* ambiguous and philosophy necessarily partakes of this worldly quality".¹⁸ Indeed he speaks of not so much a *knowing* of the world as a *living* of it. There is no clear boundary to Merleau-Ponty between the 'lived knowledge' of perception and the world of ideas. Rather consciousness is a "network of significant intentions which are sometimes clear to themselves and sometimes ... lived rather than known."¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty did not conceive of people as primarily thinkers or pure consciousnesses, but as embodied subjects. He believed that we need to replace conceptions of pure body or materiality, and pure mind, with a notion of incarnate subjectivity in which all aspects of experience interfuse in such a way that each remains relatively distinct without being entirely isolable.²⁰ He conceived of the subject as body and the body as subject, rather than object. The body is not 'en soi' or 'in itself', rather it is a *project*.²¹

¹⁶ Ibid pxvi

¹⁷ Ibid pxvi

¹⁸ Kruks p11

¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty *The Structure of Behaviour* p173 quoted in Kruks p24

²⁰ Langer p53

²¹ Ibid see p26

The body projects itself towards the world, and its manner of engaging itself in various projects reveals the nature of its bodily spatiality. The body experiences itself to the extent that it perceives something else. The body as experienced cannot be divorced from the world as experienced - "my awareness of my body is inseparable from the world of my perception."²² Things I perceive, I "perceive always in reference to my body",²³ and this is so only as I have awareness of my body in relation to them. There is "a fundamental dialectic - a to and fro movement of the living body and the world" in which something becomes significant or meaningful. This significance is neither "given... in the manner of a traditional sense-datum, nor something conceived and imposed by a pure consciousness"²⁴ - rather the significance is created in dialogue. For Merleau-Ponty the subject *is* perceptual involvement. "It is at the level of preconscious sense experience that [a person] first creates and elicits meaning through [her] dialectical interaction with the world."²⁵ The "perceiver is simultaneously part of the perceived world, and sufficiently apart from it for the dialogue between them to arise."²⁶ Merleau-Ponty says that "sensing is neither a passive registering, nor an active imposing of meaning - to sense something is to...'commune'

²² Ibid p41

²³ Ibid p41

²⁴ Ibid p50

²⁵ Kruks p11

²⁶ Langer p158

with it."²⁷ So colour, for instance, is neither purely physical, nor an intellectual construction, but a communication between a body subject and its environment, in which something comes into being.²⁸

Merleau-Ponty said that consciousness is *intentional* - i.e. it is oriented towards objects - it is always consciousness *of something*. Reflection is not self-sustaining, but depends on us actually involving ourselves in experiences such as seeing something, doubting something, liking something. But these things are themselves *phenomenal* - i.e. they are beings for consciousness, *appearing* things. He wanted to avoid both the conception of intentionality as pure creativity, and its opposite, "a passive consciousness irreconcilable with any kind of engagement."²⁹ What appears, and the consciousness in which it appears, stand in a symmetrical relationship. The relationship between phenomena and consciousness is not causal but dialectical - the "object that is essentially a structure for consciousness, would cease to be in the absence of that consciousness; just as the consciousness that is essentially consciousness of something, would cease to be in the absence of its object. They are joined in their opposition, opposed in their mutual dependence".³⁰ Objects are thus phenomenal, not independent

²⁷ Ibid p74

²⁸ Ibid see p73

²⁹ John F. Bannan *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Harcourt, Brace and Ward New York 1967) p14

³⁰ Ibid p64

existences as presumed by science and 'common sense'. Attempts to detach objects from the conditions in which they appear are thus fatally flawed,³¹ as is the traditional distinction between the object's appearance and its reality.³² The object *is* the object experienced or perceived, it *is* what appears. He says that the 'natural attitude' of science or common sense takes for granted without specifically acknowledging it, the consciousness through which the world and objects form themselves for us. It 'objectifies' things, losing sight of consciousness and its involvement in them.

Science divorces objects from their relation to any particular perceiver, and strips them of "all perspectivity, ambiguity or indeterminacy".³³ It neglects the part "we incarnate subjects play in the constitution of the objects of our perception".³⁴ Instead of recognizing our role, science considers them as "objects in themselves,"³⁵ or alternatively goes to "the opposite extreme by distorting our contribution so as to make of it the power of creating *ex nihilo*".³⁶ Such an attitude overlooks the fact that while objects are objects-for-us, they are only so "in

³¹ Langer p16

³² Ibid see p112

³³ Ibid p16

³⁴ Ibid p16

³⁵ Ibid p23

³⁶ Ibid p23

themselves-for-us".³⁷ "Objects are not mere projections, or constructions of our minds...., they are things to be encountered and discovered."³⁸ Although the thing is inseparable from the perceiver, it offers a certain resistance to the perceiver's exploration - we can not just make of it what we will. "Things thus have an independence, but not an absolute independence".³⁹ We do not simply invent them by endowing things with "whatever we subsequently ascribe to them, nor do we run up against them as entities existing entirely in themselves which we merely observe".⁴⁰

Merleau-Ponty emphasised the perspectival, spatio-temporal structure of perceptual experience. Perception *is* perspectival, the appearance of objects is always inseparable from a particular bodily attitude or point of view. An object cannot be seen from 'nowhere'; or, what amounts to the same thing, from all possible perspectives at once (a contradiction in terms).⁴¹ To see, for instance, is always to see *from* somewhere. "Our perceptual experience discloses that to be is to be situated."⁴² "By virtue of being incarnate subjects, we thus already find ourselves in a world which is 'primordially' meaningful [and oriented] prior to any explicit taking of a stand by the [conscious]

³⁷ Ibid p96

³⁸ Ibid p23

³⁹ Ibid p97

⁴⁰ Ibid p115

⁴¹ Ibid see p24

⁴² Ibid see p83

self."⁴³ The body's perspective constitutes our bond with the world, our fixed opening upon it. The perspectivism of the body and of lived experience "thwarts total expression", "resists becoming totally explicit".⁴⁴ To "be situated within a certain point of view necessarily involves not seeing our situation itself, not possessing it as a visual object except in an act of mutual signification".⁴⁵ It can only be known indirectly through others or by virtue of its "correlation with the profiled revelation of objects."⁴⁶

To a holder of the traditional concept of objectivity, it might seem that a position like Merleau-Ponty's, which insists that all knowers are situated and embodied, that all knowledge is contingent and conditioned, that there is no universal or absolute knowledge; invites relativism. But this is not so. For Merleau-Ponty knowledge is not the private discovery/ creation of an autonomous individual subject, but a product of *intersubjectivity*. He insists that despite the particularity of knowledge, there is also commonality, that situations and knowledge are shared. His vision is not one of lots of totally diversified and unconnected perspectives, but of different perspectives onto the 'same' world that ensures that experience and knowledge are not "closed in on themselves" but open up to each other. He emphasizes both the diversity *and* the unity of our

⁴³ Ibid p83

⁴⁴ Bannan p57

⁴⁵ Merleau-Ponty quoted in Bannan p56

⁴⁶ Bannan p56

experience - our engagement in a world which, despite the vastness of the possibilities of experience it offers, is a *single* world;⁴⁷ and which thus guarantees the interconnectedness of our experience. All our conscious experience arises through a dialectical interaction with the world which is primarily perceptual. Since all perception is situated, it is thus relative, but we can still talk of 'true' and 'false', still make a distinction between the two, although it will never be absolute. Since all perception is, for Merleau-Ponty, subjective, it cannot be its subjective nature that distinguishes a 'true' perception from a 'false' one (e.g. a hallucination). But perception is not 'purely' 'subjective', it is in and of the world, and 'true' perception opens onto and receives objective confirmation in the world. We can confirm the truth of our perceptions when we act on their basis and receive intersubjective confirmation from others⁴⁸ (though this confirmation is never absolute or fully guaranteed.)

The inherence of the body/ subject in the world implies finitude and incompleteness, openness, temporality and ambiguity. To Merleau-Ponty, "ambiguity is of the essence of human existence and everything we live or think has several meanings".⁴⁹ But this is not meant in a negative or

⁴⁷This supposition of a world, *one* world however variously experienced/ understood, seems to me a minimal assumption required if we wish (as I do) to avoid solipsism or a relativism which prevents us from genuinely acknowledging or communicating with others

⁴⁸See Kruks p12

⁴⁹ Merleau-Ponty quoted in Bannan p79

irrational sense - to Merleau-Ponty ambiguity and perspectivity are not defects to be deplored, but the very condition of our being human knowers.⁵⁰ And our inherence in the world, the source of our ambiguity, is also the source of all our certainty.⁵¹ "No matter how we... doubt or err, our basic hold in the world insures that we remain open to certainty and truth"⁵² (though never in an absolute sense) and our errors and illusions, once recognized as such, go on to contribute to truth. If absolute knowledge is not possible because our experience of truth is inseparable from being in situation, neither is absolute falsity - we are "born into a participation in truth".⁵³ Truth comes into being in our concrete co-existence with others, and cannot be severed from language and history. "Within the framework of a particular view of the world, various truths will strike one as self evident. However, even these truths are never unchallengeable, as we discover when we change our hold on the world and thereby transform the 'ground' of our thoughts."⁵⁴ But just as it is impossible to free ourselves from inherence in the world, so it is impossible to free ourselves from all suppositions, or 'bracket' or survey them.⁵⁵ Because we are situated and perspectival knowers,

⁵⁰ See Langer p104

⁵¹ Ibid see p118

⁵² Ibid p121

⁵³ Ibid p120

⁵⁴ Ibid p120

⁵⁵ Ibid p120

our truths will always be conditional, but they will also, because of our inherence in the world, always have an element of facticity - "they are the truths of a perspectival temporal being, and like the latter, they are dynamic and open-ended".⁵⁶

Bannan says that Merleau-Ponty was arguing for an enlarged and humanized reason. Experience has its reference points in the world, things, and other people etc. And it "is here, in dealing with these, that we find out what the very words to *know*, to be *certain*, to be *true*, mean. But here our knowing has always been at ease with their incompleteness and its own, our certitudes with their instability and the future, our truth with process and obscurity".⁵⁷ Merleau-Ponty's work offers an opportunity to realize a new understanding of knowledge and objectivity - one in which 'subject' and 'object', subjectivity and objectivity, are not separable or reducible but mutually implicated; the apparent opposition between them being mediated by the knowers engagement in the world, their relationship with what is known. Merleau-Ponty's knower is incarnate, both in and of the world, and always already situated and oriented before conscious reflection. The knower/ body-subject always perceives/ knows the world from somewhere within it, as an engaged participant caught up in it, not as a disembodied observer viewing it from outside/ nowhere. The search for truth cannot thus be seen as a

⁵⁶ See Bannan p268

⁵⁷ Ibid p268

turning away from the world of concrete experience, but must take our experience, our location in history, our insertion in the world as its starting point. All knowledge is conditioned by its situation, is mediated by subjectivity as well as being objectively shaped and constrained; and this is not to be deplored as leading to confusion or relativism, but recognized as the very conditions, the possibility for us knowing anything.⁵⁸

One thing all this discussion has not addressed is the question of power. This is not to say that Merleau-Ponty was indifferent to politics. His position was broadly anti-capitalist and anti-colonialist, with a cautious and distant support for Communism and the Soviet Union which he later withdraw. Through most of his adult life he engaged in a sympathetic but critical dialogue with Marxism (from outside the French Communist Party) which is expressed in his essays (many for *Les Temps Modernes*, which he edited.) I have concentrated here mostly on aspects of his *Phenomenology of Perception* as to Merleau-Ponty an understanding of perception is vital to a better understanding of human knowledge and existence, one less distorted and misleading than that the traditional emphasis on conscious reflection has lead to. Though the situatedness and perspectivity of Merleau-Ponty's perceiver is described primarily as a bodily/spatial one this can easily be extended to an appreciation of socio-cultural-political situation in Merleau-Ponty's treatment of intersubjectivity and the social world, in a

⁵⁸ See here Langer pp104,120

way that he would, I think, have accepted or intended himself.⁵⁹

The difficulty, to me, seems to come in if we consider intersubjective conflict, or problems of understanding, evaluating or criticizing across differences of situation and perspective. At the more specifically perceptive and spatial level Merleau-Ponty speaks of others perceptions *confirming, extending, complementing* mine, of them enabling me "to achieve a more comprehensive view of the world than is offered by my hold alone".⁶⁰ This is indeed so, yet as I said before in relation to Scheffler, social and political perspectives cannot be communicated or reconciled as easily

⁵⁹The last section in the *Phenomenology of Perception* deals with questions of freedom and determinism, and includes a discussion of class consciousness. Merleau-Ponty wanted to oppose both the conception of class consciousness held by 'Positivist Marxism' and the communist Party, which ignores people's subjective experience and understandings and sees proletarian consciousness as a purely objective state, a function of being in a certain economic relation; and the Sartrean alternative which sees it as a matter of purely subjective choice, of deciding to see the world that way; which ignores the materiality of the conditions affecting subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty insisted that class is a "manner of being-in-the world within a socio-economic order which I experience and live" (Langer p143) and is thus both subjective and objective in nature (see Langer pp141-143, Kruks p51) (Merleau-Ponty was also positively disposed toward the work of the 'early' Lukács of *History and Class-Consciousness*, in which Lukács developed his understanding of the proletarian consciousness or standpoint; which was later appropriated and modified by feminist 'standpoint theorists', and which would broadly be compatible with a position like Merleau-Ponty's - Lukács was also concerned with the split between subject and object, and the consequent reification of the object, the seeing of it outside of relation and process. He too called for the need to examine the interrelation of subject and object. (See section on standpoint theory which follows) - though after Lukács' 'recantation' their position's differed increasingly.)

⁶⁰Langer p104

and apparently unproblematically as visio-spatial ones can, due to the operation of power and ideology. Langer says of Merleau-Ponty's position that "[f]ar from being mutually exclusive these multiple modes of being-in-the-world are internally related and form a social world".⁶¹ I do think that this is right, but I also think that the relations are very complex and mutually constituting, and that with socio political perspectives so much more is at stake, so much more is contested, than with visual perspectives. We cannot look to some sort of consensual reconciling of perspectives (like different views of a church tower) that might perhaps not privilege or deny any, and could perhaps preserve and acknowledge all. More is implicated, and more is in conflict, among social perspectives. I will return to this question later, in sections on Standpoint, Difference and Gadamer, but for now I wish to develop the Marxist strand I have alluded to in the work of Merleau-Ponty.

From my description of his position, it will be obvious that the concept of the dialectic is central to Merleau-Ponty philosophy. Through it he aims to transcend the 'alternatives' of positivism and idealism;⁶² the opposition of body and mind, subject and object etc. Merleau-Ponty developed his conception of dialectics in response and opposition that of Hegel. Merleau-Ponty's dialectic is non-teleological - a continuous process intrinsic to existence, without beginning or end - and non-idealist. As such, Marx

⁶¹ Ibid p104

⁶² See Kruks p24

(especially the 'young' Marx who had "not yet subordinated dialectical thought to the naive realism of 'scientific' socialism"⁶³ - the 'early' *philosophy* of Marx as expressed in the *Theses On Feurbach*, rather than Marxism as a determinate and 'scientific' Theory of History) was of great relevance and importance to him. Such an understanding of Marxism offered a 'humanized' and 'secularized' version of the Hegelian dialectic" and attempted "a 'middle way' between idealism and positivist materialism," asserting "the inherently social and political nature of human existence"⁶⁴ and reality; which cannot be observed detachedly as an object of contemplation by an autonomous consciousness; but is known through sensuous, active and interested practice in a world structured by economic and political relationships - a world which will be experienced and known differently according to one's position within these relationships.

I have already referred to Donna Haraway's claim that "feminist accounts of objectivity and embodiment" require a manoeuvre "begun in dialectics"⁶⁵ (but as yet not carried through). Jennifer Ring argues that "it may be possible to salvage the concepts...of subjectivity and objectivity in a way that is compatible with feminist theory"⁶⁶ through a 'minimalist dialectics' which differs from Hegelian (and Marxist) dialectics "primarily in terms of its professed

⁶³ Ibid p38

⁶⁴ Ibid p46

⁶⁵ Haraway *Situated Knowledges* p592

⁶⁶ Ring *Modern Political Theory* p20

agnosticism about origins and ends in history"⁶⁷ and its refusal to privilege either "consciousness or materiality". "Minimalist dialectics" differs from some contemporary feminist uses of dialectics in that it *emphasizes* tension and conflict rather than minimizing it.⁶⁸ Rather than seeing conflict "as that which must be overcome as quickly as possible",⁶⁹ she argues that feminists should recognize conflict as "a central and unavoidable part of self-awareness and change".⁷⁰ I agree with this sort of position, and shall return to it later (again in relation to the question of 'difference' and the work of Gadamer) but first I wish to consider in detail the other crucial aspect of Marx's work referred to above - the conception of knowledge as conditioned and mediated by one's location within social structures - the inherent perspectivity and partiality of knowledge acknowledged in standpoint theory.

⁶⁷ Ibid p21

⁶⁸ Ibid see pp27-30

⁶⁹ Ibid p30

⁷⁰ Ibid p33

STANDPOINT THEORY

"Humanistic Marxism was polluted at the source by its structuring theory about the domination of nature in the self-construction of man and by its closely related impotence in relation to historicising anything women did that didn't qualify for a wage. But Marxism was still a promising resource as a kind of epistemological feminist mental hygiene that sought our own doctrines of objective vision. Marxist starting points offered a way to get to our own versions of standpoint theories, insistent embodiment, a rich tradition of critiquing hegemony without disempowering positivisms and relativisms, and a way to get to nuanced theories of meditation." (Donna Haraway *Situated Knowledges* p578).

The version of standpoint theory I am about to describe is derived from 'humanistic' interpretations of Marx, via Lukács and Gramsci, similar to those found useful by Haraway (and Merleau-Ponty). I am not going to go into what Marx (or Lukács) (*really*) said or meant; how they should (correctly) be interpreted; who said what or added or altered what, etc. Suffice it to say that I find positivist or structuralist interpretations of Marxism very problematic for all sorts of reasons related to my project of exploring the relations between subjectivity, objectivity and perspective; and that what follows is a somewhat free appropria-

tion of Marx, Lukács (and Gramsci) as his/ their work relates to the 'nature' of these phenomena and how they can be best described and integrated.

Humanistic Marxism sees knowledge not as the pursuit of isolated, detached contemplative individuals, but as a social product, arising out of our practical, purposive, interested and sensuous interaction with others in a social and material world. It sees knowledge as being conditioned by the societies people live in, especially by the economic forces and relations that shape and limit peoples lives within these societies. This picture is not a wholly deterministic one, however, as the knowledge produced can be utilized practically within the society to transform it (always within certain limits set primarily by the current economic structures) which can then lead to transformations in the knowledge that can be produced, and so on. It is not, though, a case of a society's having a unitary and coherent body of knowledge that reflects the lives/ practical activities/ material interests of all within it, in any equal or homogeneous way. Since the inception of class society [and before that really - since the inception of a sexual division of labour which Marx and Engels fail to adequately historicize and treat as somehow natural] people within a society do not all engage in the same social and economic activities; do not all experience the same concerns and conditions; but occupy different positions within economic and political structures. Nor is it a case that you simply get a number of different knowledges, reflecting the material circumstances of various groups of people as they

are situated within these relations, for these relations are relations of power, and some groups (those in control of the economic resources) have more power than others, and this includes power over the processes of knowledge production and validation.

These groups, because of their position, not only have more access to resources of knowledge generation and dissemination; but act as gate-keepers, judges of what counts as valid knowledge, of what can be expressed and communicated. They thus have the power to suppress knowledges that conflict with or challenge theirs; to reject, from a position of authority, claims made by less powerful groups, and to impose their own interpretations and understandings over those from other groups. The body of knowledge of a society will tend thus to reflect the concerns and circumstances of the ruling group, both because they have more power to express and develop their knowledge and because the other groups, in so far as they have access to resources like education, communications and other media, usually have to use those created and controlled by the ruling group, and have to conform to their frameworks and expectations in doing so. This is not to imply that this is all a conscious 'plot' on the part of the ruling group - it may be sometimes, but given the existing structures and power relations, this is what will tend to occur generally anyway, and those of the ruling group might be largely unaware of those forces and structures supporting their claims and beliefs. [One of the symptoms of privilege is often to be unaware of it, or at least of its nature and

extent, and to deny its structural supports¹. Indeed to any ruling group the way things are often seems natural and necessary, almost inevitable. A further support of the ruling point of view, and further difficulty for subjugated groups in developing a counter perspective is the way the organization of society seems to make certain phenomena seem 'given' and unquestionable (e.g. the seeming ubiquity and necessity of competition under capitalism, or the seeming naturalness of women caring for children under 'patriarchy').²

[Yet nevertheless it is possible (under certain conditions) for subjugated groups to develop a standpoint of their own, one that reflects or expresses more adequately than the dominant view their experiences and concerns, and which challenges the dominant ideology.³ Despite the difficulties and obstacles imposed by their position, those in subjugated groups can develop different and critical understandings of their society and their situation within it. Firstly, even in ruling groups, no-one ever accepts or has access to, the entirety of a society's possible knowledge -

¹ I will return to this point later, in connection with 'difference'. Stanley and Wise (in their later article *Method, Methodology and Epistemology* p32) refer to Marilyn Frye's comment about the privilege of heterosexuality - one aspect of which is not to notice that it is privileged. See also Elizabeth Spelman's *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Beacon Press Boston 1988) for a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon.

² I don't like this term but can't think of a better one that means roughly the same thing so will use it occasionally until I get something better

³ See note at end of chapter

within any society, everyone's knowledge will be partial and thus different to some extent. Also no society's corpus of knowledge is entirely consistent or coherent; there will always be gaps, inconsistencies, contradictions, and this leaves room for manouvre; subversion and transformation, even within the dominant body of knowledge. This dominant body of knowledge never has *total* hegemony - there are always alternative body's of knowledge, marginal, illegitimate and relatively uninfluential as they may be, yet still resources for resistance or the development of new knowledges. The points above apply generally, to different degrees, depending on the circumstances, but the subjugated have a further source of critique - due to the way society has been structured, their experience is generally different to that described in the dominant theories. Because of social and political inequalities they generally or often perform different kinds of labour, live in different circumstances; experience different relationships (or the same ones differently), develop different skills and capacities; etc, to those who occupy the position from which the dominant theories are articulated.

This is not to assume that there is a perfect 'fit' between the dominant theories and the lives and experiences of those in the dominant group; or that the experience of those in subjugated groups presents itself to them in any obvious or given way - that it manifests 'itself' to them transparently and truly in some clear and unmediated fashion. The experience of everyone, subjugated or not, is mediated by the discourses, codes, frameworks etc, at their

disposal; and, given the existing power relations, these will often be discourses etc. formulated and perpetuated by the dominant group. Obviously any 'experience'⁴ can be interpreted, understood, experienced in various different ways, depending on the circumstances and possibilities at play in any particular situation. There is no one way for members of the working-class, say, to experience wage labour or unemployment or whatever; and the experience of it does not lead them automatically to 'the truth' or a 'correct' interpretation. Yet if experience is not fixed or given, neither is it entirely open: it cannot be understood just *anyhow* - it places definite constraints on what can, within any situation, be plausibly said (and these limits are far narrower than the total possibilities otherwise). If the different experience of those in subjugated groups doesn't give them anything certain or definite, it does give them *something* against which to evaluate various claims or interpretations. Members of the working class, for instance, do have to attempt to make sense of their experience of wage labour or whatever, in a way those in the ruling class do not (and usually can not) since they tend not to experience these phenomena personally at all, and therefore do not come to examine them in the same way.

Often the dominant theory will attend to and explain these phenomena (in its own terms, from the perspective of the ruling group) and those in subjugated groups will

⁴This is not to imply that experiences are discrete, uninterpreted, inert, givens of some kind- I just can't think of a better way of putting it.

interpret and understand their experience in these terms, more or less satisfactorily. Where this interpretation is smooth and easy and seemingly obvious, the dominant theory will not be called into question. Where there does seem to be a disjunction, a lack of 'fit' between someone's apparent experience and the terms of the theory, the dominant theory will often be able to explain this experience (away) as an anomaly, as something to do with the imputed difference or deviance of the individual or their situation - the problem is thus not with the theory, which stands as it is, but with this anomalous individual who through their own inadequacy (or occasionally more-than-adequacy) is not experiencing things as they should or normally would. (e.g. poverty is not the 'fault' or result of the capitalist system but due to the deficiency of a few (lazy/ incapable/ unfortunate etc) individuals.) And often the individual, unless she has access to an alternative and relatively powerful theory that can more adequately explain this disjunction and why things are/ seem as they do; does or will have (reluctantly perhaps) to accept this dominant understanding of her experience. But even so, she has, nevertheless, been caused to put into question, if only briefly, the dominant theory, in a way it is unlikely someone from the dominant group would normally come to do, having never experienced this tension between the way things seem perhaps to be, and the way they are supposed or described to be. Sometimes the dominant theory will simply not recognize or deny phenomena that seem patently 'real' to those in a subjugated group; who are left with a problem - they have exposed a lack or

deficiency within the dominant theory, but unless they have access to an alternative theory, they do not have the means to express or explore it.

The sometimes different experience of those in a subjugated group can cause them to consider things critically, to feel dissatisfied with the dominant theory, to problematise what had seemed normal or natural to others; but on their own, as isolated individuals, these can always be defused or explained away without any serious challenge to the dominant group or understandings. It is only when these individuals get together, to communicate their dissatisfactions, to compare their experiences, combine their criticisms, that they can begin to develop this challenge. Through attention to the similarities and differences of other's experiences, they can further understand their own and begin to create a different theory that attends to, and explains them more adequately. For instance, it is only when workers get together and come to see - through commonalities in their experiences of poverty, fear of unemployment etc, etc; and through *reinterpreting* much of their experience in the light of what others have to say - that the way things seem is neither the way it is described in the dominant theory e.g. a free selling of their labour; nor a function purely of their individual circumstances or bad luck; but something *structural*: a result of their common position as wage labourers in a capitalist system. (They also then come to realize that changing unsatisfactory aspects of their lives cannot adequately or permanently be accomplished on an individual level (e.g. as in getting a better job) as they

will still be subject to the structures and forces which at present act to oppress or exploit them. Any real change requires structural change which needs collective and theoretically informed action to bring it about.]

The 'standpoint' of the proletariat, for instance, is thus not the way things seem to any member or members of the proletariat, from where they are situated. As (non-class conscious) individuals they are likely to accept much of the bourgeois ideology; or to hold other otherwise inadequate understandings of their situation. Nor does their experience as members of the proletariat give them any automatic knowledge of the way things are, or any adequate alternative to the bourgeois theory. But their experience does; or can, under certain conditions, cause them to question, or doubt, what to members of the bourgeoisie seems given or unproblematic. And if, under certain conditions, they came together and explore these doubts and dissatisfactions, they can collectively come to develop a consciousness of themselves as a class, as a collectivity sharing a common location within economic and political structures, a common relation to the 'forces of production' and the dominant group. And as a class, becoming conscious of their structural position and how it shapes their lives and relates to those of others, they can develop a 'standpoint' - a view of society from the (class-conscious) perspective of the proletariat.

Marx was not a relativist. He saw all knowledge as

being a historical product, as socially and subjectively⁵ mediated. All knowledge is shaped by people's interested and located interaction with the world, and all knowledge is constructed from somewhere specific and constituting within it. There is no possibility of an Archimedean point outside of it from which it may be viewed as it 'really is' - there can be no 'objective' knowledge in the positivist sense. Yet Marx held that his theory was both objective and true, and that the developed and articulated standpoint of the proletariat was more adequate (to say the least) than the view of the bourgeoisie, which was correspondingly less true. (It is not that the view of the bourgeoisie is Absolutely False - it too is the product of an objective reality which shapes and constrains it - but that it understands things in a distorted and perverted way, an effect in part of the 'distorted'/'perverted' social relations of which it is a product. Thus the bourgeoisie will not 'see' the 'truth' simply by being told it, nor can the proletariat do away with the bourgeois ideology simply by pointing out its contradictions and limitations - changes in consciousness have to go hand in hand with changes in the social relations that underlie them.)

On what grounds can Marxists argue for the privilege,

⁵There are difficulties within Marxism as regards the role and mechanisms of subjectivity (especially in 'positivist' and structuralist Marxism). The 'early'/humanistic Marx seems more able to accommodate and integrate subjectivity, to provide space for a dialectical relation between it and objectivity/materiality. Certainly the emphasis on sensuous practice and activity seems to allow room for subjectivity, and it seems that material relations could only condition thought *through* subjective experience.

or greater adequacy of the standpoint of the proletariat, since they cannot argue (on traditional objectivist lines) that the bourgeois perspective is distorted *simply* because it 'reflects' the material circumstances and interests of the bourgeoisie; as the standpoint of the proletariat is no less materially conditioned and interested? There have been many different attempts to respond to the demand to justify the (relative) privilege of the proletarian standpoint, made by various schools of Marxism. I am not going to go into them all here (especially the positivist and structuralist versions which are antithetical to my project anyway) - instead I will just describe a few (related) points that have, I think, got something to them; that cumulatively make a plausible case; though none, I think, should be used as *the* criterion by which such claims could be justified or resolved.

First, there is the claim that although bourgeois ideology tends (generally) to make sense of the world from the perspective of the bourgeoisie, it cannot make sense of the lives and experiences of the proletariat. As I said before, bourgeois ideology could usually explain away or delegitimize bothersome claims or criticisms made by individual workers, but it cannot deal adequately with claims that express the class-conscious perspective of the proletariat; which exposes the structural supports of the bourgeois position, and the distortions, gaps, inconsistencies and perversions in the bourgeois ideology operating to legitimate it. Then there is the further claim that Marx's theory can explain both the perspective of the proletariat *and* that

of the bourgeoisie - it can explain why things seem as they do to both groups, with reference to a theory that describes the 'reality' underlying and connecting both⁶. This theory, however, could only be articulated from the standpoint of the proletariat. This is both because it is the situation of the proletariat that provides the problematic, the source of critique, the epistemological and 'empirical' resources, in their lives and experiences; and because the proletariat is crucial to the working of the capitalist system - it is their labour which is exploited and appropriated for profit under this system, and it is only if they collectively become aware of this and take charge of their labour power themselves that the system can be changed. (Thus the proletarian standpoint has a privilege which would not apply to those of say, the remaining peasantry, or the middle class).

There are further points that could be argued along the lines that the standpoint of the proletariat is not an entirely *different* view, *unrelated* to the bourgeois one, but one that can almost be seen as developing out of it; as a (half internal, half external) critique; that expresses the

⁶Bear in mind the comments I made in relation to Nagel's project. While I do think that there is something right about this; in terms of the need for theory that supports, explains, connects; I don't think that the 'reality' it refers to in doing so, is a somehow neutral or aperspectival one - one 'behind' all appearance, that describes how things really are 'in themselves' - it is still a perspective/ appearance though a 'better' one. I think that theory can be critically refined, informed and revised against other perspectives/ theory without necessitating access to an Archimedean point or unmediated reality to do so. (See sections on understanding across 'difference' later on)

tensions and difficulties within it, and attempts to address them, via a considerable revision and modification of the originally dominant theory. The proletariat has also been exposed to, and constituted by, the dominant ideology; they are (initially) operating from largely the same frameworks and understandings as the bourgeoisie; only their specific structural location within society gives them access to resources of comparison and critique not generally available to the bourgeoisie, which they can utilize to develop an improved, reworked theory that can take on board the phenomena the bourgeois theory seems to misrepresent or ignore. (Like the preceding argument there are implications here of greater comprehensiveness, less partiality (in the sense of narrowness, limitation) though no less perspectivity or partiality in the sense of engagement, interestedness etc.)

[Sometimes it is argued that the standpoint of the proletariat is preferable because it is less 'partial' in the sense that its 'interests' most closely approximate those of humankind in general. This argument for the proletariat's privilege claims that both the bourgeoisie and proletariat act in their interests as a class. But the interests of the bourgeoisie include their preservation as a privileged class, and the preservation of the inequalities and exploitation of the class system. It is in the interests of the proletariat to destroy this class system (which will benefit the majority of people in society) but which paradoxically involves them working to do away with themselves as a class, as when capitalism is overthrown

there will no longer be a proletariat. So, in working to pursue their class interests they are also, in the long run, working against them and for the greater good of most people. (I include this here primarily because of its similarity to a certain feminist position (to which I ascribe myself) - one that sees feminists as working towards a state where gender categories and divisions will no longer structurally shape peoples lives; where 'gender' has no social, political or economic consequences. Feminists thus are presently in the position of provisionally and self-consciously taking up a contingent but currently politically relevant identity in order to undermine the grounds for its existence, utilizing and working from the conceptual, material and strategic resources available from that specific and interested position).

But although I am happy with talk of perspectives being 'interested' in the sense of engaged, concerned, materially and emotionally affected by whatever they are relating to, and don't mind talk of 'interest' in the rather vague sense of 'concerns' etc.; I don't think that the concept of 'interest' can do the justificatory work often ascribed to it by some defences of standpoint theory. When a justificatory claim depends on the 'nature' of some groups interests, when the adequacy of their claims depends on their being held to have certain interests, the uncertainty and contestability of these imputed interests becomes a problem. For what is meant by 'interests' in these cases - are these people's 'perceived' interests, whatever they happen to be; or their 'true' or 'real' interests, (as ascertained by

whom, from where?); are they short-term or long-term interests; material or more spiritual or ethical ones; and how are all those to be defined?

Alison Jaggar, for instance, provides a slightly different description of the Lukácsian argument for the privileging of the proletarian standpoint, one that I find disturbing in its uncritical linking of truth with emancipatory intent. She says "[i]n Lukács' view, classes whose interest lies in perpetuating the existing social order have an interest in perpetuating the myths that justify their own domination. By contrast, classes whose interest most closely approximates the interests of the social totality will have an interest in overthrowing the established order. Consequently, they are more likely to construct conceptual frameworks that will reveal accepted views as myths and provide a more reliable understanding of the world".⁷ While I would like/ hope this to be so, I feel a lot more argument would have to be provided in order to persuade me that this is necessary the case. This is a difficulty I find with some descriptions of standpoint theory, specifically those offered by Alison Jaggar and, to some extent, Sandra Harding (see next section) - but their interpretations of standpoint theory do not rely on these problematic assertions, and are indeed, I think, better without them. I will go on to discuss feminist standpoint theories as developed by them and others in the next chapter, after one more, brief but

⁷ Jaggar *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* p362

important point regarding the proletarian standpoint].⁸

The standpoint of the proletariat is not universally privileged - it is not, of course, applicable or valid in all places and all times (it would not be adequate, or even exist, for instance, in feudal times). The proletarian standpoint can only arise within a specific set of circumstances⁹ (the development of industrial capitalism) and even then its existence is not inevitable, but dependent on certain conditions being fulfilled. Yet, having said this; within this specific historical situation, the developed standpoint of the proletariat is held to be uniquely privileged - it is only by taking up its standpoint that you will get on adequate understanding of capitalism, and thus your own lives and experiences within this system. To orthodox Marxists no other standpoint can challenge or rival the primacy of the proletarian standpoint. To the extent that 'traditional' Marxists acknowledge oppression on grounds other than economic class, e.g. sexism, racism; they usually see these as secondary to those of class, and

⁸See also Charles Mills' *Alternative Epistemologies* in *Social Theory and Practice* Vol 14 no.3 Fall 1988) for a sympathetic discussion of Marxist, feminist and Black 'alternative epistemologies'/ standpoint theories, and various arguments for the relative privilege of such standpoints; ultimately stemming most satisfactorily, he thinks, from their systematically different experience.

⁹Frederic Jameson says that the epistemological 'priority' of 'proletarian consciousness' "has to do with the *conditions of possibility* ["its requisites, its preparatory requirements, that without which it cannot properly develop"] of the new thinking inherent in this particular class position". See *History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project* in *Rethinking Marxism* Vol 1 no.1 1988 p66

ultimately reducible to it. The category of the proletariat is held to be a unitary and inclusive one - all those who stand in a certain economic relation to the means of production share this common location; and if within this category there are recognized to be differences of race or gender, these again are held to be secondary or derivative or addable: as members of the proletariat their situation, their problems and concerns are perceived to exist in common, and to promise a shared and homogeneous perspective on the world.

However, far from applying equally or adequately to all; critics of Marxist theory have pointed out that the standpoint of the proletariat, like the liberal/ bourgeois theory it criticizes; does not speak for all within its supposedly inclusive categories; but in fact tacitly assumes a doer/ knower who is minimally adult, white and male; and that it speaks from that specific location. Not only does it thus exclude much of the experience and concerns of those (even 'within' the proletariat) who do not share that exact location, but because it takes for granted as 'normal' many aspects of that location it does not sufficiently examine or question much of what appears as it does from that perspective. And it is from this falsely inclusive, and not sufficiently reflexive standpoint, that many of the difficulties with Marxism (like those alluded to by Haraway) arise - the problems with its conception of labour and production, which exclude much of what women do; its conception of the sexual division of labour as in some way given, not fully historical; its supposition that human

reproduction is somehow 'natural' or 'biological' etc.

Feminists have argued that Marx's theory (as the articulated standpoint of the proletariat) cannot have the status and validity it assumes for itself; not only because of the over-inclusive nature of its categories which distorts the lives of (and actually works to exclude) many of those theoretically subsumed within these categories, like black male, or white female workers; but because its unsatisfactory acknowledgement of structures of gender and racial oppression causes it to fail to recognize its own location within these structures. From a feminist standpoint it becomes possible to see not only how Marxist theory fails satisfactorily to describe or address the concerns of women variously located within the economic structures described by Marx; but how Marxist theory, even as a standpoint not of *the* proletariat, but of a specific constituency within it; is, though indeed a perspective of that group; not adequate as an 'objective' or 'true' description of the world from that standpoint. Feminists argue that their standpoints expose distortions, gaps and untenable suppositions in both Marxist and Liberal etc theories; and that Marxism would have to deal with these difficulties satisfactorily to preserve its claim to adequacy - something that would call for pretty drastic revision of its theory, in the least. Feminist standpoint theorists argue that theirs are *better* understandings of society than the proceeding ones they criticize, (having developed in part in response to problems arising from them), though they do not make as strong a claim to truth (i.e. access to *the* (one) Truth about society

sometimes made on behalf of the standpoint of the proletariat) nor do they claim that only feminist standpoints are *uniquely* privileged. Nevertheless they do face similar questions as to the nature and unity of their categories; the diversity or commonality of their locations, the generality or specificity of their truths, which I will address through and after a discussion of feminist standpoint theory.

(Note from footnote 3)

[There is a lot of controversy about the meaning, use or necessity of a term like 'ideology'. I still find it a useful and descriptive term, and am using it in the following sense, which makes no pretence at faithfulness to a particular version of Marxism or whatever, but is simply the sense that I find most illuminating: To me, being 'ideological' implies being distorted (yet not absolutely False - all beliefs have *some* relation to reality, are 'true' to *some* degree, however small) - yet not all distorted beliefs are ideological. To say that a claim is ideological implies that it is socially shaped and positioned, but that applies to all knowledge, and not all knowledge is ideological - ideological claims are essentially *political*, in the sense that, say, Inuit claims about different varieties of snow would not be; they are a product of power relations which structure people's lives differently according to where they are located vis a vis various political categories. An ideological claim is one that fails to recognize its own contingency and locatedness, its own dependence on certain not only minimally social, but political conditions; but this again could apply to beliefs that were not ideological. Ideological claims act specifically (but not necessarily explicitly) to justify or legitimate political states of affairs - yet not all acts of political justification would necessarily be ideological. An ideological belief is one that takes as 'natural', 'given' or necessary (and uses some phenomenon's supposed naturalness, givenness or necessity to explain or justify a state of affairs) what has actually to be explained as a product of that state of affairs. Thus a referral to the naturalness and inevitability of competition, scarcity and accumulation in justifying or explaining the necessity of capitalism would be ideological on this construal, as it fails to question, takes as given, what is in fact a product of what is to be explained; and so distorts, or misrepresents the 'true' state of things. Another example would be referring to the present division of labour by gender (e.g. in childcare) in an

attempt to explain/ justify gender divisions. This is overt ideology, but ideology can be implicit too, in so many of our beliefs about the 'naturalness' and normalness of our lives - this has direct connections with what I said before about unawareness of privilege.

My understanding of ideology is similar to that described by Dorothy Smith in *The Conceptual Practices of Power: A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (University of Toronto Press Toronto 1990) (see pp37-41). She describes Marx as criticizing the 'bourgeois economists' for treating as a fact what has to be explained. "Terms such as *division of labour*, *exchange* and *competition* are the primitives of their theories. Such terms express social relations... but the social relations themselves are presupposed without being explored or analysed. Ideological theories conceal the presence and working of these relations... Marx's critique of political economy is an explication of just those relations that are presupposed when the categories of political economy are treated as given." (p37)

See Michèle Barrett's *The Politics of Truth: From Marx to Foucault* (Polity Press Cambridge 1991) for a brief description of John Mepham's understanding of ideology as operating through "the systematic and mystificatory exclusion of certain perceptions from discourse" e.g. 'commodity fetishism' mystifying, rendering invisible social relations behind an apparent relation of *things* (p15). Dorothy Smith (see p70 above) claims that Foucault's concept of 'power/ knowledge' is ideological on similar grounds - that it ascribes agency to power while mystifying the underlying social relations that make sense of it. (Both the above examples are also ones of reification, which is closely related to ideology).]

FEMINIST STANDPOINT THEORIES

Feminist standpoint theories are in origin developments/ appropriations of Marxist/ Lukácsian theory (filtered from developments of Marxist standpoint theories, e.g. the work of Nancy Hartsock,¹ Alison Jaggar² and to some extent, Dorothy Smith³; there are large areas of similarity/ overlap between kinds of 'popular'/ non-academic feminist theorizing

¹ see Nancy Hartsock *The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism* in Sandra Harding and Merrill Hintikka (eds) *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology and the Philosophy of Science* (Reidel Dordrecht 1985)

² See Alison Jaggar *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* especially chapter 11

³ See Dorothy Smith: *Womens Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology*
:The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology (Northeastern University Press Boston 1987)

:The Conceptual Practices of Power
[It is perhaps important to here point out that their work, and that of Sandra Harding in discussing and developing standpoint theory (especially as formulated in *Whose Science?*) typifies and indeed almost constitutes, the basis of 'authentic' feminist standpoint theory. I say this because many feminist critics, and even some feminists sympathetic to standpoint theory, seem to equate it with a 'women's perspective' or even a 'women's way of knowing' - which, as it will hopefully become clear, is not the same as a feminist standpoint at all. (See related point by Sandra Harding in *Whose Science?* p118 footnote 9)

(especially those related to 'consciousness-raising'⁴) and the general picture I sketched in the preceding chapter. Such an understanding might proceed on something like the following lines: Because of gender divisions, women tend to do different work, in different circumstances, within different relationships or different positions within relationships, than men; thus developing (or not developing) different capabilities and having different experiences to men of otherwise similar social location. Yet the frameworks and theories they have access to to make sense of their experience, have, because of gendered power relationships, not been ones developed from their own perspectives, but ones which reflect the positions, interests and concerns of (ruling) men. Women in the contemporary 'west' will be exposed to many different discourses, from school history lessons to 'women's' magazines, through which to understand and create themselves, but all of these, arising as they do

⁴Teresa de Lauretis says "The fact that today the expression 'consciousness raising' has become dated and more than slightly unpleasant, as any word will that has been appropriated, diluted, digested and spewed out by the media, does not diminish the social and subjective impact of a practice - the collective articulation of one's experience of sexuality and gender - which has produced, and continues to elaborate, a radically new mode of understanding the subject's relation to social-historical reality. Consciousness raising is the original critical instrument that women have developed toward such understanding, the analysis of social reality, and its critical revision. The Italian feminists call it "autocoscienza" selfconsciousness, and better still self consciousness. For example, Manuela Freire: "the practice of self consciousness is the way in which women reflect politically on their condition." (de Lauretis *Semiotics and Experience* chapter 6 in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* Indiana University Press Bloomington, Indiana 1984)

See also Anne Marie Goetz p486

out of a society which structurally divides and discriminates on the basis of gender categories; suppose and act to perpetuate these structures.

Given that things often tend to appear in ways congruent with the dominant theories (e.g. women do appear to be the ones who look after children) and that these theories usually can explain these phenomena reasonably adequately (e.g. "its because its natural/ biological for females to bear and rear young") these theories will generally tend to be accepted even by those located differently to, and subjugated by, the creators of these theories. It certainly isn't the case that from their different position things appear to them obviously or transparently otherwise, in some way that provides an immediate alternative understanding of how things really are. But it is sometimes the case, depending of the circumstances, that their different experiences can lead them to doubt or question what is otherwise accepted. For instance a 1950's housewife feeling very bored, frustrated and depressed at home as a 'full-time' mother of small children might come to feel that there was something 'wrong' somewhere - the magazines, advertisements etc. are all saying how wonderful and satisfied and content she feels and yet she feels terrible. (She might not know exactly *what* she feels e.g. the 'problem with no name') but she knows she doesn't feel as she 'should', and accepted understandings are called into question. Often these apparent difficulties can be explained away in terms of her difference or deviance - she must be neurotic/ not a 'proper' 'woman'/ an incapable housewife etc, or there is

something about her particular circumstances that makes her especially unfortunate or unusual. And in the absence of alternatives she might have to accept this. Sometimes, exploring and juggling between different (often contradictory) discourses, she might be able to manoeuvre; to change identities, adopt marginal or exceptional ones, subvert the old ones (she is not a (boring) housewife - she is a 'career woman' or 'really like a man' or whatever). But individually, although the dominant ways of understanding things are made vulnerable to examination and critique in ways not usually possible from the dominant perspective - men (ruling men especially) do not usually perform full-time domestic work or childcare - individually women do not have the resources to mount a powerful enough critique or develop an adequate alternative.

It is only when they come together and collectively examine and compare their experiences in the light of other's (which involves both a recognition of the importance of experience, and the need to *re-understand* that experience when set against the similarity and difference of other's experiences) that they can do so. Collectively they came to realize that their dissatisfactions are not the result only of their personal circumstances, of their individual character and capacities, but something *shared*, something *structural*: the result of their common location in a society that categorizes and discriminates on grounds of gender. Once they see their experience as shaped by oppressive gender structures and undertake to resist/ transform/ eliminate them (change being understood thus to be collective and

structural as well as personal/ individual) they have developed a feminist analysis; one that sees society from a feminist standpoint.

Despite many similarities between the above sort of picture and (some versions of) Marxist conceptions of knowledge and class-consciousness, there are differences between Marxist and feminist standpoint epistemologies⁵. Obviously, a feminist standpoint does not privilege the proletariat - critical examination of Marxist theory from a feminist standpoint reveals its structuring but unacknowledged gender location; one that renders it incapable of adequately accounting for many of the phenomena (variously located) women experience or want explaining (as well as distorting its understanding of men's lives). Instead, feminist standpoint theories usually begin from the sexual division of labour taken for granted in Marxist and other theories - taking it both as a problem; something to be explained and ultimately transformed/ eliminated in prac-

⁵Yet Frederic Jameson has said that "the most authentic descendancy of Lukács' theory, is to be found, not among the Marxists, but within a certain feminism, where the unique conceptual move of *History and Class-consciousness* has been appropriated... now renamed (after Lukács' own usage) *standpoint theory*" (See *History and Class-consciousness as an Unfinished Project* p64). Jameson specifically (and accurately, unlike many feminist critics) refers to Nancy Hartsock's *Money, Sex and Power*, Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism* and Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* as examples of this type of theory.

(Jameson says that feminist standpoint theory was able to restore the fundamental line of Lukács' argument (effaced and distorted by generations of both critics and supporters) because they, in a post-Kuhnian framework, see "science as construction and invention rather than... as discovery and the passive contemplation of external law".) (p66)

tice; and, (temporarily) as a resource and source of critique of the dominant theories.⁶

Thus, for instance, they point out how the abstract conceptual mode of operation of many ruling men is only possible because of the (unacknowledged) concrete, material work of other, subjugated, groups, including women; how the 'unification' of manual, mental and emotional activities characteristic of much work typically undertaken by women undermines accepted Cartesian dualisms; how childrearing work usually performed by women has effects on the kinds of knowledge and attitudes developed by its practitioners etc, etc,⁷ - claims based on the different activities and experiences of women stemming from gendered divisions of labour which are used to critically compare and examine dominant categories and concepts, exposing their contingent and structurally located nature. Central to these arguments is the claim that one's experiences of the world will shape and limit ones conceptualizing of it; so that systematic differ-

⁶ Standpoint theorists *could* argue (and some do, or rather *did* seem to hold) that divisions on the basis of gender are primary, more fundamental than those of class (or race) or other structuring categories. (It could be argued that sexual divisions of labour, as far as we know, pre-date, and seem more universal, than other divisions - this was the line often taken in the 70's and in reaction to Marxist claims about the primacy of class). However the version of standpoint theory I wish to defend does not argue for any system of oppression being primary or more fundamental, though it could perhaps allow arguments for that being the case in specific and contingent circumstances.

⁷ See the discussions of the work of various standpoint theorists that appear in Alison Jaggar's *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* pp369-389 and Sandra Harding's *The Science Question in Feminism* (Cornell University Press Ithica 1986) - especially chapter 6 *From Feminist Empiricism to Feminist Standpoint Theories*

ences or orderings of experience will have specific effects in how the world comes to be understood. Feminist standpoint theorists argue that women's specific position within various social and political structures generate the possibility of distinct standpoints on the world, ones with epistemological advantages, especially as regards critically examining androcentric theory.

Sandra Harding describes standpoint theory as beginning from the recognition that all knowledge is 'socially situated', and that human activity or material life structures and limits, "shapes and constrains what we can know".⁸ These human activities are structured in different ways for different groups - in gender stratified societies men and women are assigned different activities, have different experiences, lead different lives; but dominant knowledge claims "have been based primarily on the lives of men in the dominant races, classes and cultures".⁹ Traditional theorising has "asked only the questions about social life that appear problematic from within the social experiences that are characteristic of men (white, Western, Bourgeois men, that is)"¹⁰ and has answered them in ways that preserve their position and privilege. For instance, it asks questions like "what is the appropriate legal policy towards rapists and raped women which leaves intact the normal

⁸Harding *Whose Science?* pp119,120

⁹Ibid p123

¹⁰Harding *Feminism and Methodology, Preface* p6

standards of masculine sexual behaviour?"¹¹ - (which is not the kind of question or answer useful to women) and has conversely not asked the questions that characteristically arise from women's experience.

What standpoint theorists do is to focus on these differences of situation, experience and concern, and attempt to make use of them to examine dominant knowledge claims: for instance, attention to women's different experiences exposes the hidden, gendered¹² nature of traditional theorizing. It is not women's lives *per se* i.e. what they happen to believe or experience, that in themselves provide an adequate alternative to the dominant theory; but their

¹¹ Ibid p6

¹² (It is not specifically that traditional theory is gendered, that it arises out of people's structurally located experience, that is the problem - for once you abandon objectivist pictures of knowledge, that is inevitable, to be expected. What is the problem with traditional 'androcentric' theory is that it has refused to recognize this, and presented its knowers and knowledge claims as non-situated, non-subjective, disembodied, detached and universal - thus, exposing its gendered nature is a critique and a challenge. The other problem is that gender is not like geographical location, a (mere) difference of position or perspective; but a *relation* of power; thus the claims and questions that arise from gendered locations are ones that involve differences of power, and presumptions of its preservation.)

Jane Flax says "Gender, both as an analytic category and as a social process, is relational." "Gender relations are differentiated and (so far) asymmetrical divisions and attributions of human traits and capacities. Through gender relations two types of person are created: men and women. Men and women are posited as exclusionary categories... The actual content of being a man or a woman and the rigidity of the categories themselves are highly variable across cultures and time. Nevertheless, gender relations, so far as we have been able to understand them, have been (more or less) relations of domination." *Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* pp44,45

'objective location' "as the place from which feminist research should begin".¹³ "[A] feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it"¹⁴, but is dependent on a certain location. It is also more than a perspective which one simply has by seeing things from where they are. "It is an achievement",¹⁵ the result of what Alison Jaggar calls "protracted political and theoretical struggle"¹⁶. A feminist standpoint begins¹⁷ from women's experiences as they describe them but then "goes beyond" them to theoretically locate, connect and explain them in a way that often requires that that experience be *redescribed*.

A feminist standpoint is thus not the same thing as a 'women's perspective'; as a view from where women (as individuals or a supposedly unitary and homogeneous group) are. As Sandra Harding says, feminist theorists are not trying to replace 'man centred' theories by 'woman centred' ones.¹⁸ Feminist standpoint theorists do not assume that all

¹³ Harding *Whose Science?* p123

¹⁴ Ibid p127

¹⁵ Ibid p127

¹⁶ Jaggar p383

¹⁷ See Kathleen Lennon's unpublished paper *Defending the Idea of a Feminist Standpoint* pp12-14, where she argues that a feminist standpoint should be seen as a *project*, not some kind of foundational position. "By attending to how things are from here - that is from where women are, orthodoxies are challengeable, insights gained and new truths uncovered which were not detectable until we paid attention to women's lives... and experiences". (p12) But women's experiences are not self authenticating and should not be accepted uncritically - truth has to be worked towards, using them as a *starting point*.

¹⁸ Harding *The Science Question* p138

women share the same location, and that this location provides the grounds for a rival theory to a 'male' one (again presumed to be a unitary group positioning).¹⁹ A feminist standpoint, although it does depend on the claim that people's lives and experiences are structured by, and differ according to, how they are located along various structural axes (gender being a crucial, but not the only factor amongst these) is not dependent on any claim that women, in having different experiences, in being differently situated to men, thus all have the same experiences; or share the same situation 'as women'; or that they have no similarities, no commonalities in experience or situation with men. Although a feminist standpoint utilizes critical and epistemological resources provided by women's different (amongst themselves as well as to men's) experiences; it does not merely collect or articulate these experiences; or try to form them into some alternative description of how things seem to them (either variously or collectively) as

¹⁹ If a 'women's perspective' did exist, if say there ever was a situation where gender was the *only* structural difference in play, and there were no other differences of power - if such a women's perspective did exist, it would still not *of itself* provide grounds for an adequate (feminist) theory, as women's experiences, beliefs etc are as much a product of systems of male domination as men's are; and the 'reality' of women's lives are no more given or transparent to them than men's are (quite apart from the difficulties imposed by their lack, or problematic access to, knowledge creation, validation and communication processes). As Nancy Hartsock says (quoted in Sandra Harding *The Science Question* p150) "it is feminist political struggle and theory... not simply characteristic women's activities - in which the tendencies toward a specifically feminist epistemology can be detected. Unmediated by feminist struggle and analysis, women's distinctive practices and thinking remain part of the world created by masculine domination".

'women', but attempts to use them to develop theories that can challenge and improve upon 'sexist/ androcentric' (for want of a better term) views of the world.

A feminist standpoint thus ideally provides theory that is a critique of how things are understood to be by both (non-feminist informed) men and women. Though speaking (like everyone else in gender structured societies) from a gendered location, feminist standpoint theorists are not claiming that their theories represent how things seem to all or only those similarly situated by gender (for women are all situated differently along other axes of power, as well as within less overtly political locations) but that they are applicable to, relevant for, and explanatory of, the lives and experiences of all within a particular context, whatever their gender. *Women's* perspectives, per se, are no more likely to be adequate than *men's* - it is only when they are informed by feminist theory; a theory that sees women's and men's perspectives as *situated*, as structured and mediated by their gender location, that a feminist standpoint can develop; and with it the possibility of more adequate, explanatory and useful theories. The crucial thing about this theory is that it is reflexive (at least as regards gender location). However, if it is to escape the faults of the proletarian standpoint it has to be reflexive about its other locations too, in terms of race, class, ethnic, sexual and other positionings. Unlike the supposedly unitary proletariat, 'women' exist only as they are specifically and complexly located in terms of other political and economic structures; thus feminists have to

engage with questions of race, class, sexuality etc (including their own location within these structures) if they are to be able to properly attend to, or account for, the experiences of both themselves and others.

Thus while Marxism described *the* standpoint of the proletariat, there can be no *one* feminist standpoint that speaks from one determinate position in society, but many feminist standpoints theorizing the world from different and often opposing, locations within it. This does not, however, as some suppose, cause it to have to fragment into millions of individual perspectives - for as said before, a standpoint is not the same thing as a perspective - it is the mediation by feminist (and other structurally locating theories) that creates a standpoint; and this allows for connections and correlations; for though our individual experiences might be very different, we in a sense, hold the structures in common: (both 'white' and 'black' people's lives are structured by race and racism, for instance).²⁰

This demand for reflexivity is not easily or simply met - it is very difficult to become aware of one's own location, most especially when one is privileged by it. Just as it is difficult for men to understand their experience as structurally located in terms of gender, so is it difficult for white feminists to see their lives as conditioned by their position in societies that discriminate on the basis

²⁰See Kathleen Lennon's *Defending the Idea of a Feminist Standpoint* pp15,16 where she argues that recognition of diversity does not have to lead to talk of multiple realities but can lead to "reconnecting in an explanatory way these differences"

of 'racial' categories, and exploit or oppress people in other countries. Standpoint theorists have to utilize the differences produced by these structures, both to locate themselves within these structures; and to investigate them. These differences operate both between categories (e.g. between men and women); within categories (e.g. between women) and within each individual constructed by these categories (e.g. in conflicts between a woman's position as 'mother' and 'student'). Standpoint theorists, (as will already be obvious) concentrate on differences, explicating and comparing them for the insights they can provide. They emphasize tension and contradiction - for instance as in Sandra Harding's claim that it "is thinking from a contradictory position [both within society and within each woman] that generates feminist knowledge"²¹; Dorothy Smith's conception of a 'disjunction' or 'line of fault' between something about our experience and the "categories available to us with which to express our experience"²² and Patricia Hill Collin's concept of the "Outsider Within"²³ neither properly 'belonging' nor being completely 'outside', but experiencing the tensions between these locations. Some of these resources are only initially available from the situation of the subjugated (Sandra Harding points out that it is only from a lesbian/ gay perspective that heterosexual

²¹Harding *Whose Science?* p285

²²Dorothy Smith quoted in Harding *The Science Question in Feminism* p157
See also Dorothy Smith *Women's Perspective* p86

²³Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought* eg p233

privilege can be seen at all, for instance. "From the perspective of heterosexual women's lives, this privilege appears simply as 'the way things are', perhaps as part of nature")²⁴. However once this difference, this challenge is articulated (always remembering that it too might be open to challenge from other standpoints, as insufficiently aware of its own race or class location for example) it can, and should, be taken on board by others and used to examine and revise their own understandings.

A feminist standpoint does not thus provide a 'totalistic' theory like Marx's, it is inevitably and consciously partial.²⁵ Any articulation of a feminist standpoint will always be mediated by its situation in terms of other social and political variables, and cannot adequately develop except in dialogue with other standpoints, which refine and 'correct' it as it proceeds. Yet standpoint

²⁴Harding *Whose Science?* p258

²⁵Sandra Harding repeatedly, and problematically, characterizes 'better' accounts as 'less partial and distorted' see e.g. *Whose Science?* pp121, 144, 187, 248) as though partiality was a negative factor (compared to what?). By her own understanding of standpoint theory Harding would surely agree that feminist (or any other standpoint) theory is partial both in the sense of limited and in the sense of interested. Being partial doesn't, I think, *necessarily* have to lead to distortion/inaccuracy so long as it is acknowledged and taken account of. Traditional 'male' theory is not distorted *simply* by expressing the experiences/ concerns of a limited and partial section of society, but by the way it does so; by seeing these as natural or universal or necessary, and not as contingent and situated and structurally supported, for instance; which leads to the construction of inadequate understandings of the lives and experiences of both those whose perspective it expresses and those excluded by it. This is not to say that comprehensiveness (to a viable degree) is not a good thing in a theory, but that I don't think that it is necessary precluded by acknowledgement of partiality.

theories are not relativist in any sense. They do not operate with any conception of different but 'equal' or incomparable perspectives. Feminist standpoint theories offer *critiques* of other perspectives - by attending to the different experiences and position of women, it exposes distortions, inconsistencies and other inadequacies in such theories that render them less valid than the contesting feminist accounts.²⁶ The greater validity of these feminist accounts (though not immune to challenge from other standpoints) is not limited to those from whose perspective these theories were developed; but is claimed to apply to all (within that particular social/ historical context). Gender, like race and class, is a *relation*,²⁷ - one cannot understand or theorize the experience of one gender without considering and attempting to explain that of the other, as the two are interrelated and mutually dependant.

Though there are some situations where relativism is reasonable - (Harding gives an example of an artist's and a geologist's view of some mountains,²⁸ where the two views, though very different, could be equally valid as they are not competing or contradictory; (and crucially are not - let's assume anyway - the product of any power relations between them; are not structurally related)) - relativism is

²⁶ See Kathleen Lennon pp6,7.

²⁷ 'Situation' and 'relation' being closely linked, non-situated conceptions of knowledge and experience tend not to recognize or focus on, it's relatedness.

²⁸ Harding footnote p13 in *Preface to Feminism and Methodology*

not a viable position politically²⁹ (and a feminist standpoint is inherently political, focusing as it does on gender as a political category and construct). Feminist standpoint theory is quite compatible with what Harding calls 'cultural' or 'historical' relativism - a recognition that "different social groups tend to have different patterns of practice and belief and different standards of judging them".³⁰ What it does not accept, and what it is not committed to (despite objectivist (and relativist) assumptions to the contrary) is the further claim that there are no grounds for comparing, evaluating and judging between these 'patterns of belief' - what Harding calls 'judgemental' or 'epistemological' relativism.³¹ (I shall return to this point in more detail in the section on 'difference' further on.)

Feminist standpoint theorists, in rejecting the objectivist picture of knowledge as universal, non-conditioned, non-located, non-'subjective'; have, in acknowledging and capitalizing upon, the situatedness of knowledge; not abandoned 'objectivity'. Standpoint theorists accept neither

²⁹ or if so only for dominant groups as a means to evade or disarm challenge.

³⁰ Harding *Whose Science?* p152

³¹ Ibid p153

objectivist or relativist³² claims but argue that one can have 'objective' socially situated knowledge - and that an acknowledgement and exploration of one's situatedness can provide greater reflexivity, more awareness of partiality, mediation and contingency; greater openness to criticism from others; and a recognition of the need to question and revise one's beliefs in encounter with others. Sandra Harding claims that feminist standpoint epistemologies require *strengthened* standards of objectivity; which, while recognizing the historical/ sociological/ cultural relativity and situatedness of claims, emphasizes the need for critical examination and evaluation of these claims *and* their locations³³. What she calls "strong objectivity"³⁴ (as opposed to the 'weak' objectivity of objectivism) extends the critique beyond examination of the claims 'themselves' to the background assumptions, agendas and hypotheses that, invisible and unarticulated, support and situate them; and to the social contexts and processes which shape and limit knowledge claims and practices.³⁵ 'Strong objectivity', says Harding, "requires that we investigate the relation between

³² Many theorists, like Richard Bernstein and Donna Haraway, to name just two that come to mind, point out that these supposedly opposing positions are in fact internally related, "sides of the same coin" as Harding puts it (*Whose Science?* p153). Harding also says that acceptance of this objectivist/ relativist dichotomy makes objectivism look more attractive than it should, and relativism appear more progressive than it is. (Ibid p139)

³³ Harding *Whose Science?* p142,152

³⁴ Ibid p149

³⁵ Ibid p147

subject and object",³⁶ requires "putting the subject or agent of knowledge in the some critical, causal plane as the object of her or his inquiry".³⁷ It requires valuing the perspective of others, and using this "to look back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical, objectifying location".³⁸ It requires reflexivity, exploring one's situatedness, how one is related to what one knows - which can often only be done through engagement with the perspectives of others. (This point will be developed later in relation to 'difference')

Standpoint theories, then, though rejecting the idea of *one*, absolute Truth, certainly want to preserve the concept of 'truth' in a contingent and provisional, yet still meaningful way. All operate with an idea that at any one time/ place some claims/ theories can be judged to be, and

³⁶ Ibid p152

³⁷ Ibid p161

³⁸ Ibid p151. There are resonances with Nagel's position here. I have some doubts about Harding's description of the related process she terms "reinventing the self as other" which I will discuss in a later chapter on 'difference'.

are, 'truer',³⁹ more adequate, better, by reference to various relevant criteria; and although all claims are dependent on, and made relevant to, certain frameworks, belief systems, discourses etc; their truth is not *simply* a function of their fulfilling these criteria, or obeying the rules as required by the particular language game or whatever; but is in some sense dependent on the world, which constrains what may be truthfully said or known in any particular context. Standpoint epistemologies are essentially realist in character; seeing knowledge as the product of a *relation* between various differently located knowers and 'the world'. The concept of 'the world' which standpoint theories operate with is a fairly robust one - the world is not merely presumed or acknowledged to exist, but plays a crucial and 'active' role in shaping and constraining what

³⁹The one exception perhaps is the work of Stanley and Wise, discussed earlier, which they retrospectively characterise as "a feminist standpoint epistemology" (see Stanley and Wise, *Method, Methodology and Epistemology* p25). Though they say that the position closest to theirs is that of Dorothy Smith (see discussion in next section) (ibid p24) their conceptions of truth/ reality definitely have more relativist implications than hers (or other standpoint theorists I know of). They, for instance, reject the "successor science" label Harding once placed standpoint epistemologies under (see Harding *The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory* in *Signs* Vol 11 no 4 1986, p653). Insisting on "contextually grounded truths" (p28); that "judgements of truth are always and necessarily made relative to the particular framework or context of the knower" (p41), (something standpoint theorists would generally accept); - they go on to say that though they are not "radical relativists" (which they characterize as involving a denial of any external material reality) they are relativists in the sense of seeing truths as speaking to "the existence of different overlapping but not coterminous material realities" (p41) - not a conception that most standpoint theorists would, I think, share; in that they presume more a complex, multifaceted yet inclusive *reality* which relates, connects and supports various truths.

can be known, and how it can be known. Knowledge is *of* and *about* the world - and it is that supports its coherence and 'truth'.

Standpoint theories assume that a feminist standpoint (depending on the adequacy with which its claims are constructed and articulated) can, in certain circumstances, provide a route to truth. Many carry the extra implication that a feminist standpoint (again in certain circumstances) is (relatively) privileged in its capacity to enable those who take it up to develop 'true' or truer theories. As in the case of the proletariat, this privilege is not universal, but dependent on historical/ social/ political conditions that make possible the emergence of this standpoint (in the feminist case this being the existence of social systems that discriminate as the basis of categories of gender; that create these different genders and consequently their different positions and possibilities of experience and knowledge; and also certain further conditions that make possible the development, articulation and communication of a feminist standpoint). The proletariat, for instance, were argued to have a privileged standpoint on capitalism. The proletariat were a product, and crucial part of, capitalism; yet that system was not understood/ conceptualised from their perspective; but only from that of the ruling class. Tensions between the ruling ideology and the situation of the proletariat provided the impetus and resources for the development of a critical response to dominant knowledge claims, one that made visible aspects of the system not acknowledged by the ruling class, or obscured or distorted

from their position. This critique was both an external one - the proletariat did not share the situation, power, or access to knowledge production and validation processes of the bourgeoisie - and an internal one; they were located within the same economic and social structures, utilizing largely 'the same' conceptual resources (though reworking and subverting them in articulating their standpoint.)

I think that a lot of the relative privilege of standpoints like the feminist ones comes from being similarly *critiques*, both from 'within' and 'without'. The feminist standpoints are not opposing but separate perspectives - as said before they are not simply offering a 'women's' perspective as an alternative or balance to 'men's' perspectives; nor an entirely different and unrelated understanding of the world from some completely different location. A feminist standpoint derives from, and is located in, the 'same' social structures as the ruling theories, and utilizes largely 'the same' intellectual traditions and conceptual frameworks as the theories it criticizes. But it does so from a different location within, and relation to, these structures; and in a way that exposes the distortions, silences and contradictions etc in these theories; and where and in what directions they would have to change. They thus begin, provide some of the resources, and point the way to an improved/ revised theory that is in

some ways a more adequate understanding of the world.⁴⁰

This certain privilege can never be considered to be unique in the way that that of the proletariat was held to be. To the extent that gender is only one of the structuring categories operant in any society, a feminist standpoint⁴¹ will problematise, examine, illuminate certain aspects of society, but might, depending on the circumstances, equally distort or not recognize others. Its privilege will always be partial and contingent and never guaranteed. A feminist standpoint can provide the starting point for theory that improves upon those that it critiques, but this is not necessarily so. The greater adequacy of any theory derived from a feminist standpoint will have to be demonstrated and argued for like any other in terms of its meeting multiple and perhaps contested evaluatory criteria, some of which

⁴⁰Change cannot be achieved purely at the level of theory though, but requires material/ structural change with which conceptual change can dialectically proceed. (Dominant theories aren't the way they are because of some stupidity of their originators but because of the way societies and power relations are structured, and therefore cannot be transformed in the absence of social/ structural change)

⁴¹There would never be a *purely, only* 'feminist' standpoint. Any feminist standpoint analyses social phenomena and understands and locates individual's beliefs and experiences through a theory of gender structures and positionings. But as any knowers will be located in terms of race, class, ethnicity, sexuality etc, as well as gender - any standpoint these knowers develop will be conditioned by, and should take into account these locations and structures too - so the theories they develop (and the ways and extent to which they develop them, depending on their relative locations) will be different (but ultimately related).

might turn out to be at odds with each other.⁴² Making a choice on the basis of these various criteria (some of which will be more relevant in any one context than another) is always an evaluative and political and ethical act, yet also proceeds in hope of truth.

Though there is a definite link within standpoint theory between situation and belief, not only in terms of the context of beliefs but also their adequacy (as in the claim that from some positions it is harder to 'see' certain phenomena, and more likely that one will have inadequate understandings of them, even if one aims for 'truth') this link is not a *direct* or *necessary* one, but mediated through various contingent factors and circumstances - it certainly does not invoke the claim that because someone is in a certain (relatively powerful) position their claims must *necessarily* be false, or that their political position is sufficient grounds for rejecting their claim. Their claims might, quite probably, turn out to be less than adequate, but that inadequacy is to be established with reference to all the pertinent criteria for evaluating such claims; among which can very usefully be facts about the social location of their maker, but that cannot be the *only* criterion by which such claims are judged.

Yet some standpoint theorists seem to adopt the inverse

⁴²Such criteria could include for instance plausibility, reliability, explanatory power, fruitfulness, implications for practice, political usefulness, ethical implications, consistency, comprehensiveness, descriptive resources, intellectual or emotional appeal, novelty, being 'illuminating', confirming of experience, verifiability etc. etc.

of such a position, in linking truth with subjugation or emancipatory potential in a very problematic way. Alison Jaggar, for instance, after arguing (correctly) that objectivity cannot be conceived of as neutrality or an absence of interests and values, goes on (very strangely, I think) to ask *whose* interests objective claims should reflect. The answer, she says, is that "they should reflect the interests of women. Women's subordinate status means that, unlike men, women do not have an interest in mystifying reality and so are likely to develop a clearer and more trustworthy understanding of the world".⁴³ Quite apart from the fact that many women are in positions of power over other women and many men, (and therefore by this account have interests in mystifying reality); and the difficulties surrounding the whole concept of 'interest'⁴⁴ - the leap here from subordinate status to truth is too great to be justified on any adequate standpoint account. Subordinate status can (within certain specific and contingent conditions) at most provide the impetus and resources for critique and reflexivity - resources not to be sneezed at, certainly; - but the truth of any claims thus made has to be ascertained in a further step, and does not follow automatically from the social location of its claimants. This unfortunate tendency to

⁴³Jaggar p384

⁴⁴Even Sandra Harding says "the systematically oppressed, exploited and dominated... have fewer interests in ignorance about how the social order actually works" (*Whose Science?* p150 and similar quotes p125/6). Couldn't the oppressors have just as great an 'interest' in knowing how society really works to protect their position and incapacitate revolt? I really don't think concepts of 'interest' can do the work demanded of them in this way.

directly link truth with subjugation, in terms either of the subjugated being the only ones in a position, or the only ones with the right motivation, to pursue and grasp the truth, is not however a necessary or integral point of standpoint theory - and indeed does not seem to follow from, or be consistent with, the rest of Jaggar's or Harding's positions.

In contrast to objectivist conceptions of knowledge, standpoint theorists recognize that all knowers are embodied and situated; and that the situation of the knower does matter in that it will condition and limit what that knower can come to know. Acknowledgement of the situatedness of knowers, of both oneself and others, is essential if we are to adequately understand and evaluate both how things seem to us as they do, and how they are claimed to be by others. Once this is accepted, one's situation can be used as a resource and source of critique, in that awareness and investigation of one's locatedness can provide criteria by which to judge our own experiences and understandings, as well as the claims of others. But truth still has to be worked and fought for. If one's situation doesn't prevent one from producing true and objective knowledge (as objectivists suppose) neither does it guarantee it.

Yet despite what seems to me the obvious promise of feminist standpoint theories, they have been criticized by various feminist theorists as either too 'objectivist' or 'relativist', depending on the stance of the critic. I think these objections are mistaken, and the result of an inadequate understanding of standpoint theory, and more espe-

cially from a lack of understanding of the role that experience plays within them. I will discuss these objections in the chapter after next, after first briefly outlining two feminist standpoint theories as an illustration of what such theories typically can be like.

FEMINIST STANDPOINTSDorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins

In this section I wish briefly to outline the positions of two standpoint theorists - Dorothy Smith and Patricia Hill Collins. (I could also have concentrated in more detail on the work of Sandra Harding, who has, perhaps, done the most over the years to discuss and sympathetically yet critically examine the work of feminist standpoint theorists in the course of a project to develop a politically and theoretically adequate feminist understanding of science.¹ Her latest book, *Whose Science?, Whose Knowledge?* offers an extended discussion and defence of standpoint theory against doubts and objections commonly raised against it (including ones raised by Harding herself in earlier publications.) Yet she is primarily a wide-ranging feminist epistemologist, one who thinks that feminist standpoint theory is "doing something different and important"² and that it can be shown to have successfully survived "the first round of its critical

¹ See Sandra Harding: (ed) *Preface to Feminism and Methodology*

: *The Science Question in Feminism* (esp. chapter 6 *From Feminist Empiricism to Feminist Standpoint Epistemologies*)

: *The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory*

: *Whose Science?, Whose Knowledge?*

² Harding *Whose Science?* p187

evaluations",³ rather than a self-proclaimed standpoint theorist like the two I will instead discuss as examples of the kind of theories Harding refers to in her work).

Dorothy Smith has been writing in this area of theory earlier, and for longer than many other theorists,⁴ yet her work still stands up well to critical examination (better than that of some other early standpoint theorists.) Dorothy Smith is a sociologist, concerned with developing an 'alternative' sociology to the traditional one; which is, she argues, part of the practices that govern us, by which society is ruled, managed and administered.⁵ The subject matter of sociology "is organized from a determinate position in society - a ruling class, white, male one".⁶ It's issues are those administratively relevant to this ruling group; its constructs those of the practice of governing.⁷ Yet although the "relevancies, interests and perspectives" of sociology are those of ruling men - men "not as individuals floating vaguely as sexual beings in a social void, but as persons playing determinate parts in the social relations of this form of society",⁸ established sociology "looks at society, social relations and people's lives as if

³ Ibid p187

⁴ See Dorothy Smith: *Woman's perspective as a radical critique of Sociology*
: *The Everyday World as Problematic*
: *The Conceptual Practices of Power*

⁵ Smith *Women's Perspective* p86

⁶ Harding introduction to *Women's Perspective* p85

⁷ Smith *Women's Perspective* p87

⁸ Smith *The Everyday World as Problematic* p56

we could stand outside them, ignoring the particular local places in the everyday in which we live our lives. It claims objectivity.... in terms of its specific capacity to exclude the presence and experience of particular subjectivities."⁹ "Although sociological inquiry is necessarily a social relation", sociologists do not attend to their part in it, instead they recover "only the object of its knowledge as if that stood all by itself and of itself. Sociology does not provide for seeing that there are always two terms to this relation".¹⁰

"One important set of procedures which serve to constitute the body of knowledge of the discipline [of sociology] as something which is separated from its practitioners" are those concerned with 'objectivity'; which are concerned primarily with the separation of the knower from what he knows and in particular with the separation of what is known from any interests, 'biases' etc. which he may have which are not the interests and biases authorized by the discipline.¹¹ Yet what is "treated as general, universal, unrelated to a particular position or a particular sex... is in fact partial, limited, located in a particular position and permeated by special interests and concerns".¹² Sociology "takes for granted and subsumes without examining, the conditions of its existence. It is not capable of analysing

⁹ Ibid p2

¹⁰ Smith *Women's Perspective* p92

¹¹ Ibid p88

¹² Smith *The Everyday World* p20

its own relation to its conditions because the sociologist as actual person in an actual concrete setting has been cancelled in the procedures which objectify and separate him from his knowledge. Thus the linkage which points back to its conditions is lacking."¹³

These conditions, however, are more visible to women sociologists because of the contradictions that arise between their practicing of the discipline and their experience of the world. They experience a "bifurcation of consciousness" between the conceptual practices of sociology, and their concrete, practical activities in the world which has continually to be confronted.¹⁴ They discover that they cannot "enter and occupy" the discipline on the same terms as men do. They cannot "fully appropriate its authority". "The frames of reference which order the terms upon which inquiry and discussion are conducted originate with men. The subjects of sociological sentences (if they have a subject) are male".¹⁵ To attempt to occupy such a subject position women have to suspend or deny their gender and their experience. Women experience a 'disjunction' between their experiences of the world and the concepts and frameworks available to them to think about them in,¹⁶ which can lead them to realize that these concepts and theories are constituted from a location in society that they do not

¹³Smith *Women's Perspective* p90

¹⁴Ibid p90

¹⁵Ibid p91

¹⁶Ibid p80

occupy. "Women's perspective...discredits sociology's claim to constitute an objective knowledge independent of the sociologist's situation. Its conceptual procedures, methods and relevances are seen to organize its subject matter from a determinate position in society. This critical disclosure becomes, then, the basis for an alternative way of thinking sociology. If sociology cannot avoid being situated, then sociology should take that as its beginning and build it into its methodological and theoretical strategies."¹⁷ "An alternative sociology must be reflexive [here she refers to Gouldner] i.e. one that preserves in it the presence, concerns and experience of the sociologist as knower...".¹⁸

"[I]t is not enough to supplement an established sociology by addressing ourselves to what has been left out, overlooked, or by making sociological issues of the relevances of the world of women... We cannot rest at that because it does not account for the separation between the two worlds and it does not account for or analyse the relations between them".¹⁹ She calls instead for a sociology that offers "a means of understanding our experience *and the conditions of that experience*"²⁰ [my emphasis] - a "reflexive inquiry" that makes "an object of investigation what we ourselves are immersed in".²¹ We must, she says, explore

¹⁷ Ibid p91

¹⁸ Ibid p92

¹⁹ Ibid p85

²⁰ Smith *The Conceptual Practices* p14

²¹ Ibid p4

methods of thinking that will enable us to "preserve the presence of actual subjects while exploring and explicating the relations in which our everyday worlds are embedded."²² The method she recommends is "one that frankly begins from somewhere",²³ from where we are located bodily and socially; one that begins from our experience and returns to it as a constraint or test of adequacy.²⁴ She calls for a reorganization of sociology which "involves first placing the sociologist where she is actually situated, namely at the beginning of those acts by which she knows or will come to know; and second, making her direct experience of the everyday world the primary ground of her knowledge."²⁵ But, in speaking of 'experience', in proposing a sociology grounded in the sociologist's actual experience, she is "not recommending the self-indulgence of inner exploration or any other enterprise with self as sole focus and object. Such subjectivist interpretations of 'experience' are themselves an aspect of that organization of consciousness which bifurcates it and transports us into mind country while stashing away the concrete conditions and practices upon which it depends... Rather the sociologist's investigation of our directly experienced world as a problem is a mode of discovering or rediscovering society from within."²⁶ It aims

²² Smith *The Everyday World* p111

²³ Ibid p177

²⁴ Smith *Women's Perspective* p92

²⁵ Ibid p91

²⁶ Ibid p92

"not at a reiteration of what she already (tacitly) knows, but at an exploration through that of what passes beyond it and is deeply implicated in how it is".²⁷

An alternative sociology locates the beginning of enquiry in a knower's experiences. "This is to constitute the everyday world as problematic",²⁸ as that in which questions originate. It aims to make available to women/people analyses, descriptions, and understandings of their situation, of their everyday world, and its determinants in the larger socio-economic organizations in which it is located. "Sociology would aim at offering to anyone a knowledge of the social organization and determinants of the properties and events in their directly experienced world. Its analyses would become part of our ordinary interpretations of the experienced world, just as our experience of the sun's setting below the horizon is transformed by our knowledge that the earth turns, (yet from where we are it seems to sink and that must be accounted for)".²⁹ In explicating the social organization of their experienced world, *it goes beyond what is known in everyday experience.* "Locating the sociological problematic in the everyday world does not mean confining the enquiry to the everyday world".³⁰ We cannot understand the nature of our experienced world "by staying within its ordinary boundaries of assump-

²⁷ Ibid p93

²⁸ Smith *The Everyday World* p88

²⁹ Smith *Women's Perspective* p92

³⁰ Smith *The Everyday World* p89

tion and knowledge."³¹ "The conditions of our action and experience are organized by relations and processes outside them and beyond our power of control".³² No amount of observation of face-to-face relations, no amount of analyses of common-sense knowledge of everyday life; will take us beyond our essential ignorance of how it is put together. Our direct experience of it constitutes it (if we will) as a problem, but it does not offer any answers".³³ To construct the answers we have to posit a socio-economic order 'in back' of different experiences in order to explain and relate them.³⁴

A "sociology for women" thus "preserves the presence of subjects as knower's" and enlarges the grasp of the world of the knower "from where she stands".³⁵ Such an alternative sociology would be "a means to anyone of understanding how the world comes about for her and how it is organized so that it happens to her as it does in her experience".³⁶ "The standpoint of women" [I'll come back to this in a moment] "insists that we are always located in particular, actual places, knowing society from within.... knowing is always a relation between knower and known. The knower cannot be...

³¹ Smith *Women's Perspective* p94

³² Smith *The Everyday World* p91

³³ Ibid p95

³⁴ Smith *Women's Perspective* p94

³⁵ Smith *The Everyday World* p105

³⁶ Smith *Women's Perspective* p95

eliminated, the knower's presence is always presupposed".³⁷ Obviously knowers are located differently, and "society is known and experienced rather differently from different positions in it".³⁸ "Locating women's experience as a place to work from in society does not", says Smith, "land us in a determinate type of position or identify a category of persons from whose various or typical positions in the world we must take our starting point. Women are variously located in society",³⁹ their position differs greatly by class and race and other variables.

So why speak of the standpoint of *women*? Sandra Harding, in a footnote to one of her earlier articles more doubtful of standpoint theories⁴⁰ says that standpoint shouldn't be seen in terms of women versus men, but of feminist versus non-feminist: - on which point I totally agree - I have consistently discussed a *feminist* standpoint as opposed to that supposedly of women. This is so firstly because 'women' and 'men' are over inclusive categories to ground a perspective in. There are no 'pure' women and men, unconditioned by their location in terms of other structures, thus there will be lots of different perspectives of differently located 'women' and 'men'. Secondly, a standpoint is not the same thing as a perspective. A standpoint is something that structurally locates,

³⁷ Smith *The Conceptual Practices* p33

³⁸ Smith *Women's Perspective* p93

³⁹ Smith *The Everyday World* p86

⁴⁰ See Harding *The Instability* p655

that situates a perspective or different perspectives⁴¹ - (thus the proletarian standpoint situates (and in the process reconceptualises and connects) the different perspectives of proletariat and bourgeoisie, in terms of their class location. A feminist standpoint locates, connects, explains and re-understands various perspectives (of both variously located women and men) in terms of gender). They are thus consciously, though perhaps not sufficiently, situated and (minimally) reflexive knowledges - though to the extent that they concentrate only on class or gender, they are not nearly reflexive enough, not aware of their location in terms of other axes of power and privilege, and therefore open to challenge from other standpoints. [Note too, that on my understanding of standpoint, that though there are obviously lots of variously located 'male' perspectives, they are not standpoints - the scenario is not one of feminist versus non-feminist *standpoints* - to the extent that non-feminists developed a standpoint, and saw their lives, experiences, beliefs etc, as mediated by their (amongst others) gender location, it would come to resemble

⁴¹ Sandra Harding says in a footnote to *Whose Science?* p276 that "a standpoint is not a perspective... Standpoints are socially mediated; perspectives are unmediated". What she means, I think, is that standpoints are *reflexively acknowledged* to be socially mediated; perspectives are not necessarily aware of their mediation, especially their mediation in terms of structural location.

a feminist one.]⁴²

(Alison Jaggar also, like Dorothy Smith, talks of a standpoint of 'women'.⁴³ She clearly means this in a sense similar to that of the standpoint of the proletariat, which is the *class conscious* standpoint developed by them when they recognize their location in economic and political relations; not the perspective of any or all members of the proletariat - so her 'standpoint of women' is therefore a 'gender' conscious one, one that sees people's lives and experiences as conditioned by their location in gendered structures, i.e. it is basically very similar to a 'feminist' standpoint. The difficulty is that like that of the proletariat, it can be seen as too unitary and inclusive a category, too ignorant or dismissive of differences within it. Dorothy Smith, although saying she wishes

⁴²I think that seeing standpoints in terms of 'interests' (see last two chapters) can make it seem like 'men', the bourgeoisie, or 'whites' have a standpoint too - in that their 'standpoint' would reflect their '*interests*' as men/ bourgeoisie/ whites.

I see it in terms of how a (structurally located) acknowledgement of situation/ mediation can transform/ reform one's understanding of one's experience/ belief etc so that a male/ bourgeois/ white recognition of their situation and how it conditioned their knowledge would hopefully/ eventually produce an understanding broadly compatible with a feminist/ proletarian/ black standpoint.

As to whether this would/ could be a standpoint in its own right - it would be very difficult/ unlikely for men/ the bourgeoisie/ whites to produce a standpoint 'on their own' as things stand.

But they could *perhaps* do so, if they were willing (and put in a lot of effort) to learn from and examine their own experience/ belief in the light of feminist/ proletarian/ Black critiques - they would have to learn from and respond to, the standpoints of others, to develop their 'own'.

⁴³See Jaggar p232-4

to "formulate a sociology from the standpoint of women",⁴⁴ does not see this as speaking from any determinate position in society (i.e. some position where all women might be supposed to be located) - she says she is not speaking of a *perspective*.⁴⁵ She describes it instead as a "*transformer*",⁴⁶ more a means of understanding; one that begins with people's everyday lives and experiences, and then explains how they are shaped within extended social and political relations. This mode of inquiry is explicitly feminist; it sees those relations as including (but not being exclusively) ones based on gender. The standpoint of women, she says "does not imply a common viewpoint among women. What [women] have in common is the organization of social relations...".⁴⁷ Women do not share a common or unitary location *as women*, but they do share their insertion and implication in relations of gender - thus all women's different situations and experiences will be mediated by gender; and any exploration or explication of their lives and experiences will involve a consideration of gender. This should be undertaken from different positions, "from which the working of the whole (though open-ended) complex of relational processes come into view".⁴⁸

I think the implication is that, if instead of begin-

⁴⁴ Smith *The Everyday World* p1

⁴⁵ Smith *Women's Perspective* p92

⁴⁶ Ibid p91

⁴⁷ Smith *The Everyday World* p78

⁴⁸ Ibid p177

ning at 'the top', with theory that explains in terms of class or race or gender, we begin at 'the bottom', with women's/ people's actual lives; where they are actually situated in terms of all sorts of complex and interweaving relations, we may be more able to see how these structures interrelate and mutually condition and modify each other. This is not to say that this is easy - it is very hard to comprehend how/ where you are located; especially if your location is not 'obviously' one of oppression - hence the difficulty white feminists have in seeing how their lives are mediated by their 'whiteness', by their privileged location in racist structures, for instance. But Dorothy Smith argues, in relation to the different experience and location of others, that if "we begin from the world as we actually experience it, it is at least possible to see that we are located and that what we know of the other is conditional upon that location as part of a relation comprehending the other's location also".⁴⁹ It thus offers us more resources, more possibilities of adequately understanding both ourselves and others, than did the old objectivist model of knowledge that disparaged subjectivity and lived experience.

Patricia Hill Collins⁵⁰ is concerned with 'Black Feminist thought' - "knowledge created by African-American women [she is speaking from a North American context, as in

⁴⁹ Smith *Women's Perspective* p93

⁵⁰ See Patricia Hill Collins *Black Feminist Thought*

fact do all the major standpoint theorists] which clarifies a standpoint of and for Black [American] women.... thought [which] encompasses theoretical interpretations of Black women's reality by those who live it".⁵¹ Although black feminist thought is generated from the characteristic (structured) experience of African-American women (she says living life as a black woman is a necessary prerequisite for producing Black feminist thought),⁵² this "does not mean that all African-American women generate such thought, or that other groups do not play a critical role in its production".⁵³ Collins acknowledges that there are "differences created by historical era, age, social class, sexual orientation, or ethnicity"⁵⁴ among African-American women, but sees a struggle against racism and sexism as a common thread between them. This does not mean that African-American women have experienced or responded to these forces in the same way⁵⁵ - "although all African-American women encounter racism, social class differences, for example, among [them] influence how racism is experienced."⁵⁶ Other factors, "such as ethnicity, region of the country, urbanization and age contribute to produce a web of experiences shaping diversity among African-American

⁵¹ Collins p22

⁵² Ibid p230

⁵³ Ibid p22

⁵⁴ Ibid p22

⁵⁵ Ibid p23

⁵⁶ Ibid p24

women"⁵⁷ - she speaks thus of a Black *women's* standpoint, not that of Black women as a homogeneous category. (The same comments apply here as to Dorothy Smith's 'standpoint of women'. Collins again sees this as having to be mediated through feminist (and anti-racist) theory, and as being specifically a *situated*, contextually located knowledge.)⁵⁸ Despite the differences among them, Collins argues "that African-American Women as a group experience a world different from that of those who are not Black and female; and that "these concrete experiences" [not exactly the *same* experiences but experiences of a commonly experienced interlocking of racism and sexism] "can stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness"⁵⁹ - though it is by no means guaranteed that such a consciousness will be developed or articulated by them.⁶⁰ She thus endorses the standpoint epistemologists' claim that there is "a connection between what one does and what one thinks", "between experience and

⁵⁷ Ibid p24

⁵⁸ Ibid p234

Collins does though, I think, tend to equate a standpoint with a perspective (see p22 for instance, where she describes a Black women's 'standpoint' as a "unique angle of vision" provided by their characteristic experiences; and p203, where she speaks of a white male 'standpoint' - these 'standpoints' would be to me better termed 'perspectives'). This "Black women's standpoint" when mediated through feminist and anti-racist consciousness becomes for Collins 'Black feminist thought' (more like what I would term a 'standpoint'). She also sees it as expressly *collective* (she sees Dorothy Smith's position as being very individual in comparison (p40))

⁵⁹ Ibid p24

⁶⁰ Ibid p25

consciousness."⁶¹

But although an "oppressed group's experiences may put its members in a position to see things differently... their lack of control over the ideological apparatuses of society makes expressing a self-defined standpoint "problematic".⁶² "Black women's experiences... have routinely been distorted or excluded" by the traditional theoretical discourses controlled by elite white men.⁶³ "Within the Eurocentric masculinist [knowledge validation] process... [someone] making a knowledge claim must convince a... community ruled by white men that such a claim is justified."⁶⁴ Such alternative or critical ideas that do arise are typically suppressed, and are very difficult to articulate and develop. "Given that the general culture shaping the taken-for-granted knowledge of the community of experts is permeated by widespread notions of Black and female inferiority, new knowledge claims that seem to violate these fundamental assumptions are likely to be viewed as anoma-

⁶¹ Ibid p25

⁶² Ibid p26

⁶³ Ibid p201

⁶⁴ Ibid p203

lous".⁶⁵ The process of creating a challenging alternative theory is one of "self conscious struggle"⁶⁶ against ruling interpretations and domination - one that involves "tapping sources of everyday unarticulated consciousness that have traditionally been denigrated by white male controlled institutions".⁶⁷ Thus "alternative sites such as music, literature, daily conversations and everyday behaviour [have often been used] as important locations for articulating... a Black feminist consciousness".⁶⁸

Although Black feminist thought is developed by African-American women out of their experiences of racism and sexism,⁶⁹ this "does not mean that Black feminist thought has relevance only for African-American women, or that African-American women must confine themselves to analysing their own experiences".⁷⁰ Others can learn from Black Femin-

⁶⁵ Ibid p203

Collins says that "[a]lternative knowledge claims in and of themselves are rarely threatening to conventional knowledge. Such claims are routinely ignored, discredited or simply absorbed and marginalized in existing paradigms. Much more threatening is the challenge that alternative epistemologies offer to the basic processes used by the powerful to legitimate their knowledge claims. If the epistemology used to validate knowledge comes into question, then all prior knowledge claims validated under the dominant model become suspect. An alternative epistemology challenges all certified knowledge and opens up the question of whether what has been taken to be true can stand the test of alternative ways of validating". (p219)

⁶⁶ Ibid p27

⁶⁷ Ibid p26

⁶⁸ Ibid p202

⁶⁹ Ibid p26

⁷⁰ Ibid p35

ist thought and participate in its development (though they could not produce it on their own).⁷¹ Black Feminist thought develops in dialogue with other standpoints - "full actualization of Black feminist thought requires a collaborative enterprise" based on dialogue and "principled coalition",⁷² not always easy to build or sustain under oppressive conditions.⁷³ Collins offers a "humanist vision", echoed by many other Black feminists, that sees Black women's struggles as "part of a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment",⁷⁴ and opposes any espousal of separatism, or acceptance of domination in any form.

She rejects additive analyses of oppression, "that suggest that oppression can be quantified and compared"⁷⁵ - ones that for instance would see Black women as 'more' oppressed because oppressed as 'Black' and as 'women'. If we stop to ask what is assumed by the categories 'Black' and 'women' in such additive analyses, Elizabeth V. Spelman⁷⁶ argues that white feminists, for example, tend to assume that Black women share their experiences of oppression 'as

⁷¹ Ibid p36

⁷² Ibid p36

⁷³ Ibid p37

⁷⁴ Ibid p37

⁷⁵ Ibid p207

⁷⁶ See Elizabeth V. Spelman's *Inessential Woman*

women' in some homogeneous way,⁷⁷ and that they differ only by *additionally* being oppressed 'as black' (the assumption here being that they experience racial oppression in the same way as Black men, the only difference being their additional oppression on the basis of gender).⁷⁸ Spelman argues that Black women are oppressed 'as Black women'; that their gendered and racial identities and locations cannot be separated and reassembled like "parts of a pop-bead necklace".⁷⁹ (This is not to say that they do not in various specific circumstances experience similarities or commonalities of experience or oppression with white women or Black men, but to recognize that "how one form of oppression is experienced is influenced by and influences how another form is experienced.")⁸⁰

"Instead of starting with gender and then adding on other variables such as age, sexual orientation, race, social class and religion, Black Feminist thought sees these distinctive systems of oppression as being part of one overarching structure of domination. Viewing relations of domination for Black women for any given socio-historical context as being structured via a system of interlocking race, class and gender oppression expands the focus of

⁷⁷This is because due to their racial privilege they tend not to be aware of their own location as specifically 'white' women, but tend to assume that their lives are conditioned only by gender (and perhaps other factors like class, sexual orientation etc. when disadvantaged by the latter)

⁷⁸Spelman p14, also pp113-123

⁷⁹Ibid p15, see also pp136/7

⁸⁰Ibid p123

analysis from merely describing the similarities and differences distinguishing these systems of oppression and focuses greater attention on how they interconnect" says Collins.⁸¹ "Replacing additive models of oppression with interlocking ones creates possibilities for new paradigms"⁸² which challenge the either/ or dichotomies of Eurocentric masculinist thinking, and the drive to rank oppressions - offering instead a 'both/ and' conceptual stance which recognizes "varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically located system"⁸³ depending on people's specific context and location. Such a stance would not see race, class and gender as interchangeable, or hierarchically orderable, but as interlocking axes within a matrix of power relations.⁸⁴

Collins thus rejects any idea (which might be derived from the recognition of the (partial and contingent) epistemological privilege of some subjugated groups) that the 'more subjugated' a group, the greater its possible privilege.⁸⁵ There are no 'layers of oppression' which can be added and quantified to give you the maximally oppressed group and thus 'the best standpoint'⁸⁶ - (what Donna Haraway, whose use of standpoint epistemologies - "situated

⁸¹ Collins p227

⁸² Ibid p225

⁸³ Ibid p225

⁸⁴ Ibid p226

⁸⁵ Ibid p207

⁸⁶ Ibid p207

knowledges" - Collins sees her own work as approximating;⁸⁷ calls the search for the "full and total position", the "perfect subject" of oppositional theory.⁸⁸) Subjugation, says Collins, "is not the grounds for an epistemology"⁸⁹ (though it can have epistemological consequences and provide epistemological resources - Collins says, for instance, that the subjugated are perhaps more likely to see the link between ideas and the situations of their creators.⁹⁰) The standpoints of oppressed groups can reveal that what is taken as natural, universal etc in dominant conceptions is rather the product of specific race, class and gender formations. "Placing African-American women in the centre of analysis "not only reveals valuable information about Black women's experiences, but also questions and challenges Eurocentric masculinist perspectives on 'the family', 'community', 'power', 'freedom' etc."⁹¹ Thus it not only exposes Eurocentric masculinist perspectives as not valid when applied to other, differently situated groups, but also challenges ruling male accounts of their own experience.

But Black feminist thought is itself necessarily situated and partial and not exempt from criticism from other perspectives.⁹² Collins opposes any assumption of 'Absolute

⁸⁷ Ibid see p39

⁸⁸ Haraway *Situated Knowledges* p586

⁸⁹ Collins p234

⁹⁰ Ibid p234

⁹¹ Ibid p223

⁹² Ibid p235

truth', of "one true interpretation of reality".⁹³ "The overarching matrix of domination houses multiple groups, each with varying experiences of penalty and privilege that produce corresponding partial perspectives, situated knowledges..."⁹⁴ Yet she also rejects relativism, the claim that no group "can claim to have a better interpretation of the 'truth' than another."⁹⁵ Both objectivism or positivist science, "and relativism minimize the importance of specific location in influencing a group's knowledge claims, the power inequities among groups that produce subjugated knowledge, and the strength and limitations of a partial perspective".⁹⁶ She sees Black Feminist thought as suggesting an alternative to both these positions - in that it sees its knowledge as situated, as located within interlocking axes of domination and privilege - Black Feminist thought is thus partial and incomplete, but it is also open, able to make connections, to consider and learn from the standpoints of other partial, situated knowers.⁹⁷

⁹³ Ibid p235

⁹⁴ Ibid p234

⁹⁵ Ibid p235

⁹⁶ Ibid p235

⁹⁷ Ibid see p236

OBJECTIONS TO STANDPOINT THEORYa) Experience

As I said before, despite (what seems to me to be) the positive and attractive features of feminist (or other similar) standpoint theories, they have, to quite a large extent, been negatively assessed or rejected by feminist

theorists of other persuasions,¹ who generally seem to regard them as either too 'objectivist', or too 'relativist', or both; - in the sense of uneasily and untenably occupying an unstable position that has to lead them to fall into one or other camp. I do see them as occupying a ground 'between' (or 'beyond' as Richard Bernstein would call it - they are not really 'between' as they do not accept many of the basic tenets supporting both)

¹This negative response is not wholesale. Besides Sandra Harding's defence of standpoint theory (in *Whose Science?*) against objections similar to the ones I shall be describing here, other feminist theorists have made positive, if cautious and critical, judgements regarding standpoint theory, or have produced positions which are either somewhat like improved/ revised versions of standpoint theories, or basically quite similar and compatible approaches.

See e.g. - Michèle Barrett's *The Concept of Difference* (*Feminist Review* no. 26 July 1987) where she says "some feminists associated with... feminist standpoint epistemologies" "are now working through some of the difficulties [associated with the category of experience] in a very interesting way".

See - Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges*

- Kimberley Hutchings's *The personal is International: Feminist Epistemology and the Case of International Relations* (paper presented to "Women, Power and Knowledge" Conference, Beechwood Hall, Leeds, Sept 1991)

- Lisa Alcoff's *Cultural Feminism versus Postmodernism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory* in *Signs* Vol 13 no.3 1988 esp. pp428-436 where she argues for "a concept of positionality" which utilizes a conception of experience along the lines of that put forward by Teresa de Lauretis - one that recognizes "ones identity as always a construction yet also a necessary point of departure" (p432) (See discussions of Alcoff and de Lauretis further on).

- Anne Marie Goetz's *Feminism and the Limits of the Claim to Know: Contradictions in the Feminist Approach to Women in Development* (in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol 17 no.3 1988 pp477-496) (She refers again to Alcoff and de Lauretis and also Sandra Harding)

- Lorraine Code in *What Can She Know?* pp295-304 also argues for a concept of 'positionality' like Alcoff's, describing it as "a sophisticated elaboration of earlier feminist standpoint theories" (p317) though she does not specifically discuss standpoint theory in any detail.

objectivism and relativism, but one that *is* tenable; and that does not lead to either pole of that opposition in that it rejects or questions many of the assumptions underlying both approaches; but offers an 'alternative', which though related, is not a simple inversion or mirror image of what is unsatisfactory in both.

In fact, it seems to me that many of these critics are themselves operating from positions that to a standpoint theorist would be either too 'objectivist' or 'relativist', and that the difficulties those theorists encounter with standpoint theory arise (in both cases) from a non-recognition either of the situatedness of knowledge and what that actually entails, epistemologically; or from a misunderstanding of the role and nature of the concept of experience in standpoint theory: i.e. their difficulties centre in many cases around the subjective constitution of knowledge and how that relates to objectivity. Although there are indeed interesting and relevant issues that could be raised in relation to this topic, which would be worth explicating or investigating, I feel that too often the critics objections stem from a considerable (and not always innocent) ignorance

of the theories they are criticizing,² and a set of problematic assumptions that come from these critics themselves, not from the theories they are attempting to refute; - so that in many cases my response has to be along the lines of "No - you've got it all wrong, it's not like that at all". Still, saying so may serve to prevent these unwarranted yet prevalent conceptions of standpoint theory, and may help to clarify what it does and does not entail, disentangling it from other sets of assumptions and associa-

²See for example Susan Hekman's *Gender and Knowledge*, where she states that the "feminist standpoint epistemologies take a number of forms, but common to all of them is an appeal to women's unique association with nature" (p126) and that feminist standpoint epistemologies reify "the nature/ culture dichotomy that is at the root of the exclusion of women from the scientific enterprise. All of the theorists who argue for a distinctive feminist standpoint appeal in some way to women's special relationship to nature to ground the feminist epistemology that they advance" (p127). This is absolute rubbish - no standpoint theorist I know of places any emphasis on a supposed relationship to, or basis in 'nature'. In fact all the standpoint theorists I can think of are extremely sceptical of any concept of the 'natural', regarding it as an 'ideological' construct which marks that which within any discourse is not to be questioned, not to be seen as changeable or political or contested. No standpoint theorist I am aware of therefore accepts any idea of a nature/ culture dichotomy except as it describes a concept they would wish to critique. Nor do they accept or rely on any concept of 'female nature' or a 'natural self' as many critics seem to suppose (see e.g. Marnia Lazreg *Women's Experience and Feminist Epistemology* in Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (eds) *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (Routledge London (forthcoming 1994) pp18,20 of manuscript; Mary Hawkesworth *Knowers, knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth* in *Signs* Vol 14 no.3 1989 p55). Hekman (p126) describes the work of Mary Daly and Dorothy Dinnestein in the middle of her discussion of standpoint theory. She does not specifically say that they are standpoint theorists, but the assumption must be that she is implying that they are, (though it is hard to see how she could mistakenly come to such a conclusion). Her argument relies, though, in equating an approach like Daly's with standpoint theory.

tions that many conflate it with.

There are doubts regarding standpoint theory that I do feel are valid and relevant questions that have to be addressed (as opposed to the misreadings and confusions referred to above) - issues surrounding the universality and content of feminist categories; problems of inclusion and exclusion, generality and specificity; of recognizing and negotiating difference (which I do think standpoint theory has resources, or some promise, for responding to in some minimally adequate way) which I will come back to after first discussing objections related to the concept of experience. These two (standpoint theory and experience) are closely linked in the critiques I shall be referring to, in that critiques of the concept of experience are almost always also critiques of standpoint theory; and critiques of standpoint theory focus heavily on its use of experience.³

Standpoint theorists, do, of course, acknowledge the role of experience in shaping (and constraining) knowledge -

³See e.g. Margareta Halberg *Feminist Epistemology: An Impossible Project?* in *Radical Philosophy* Autumn 1989
Mary Hawsworth *Knowers, Knowing, Known*
Judith Grant *I Feel, therefore I Am: A Critique of Female Experience as the Basis for a Feminist Epistemology* in *Women in Politics* Vol 7 no.3 Fall 1987.
Marnia Lazreg *Women's Experience and Feminist Epistemology: A Critical Neo-Rationalist Approach*

some putting more emphasis on it than others.⁴ But none, (except maybe Stanley and Wise if you classify them as standpoint theorists) cite it as the *only* source or criterion of valid knowledge, as is often claimed or implied by critics. Some of this attention to experience stems from a desire to redress or correct the distorted/ inaccurate picture of knowledge as being somehow opposed to, or contaminated by, the 'subjective' - thus standpoint theorists stress that knowledge is 'subjective' (*as well as*, or in interaction with, the 'objective'), that it is experien-

⁴Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of experience in her description of an alternative 'Afrocentric feminist epistemology' - experience as a criterion of credibility, as providing evidence, as providing a challenge to accepted ideas, as selecting topics for investigation, as a source of insight, as involving concrete images, as providing symbols, as educational, as illustrative to others, as involving empathy, allowing others to share impressions and meanings (see *Black Feminist Thought* pp 208-212) (She also stresses the role of dialogue (not seen in terms of adversarial debate) in assessing knowledge claims. Such dialogue emphasizes connection, interaction, and does not assess claims in isolation or abstraction, but concretely and contextually. It values participation, response, active listening, engagement; not the detachment of the ideal Eurocentric masculinist knower (pp212-214). Collins stresses the importance and appropriateness of emotions and expressiveness, empathy and personality in creating, communicating and evaluating knowledges (215-217). An 'Afrocentric - feminist epistemology' must also contain an 'ethic of personal accountability' in which knowers must take responsibility for the claims they make. Assessment of a knower's claims should/ does not concentrate solely on the claim 'itself', but is simultaneously an evaluation of the knower's situation, experience, history etc. (pp217-219) "Emotion, ethics and reason are used as interconnected essential components in assessing knowledge claims" (p219) Dorothy Smith is also very concerned with experience (as, of course, are Stanley and Wise, though they are not exactly typical standpoint theorists in many respects). Sandra Harding does not overtly place much emphasis on experience, and is quite cautious in her discussion of it - yet her position, I think, depends on, or is compatible with, something like the use I (or Dorothy Smith) make of it.

tial, embodied, sensual, emotional and ethical, while not denying that it can be rational and reflective and contemplative etc at the same time. They also stress that experience, and thus the knowledge for which it provides a route and impetus and resource; is not entirely arbitrary, or freely chosen; but is structured and *situated*; and that the knowledge we produce is dependent upon this structured and situated experience. All knowledge is produced *from somewhere*, from a complex social, historical, political, discursive, conceptual location or context; and knowledge that can be constructed from one such location might not be able to be constructed from another.

Most feminist standpoint theorists, for instance, agree that specifically 'feminist' standpoints can only be constructed from certain positions, utilising structured experiences which arise from knowers occupying certain locations with social and political relationships. Thus, Patricia Hill Collins, for instance, argues that Black feminist thought can only be produced by Black women⁵ (not because as a group of people they share certain essential capacities or characteristics, as some kind of 'natural kind', but because of the way Western society is structured by racism and sexism, among other power relations, people categorized and constructed in such relations as 'Black women' will have their lives and experiences structured by their situation; which will have consequences for the kinds of knowledges they can produce. This does not mean that others cannot learn from

⁵See Collins chaps 2, 10 and 11

the knowledges Black women produce (as others lives are also structured by these same racist/ sexist relations, the claims of Black women will have relevance and a bearing on other's lives also) or that Black women cannot themselves learn from, and develop their standpoints in encounter with, or relation to, the knowledges of others - but it does mean, for instance, that Black feminist thought could not (only) be produced by white women, or black or white men (though they could, perhaps contribute to its production)).⁶ Standpoint theory also stresses the importance of experience in its emphasis on the tensions, contradictions or disjunctions encountered or confronted by knowers (especially in the ways and respects that knowers are marginalised or subjugated by dominant practices and conceptual schemes) that can be utilized productively as a problematique, or source of insight or critique, by these knowers.

So standpoint theory generally makes quite a lot of use of some concept of experience, but the concept it utilises bears little relation to the understanding of experience relied on by it's critics. Firstly, these critics often mention it in connection with the idea that certain modes of thinking or being typify a male/ female dichotomy - thus

⁶See Sandra Harding *Whose Science?* pp277-84 for a discussion of the possibility of male feminists and locating oneself in relation to the standpoints of others. (See also Alison Jaggar p387, Kathleen Lennon p14, and the contributors to Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds) *Men in Feminism* (Methuen London 1987) especially:
Steven Heath *Male Feminism*
Terry Eagleton *Response*
Robert Scholes *Reading Like a Man*
Rosi Braidotti. *Envy: Or With your Brains and my Looks*

rationality/ theorising is held to be 'masculine' whereas an emphasis on experience is seen as reflecting a female way of being in the world.⁷ But any contrast should definitely not have to be seen as one between 'experience' (typified misleadingly as somehow 'biological' or 'intuitive') and 'rationality'. Indeed, there is no obvious or necessary opposition between the two - what contrast there is to be made, is between approaches that take people's experiences seriously, as the situated, particular and provisional 'grounding' (for want of a better term, though not intended in any absolute or foundationalist sense - see later) of their attempts to understand the world; and those that falsely 'objectify' - that ignore or deny the importance of people's experiences and locatedness in shaping and limiting the knowledge they produce. A concern with experience by no means precludes rationality or theorising, nor necessarily associates such activities with men and masculinity; nor sees experience as somehow intuitively or physically or transparently apprehended; nor appeals to some unique female capacity. In so far as any standpoint theorists describe conceptions of 'objectivity', 'rationality' etc. as 'male' it is not implied that they typify any 'essential' male traits or characteristics; but that dominant theories about knowledge have been developed from the perspective of privileged white western males, and that these theories reflect that location without taking it critically into

⁷ See e.g. Halberg p5
Grant pp99-107
Hawkesworth *Knowers* pp539,540,543

account.

Standpoint theory does not depend on assumptions about what Halberg calls "a special women's knowing from experience"⁸ (different to that of men's); the use of gender categories "to distinguish between male and female reasoning".⁹ (She says it is only when so used that she finds the idea of knowing from experience "suspect and doubtful" and that she would find "the basic idea acceptable, if it were extended to all kinds of experience and knowing and not only women's. If we recognise all thinking as social, the assumption would cease to be problematic" she says.¹⁰ Though she says this in *criticism* of standpoint theories and the possibilities of feminist epistemologies in general,¹¹ it actually stands in their favour, as no standpoint theorist argues that *only* women know through experience, or fails to recognise all thinking as social. One of the primary features of standpoint theory is that it does see *all* knowledge and thought as socially produced and located, seeing it as being shaped and limited by all knowers' socially situated experience. It is not, as Halberg puts it, that men and women "have different ways to knowledge"¹² in

⁸ Halberg p5

⁹ Ibid p5

¹⁰ Ibid p5

¹¹ Halberg describes herself as doubtful of the possibility of feminist epistemologies (she refers specifically to Sandra Harding as a proponent of them) - both as a radical critique of traditional philosophy and as a "logical and coherent alternative to them" p3

¹² Ibid p6

some gender specific sense (e.g. they have different capacities depending on whether they are male or female) it is simply a recognition of the fact that as far as people's lives are structured by relations of discrimination and domination like sexism and racism, it will tend to 'make a difference' in terms of the kind of activities they typically undertake, the circumstances they inhabit, the ways others relate to them, the possibilities open to them or the constraints upon them, and so on; depending on how they are located along these axes, and that this will influence what they come to know. Standpoint theorists argue that everyone knows the world from a specific somewhere within it; from a particular complex social and historical location; and that as knowledge is the product of a relation between knowers and 'the world', a knower's situation and experience will affect the knowledge they produce.

Mary Hawkesworth (correctly) describes feminist standpoint theories as "arguing that knowledge is always mediated by a host of factors related to an individual's particular position in a determinate sociopolitical formation at a specific point in history. Class, race and gender necessarily structure the individual's understanding of reality and hence inform all knowledge claims."¹³ Yet, having said this, she goes on herself to argue for turning the emphasis away "from questions about knowers to claims about the known";¹⁴ describing a focus on the sources of people's knowledge

¹³ Hawkesworth *Knowers* p536

¹⁴ Ibid p538

(rather than solely on the validity of the specific claims they make) as including "psychological and functionalist arguments"¹⁵ - 'psychological' in terms of imputed 'male' 'needs' or 'desires', 'functionalist' in terms of the imputed 'needs'/ interests of groups, systems etc. In a later article (a reply to critical comments on the one discussed here)¹⁶ she again characterises approaches that emphasize 'knowers' rather than confining themselves to the 'known' as 'subjectivist', arguing instead for an 'objectivist' approach that concentrates on investigating the validity of knowledge claims. She warns against what she sees as "too facile a conflation of epistemology and psychology" and describes "claims about the origins of one's opponents views" as involving "an illegitimate ad hominem attack".¹⁷

I have already stated that I do not think that standpoint theory needs to, or should, rely on any concepts of 'interests' (see first two chapters on standpoint theory) and I probably share Hawkesworth's views on 'speculative psychological notions' about male and female psyches or identities. But, I would claim that a recognition of the importance of a knower's social situation and experience in no way needs involve theories about *psychological* needs and drives etc, as she seems to suppose. To claim, for instance, that a white person will most likely have a different

¹⁵ Ibid see pp539-542

¹⁶ See Hawkesworth *Reply to Hekman* and *Reply to Shogan* in *Signs* Vol 15 no.21 (1990) pp420-423 and pp426-428

¹⁷ Ibid p426

experience, understanding and self-conception regarding the nature of racism and her or his relation to it, than a Black person, is not, I think, to make psychological claims, or illegitimate attacks, but merely to state something about the partial and perspectival nature of human conceptualisation that needs to be taken account of (and be taken account of in assessing what is 'known'.)

Hawkesworth discusses reference to experience in terms of appeals to a female embodiedness or intuition that supposedly allows women "through their unique experience" "to grasp the truth about the world" or "produce an accurate depiction of reality";¹⁸ arguing that such approaches rely on presumptions that an unmediated grasp of reality is possible, and "fail to grasp the manifold ways in which all human experiences... are mediated by theoretical presuppositions embedded in language and culture".¹⁹ Halberg too argues in criticism of a concern with experience, that experiences are always "interpreted differently in different social contexts",²⁰ and that though it seems "plausible to argue that there exists a shared material world which is part of experience" it is not "directly given" but is rather "mediated, verbalized and interpreted in socially constituted forms."²¹ Experiences, she says, are "not contextually independent" and their interpretation "is influenced,

¹⁸ Hawkesworth *Knowers* pp543-545

¹⁹ Ibid p544

²⁰ Halberg p5

²¹ Ibid p5

confronted and questioned by other... interpretations".²² No adequate consideration of experience, however, need assume otherwise in the first place.

Theorists concerned with experience, like Stanley and Wise, and various standpoint theorists like Dorothy Smith, recognize that we do not experience things in any transparent or immediate way - that we necessarily attempt to understand what we are experiencing as it occurs; that what an experience *is* depends on what we interpret and construct it to be; that its meaning depends on the context in which it occurs and how we understand that. What we feel is not 'given' in some direct or unproblematic sense, but depends, as those emphasising experience usually acknowledge, on how it is interpreted within its specific social/ historical/ discursive/ conceptual location. All experience has to be conceptualised, understood in some way, in order to experience it *as* something, in order to 'know' what is going on, in order to be able to respond. This interpretation of experience is not a separate act we perform on a 'brute' experience awaiting conceptualization - our experience is not a passive absorption of sensation or information which we later attempt to understand or give meaning to - rather we are actually interpreting our experience as it happens.²³ Experience is *itself* interpretive (though we can obviously

²² Ibid p5

²³ (Judith Grant, however, claims that "Experience simply exists" (p113) and does seem to see experience as somehow "primitive", unreflective and unmediated - a basis for interpretation, perhaps, but not interpretive itself.)

further interpret and reinterpret it); it is contextually dependant and conditioned - but this does not mean, as those critics who point this out seem to imply, that it is not epistemologically significant, - that its mediated and situated nature somehow disqualify it from serious attention (for if that was the case, everything would be so disqualified).

Recognizing the significance of experience in no way necessitates regarding it as transparent, directly apprehended, given to the senses, or, as Grant says (referring to theorists like Mary Daly and the 'French Feminist's) that "the primary experience of everyone is of the sexual self and the body."²⁴ She claims herself that experience "tends to always draw the theorist back to biological women,"²⁵ and indeed her discussion of experience tends to give the impression that experience is somehow 'biologically' based, rather than seeing it as socially shaped. On the view I am defending, 'women' denotes not a 'biological' 'natural kind', but a social/ political category; and one's 'gender' (location) is significant not because one's 'biology' shapes one's experience in determinate ways; but because in a society that categorizes and discriminates between people on the basis of a concept of gendered difference and inequality, people's experiences of the world, and thus their understandings of it, will be crucially mediated by where they are placed in respect of these divisions - not because

²⁴ Grant p104

²⁵ Ibid p112

of any essential psychological or biological capacities they might be imputed to possess. Thus when Grant criticizes "the implicit assertion that the sex of one's body is at least as significant as the condition of one's mind"²⁶ I do not see 'the condition of one's mind' as entirely separable from one's (gendered) body; not because one's physical make-up in terms of various organs, hormones or whatever directly affect one's thought, but because the categorisation of 'the sex of one's body' is a crucial aspect of one's location within social and discursive relations. She says it "is not obvious... precisely what it is about the female reproductive system that would make women think differently from men"²⁷ - the concern, however should not be seen as about 'the female reproductive system' conceived of as some kind of uncontested biological entity, and 'natural'/ physical source or marker of difference; but with the meanings attributed to 'it', the ways in which 'it' is constructed and understood and experienced;- with the social and political consequences which stem from these, which shape people's beliefs about themselves and others.

Marnia Lazreg also sees contemporary feminism as locating experience in the body.²⁸ She claims that "according to Harding, a feminist science is based on the women's experience as it is expressed in menstruation, abortion and self-health care" and that Harding is thus

²⁶ Ibid p105

²⁷ Ibid p106

²⁸ e.g. Lazreg *Women's Experience* p24

"unable to escape the problematique of the body".²⁹ This though, is a definite misrepresentation of Harding's position - Harding has always been the standpoint (inclined) theorist most wary of an uncritical attitude towards experience³⁰ and certainly doesn't consider it as primarily 'bodily'. (Harding specifically points out³¹ that none of the claims made by standpoint theory "suggests that biological differences between women and men provide the resources for feminist analysis". She rejects any notion of grounding a feminist standpoint in women's "spontaneous consciousness", any idea that "individual experience provides a uniquely legitimating criterion for identifying preferable or less false beliefs".³² She emphasizes the socially and historically mediated nature of experience, the fact that what can appear 'natural' or 'obvious' or 'intuitive' or 'common sense' may not be so, that women (and feminists) can be wrong about their experience just like anyone else. While a feminist standpoint might begin from and use people's experiences, it considers them critically and reflexively; attempts to locate and understand them contextually).

The actual passage to which Lazreg refers to above³³ is in fact a discussion, by Harding, of the work of Hilary Rose, and goes "In its consideration of such biological and

²⁹ Ibid p10

³⁰ see e.g. Harding *Whose Science?* pp123, 249, 269, 271, 286/7, 294/5

³¹ Ibid p133

³² Ibid p269

³³ Harding *The Science Question* pp142-5

medical issues as menstruation, abortion and self examination and self-health care, [Rose argues that] the women's movement fuses "subjective and objective knowledge in such a way as to make new knowledge"³⁴ Rose argues that such knowledge overcomes Cartesian dualisms and fuses "the personal, the social and the biological". Certainly abortion, self health care (and menstruation) are political and social phenomena as much, or more than they are biological or bodily.³⁵ Standpoint and other similar feminist theorists do not "locate experience in the body", though they do see 'the body's' situatedness as locating experience spatially, socially etc. They do not ignore or deny physicality,

³⁴ Ibid p143

³⁵ Lazreg also tends towards a misunderstanding of Dorothy Smith's position, saying that "while an adequate knowledge of what women do on a daily basis is welcome, it is essential to bear in mind that women's lives are also affected by what they do not do "in the everyday world" (p7). But this latter is precisely the point that Dorothy Smith herself repeatedly emphasizes. Lazreg claims that "the feminist position" "does not recognise that an epistemology based on experience may not yield access to knowledge of the social structures within which experience takes place or to the social antecedents of that same experience" (p14). Dorothy Smith's argument is that everyday experience can be critically and reflexively explored and explicated to expose its social conditions. Likewise, of Alison Jaggar's position she says that "implicitly, the women's standpoint is seen as neutral in the sense of not being interest bound" (Lazreg argues that it would still reflect the interests of one group only) (p19). But Jaggar very specifically sees a 'women's standpoint' as reflecting 'women's' 'interests' - the problematic aspect of her position (besides difficulties with the whole notion of 'interests' and her use of the category 'women' in this case) is that she sees their interests as somehow being linked to truth. (Lazreg sees feminist (and 'masculinist') views as partial, but argues for the need of a 'standpoint' that transcends them both, and is therefore not partial or interested or gender based) (see p25 as well)

embodiedness, the sensory and sensual etc (because they see 'the body' as entwined and interacting with, mutually affecting, the 'mental' and emotional, social and discursive etc, and ultimately not entirely separable from them) but neither do they go to the opposite extreme and concentrate on, or exalt it to the neglect of other factors; or see 'the body' as somehow given or natural or uncontested. Lazreg is, I think, therefore, mistaken, to call for a theoretical effort that "frees itself of the body, be it men's or women's".³⁶ Traditional epistemology has equated subjectivity/ experience with the 'bodily' and non-knowledge. This conception, and the dualisms upon which it is based, should not be accepted in calling for a 'rational' theoretical approach that denies or rejects the bodily, the experiential or the subjective. (Lazreg calls for a "neo-rationalist approach" as opposed to what she sees as "a subjectivist epistemology based on the body",³⁷ though she does allow that experience may 'provide insights' or be used as a way of defining a

³⁶ Lazreg *Women's Experience* p14

³⁷ Ibid p25

Lazreg's concentration on 'bodily' difference emerges again when she calls for "the present feminist focus on incontrovertible differences between men and women to be rethought" in relation to a statement about men apparently also experiencing bodily changes usually associated only with women (p23). Differences between men and women, in my kind of position are not 'biological' or bodily, but political - to do with where 'women' are located structurally in relation to 'men'. I do not presuppose any given or natural or 'biological' difference between 'men' and 'women', and see such 'differences' more as 'consequences' of gender categories and divisions, than 'causes' or 'grounds' or explanations for them. What (if any) 'differences' there would be if gender was no longer a structuring distinction I don't know, but they would no longer be quite the ones operant here and now.

'problematique'.)³⁸

Lazreg sees feminist epistemologists' concept of experience as belonging "to a classical empiricist tradition, the very source" of the positivist science they otherwise oppose.³⁹ Though her discussion of 'experience' fits in with an empiricist conception (she speaks of giving "a privileged status to immediate experience",⁴⁰ of experience "as the *only* source of valid knowledge",⁴¹ of women "as mere shells filled with the sum of their sense perceptions")⁴² the feminist (standpoint especially) conception of experience is very different. 'Experience' in this sense, is, as I have said before, 'lived experience', not the narrower 'sense perception' of empiricism. As such it is not confined to the sense organs, but involves the whole person physically, mentally, emotionally, socially. It is not presumed to be an immediate given but recognised to be mediated, constructed, interpreted. It is inherently social and political, and it conceives of this in terms of location - all experience is

³⁸ In another article, on *Feminism and Difference* in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (eds) *Conflicts in Feminism* (Routledge London 1990) (see discussion later on in relation to 'difference') Lazreg says "What is needed is a phenomenology of women's lived experience... such a phenomenology would not be a mere description of the subjective meaning of women's experience. Rather, it would be the search for the organizing principles of women's lived reality as it intersects with men's." (p337) Here I (and I am sure Harding and Smith and Jaggar) would be in agreement with her.

³⁹ Lazreg *Women's Experience* p2, see also p19

⁴⁰ Ibid p23

⁴¹ Ibid p15

⁴² Ibid p27

seen as specifically socially and historically situated. 'Subjects' of experience are thus (unlike empiricism) not presumed to be all alike; as their position in society will condition their experience both in terms of what 'happens' to them or what they are able to do, and how this can be understood or conceptualized. Thus, contrary to claims like those of Hawkesworth (that we can or should concentrate simply on 'what is known', or the validity of what is claimed, and not on knowers or the sources of their knowledge)⁴³ "it *does*" as Harding says "make a difference who says what and when"⁴⁴ and to whom.⁴⁵

Regarding this, Grant sees what she calls "experientialism" as "a dangerous repudiation of the Enlightenment" leading to a tendency to judge human beings "not by what they do or say, but by what they are".⁴⁶ If we allow (as we must) that women have different experiences, she sees no way on a "perspectives approach" that anyone "can logically refute the experiences of another who has, it is claimed merely had different experiences".⁴⁷ She says that "experiences are subjective and cannot be proven or

⁴³ see Hawkesworth *Knowers* pp538,544

⁴⁴ See Harding *Whose Science?* p269

⁴⁵ Ibid p283

(Hawkesworth discusses the 'situatedness' of knowers not in connection with standpoint theory, but postmodernism. (p554) But though she says the latter has a lot to recommend it, its defects (among which she sees as a slide into relativism) militate against an uncritical adoption of all its tenets by feminist epistemology (p555))

⁴⁶ Grant p112

⁴⁷ Ibid p110

disproven per se" and that the implication of this (as she sees it, "radically relativistic") approach is that "all experiences must be valid," that "there is no way to decide among competing world views".⁴⁸ (Hawkesworth also sees what she describes as appeals to intuition or the immediate apprehension of reality, as precluding the possibility of rational debate, or adjudication in dispute, since such claims couldn't, she thinks, be refuted by other's apprehensions).⁴⁹ But a recognition that all knowing is necessarily experientially informed, partial and perspectival, need not involve rejection of the idea that some perspectives can be epistemologically advantageous in varying respects and to varying degrees, or that one perspective cannot be used to criticize, challenge or evaluate another. Perspectives do not have to be seen as separate and unrelated views which cannot be compared; but as attempts from different locations to gain understanding of an interconnected complex social world which 'supports' or relates all our different experiences of it. Different perspectives can thus be seen as mutually critical, mutually interrogative, mutually informative in a way that does not at all preclude 'debate'.

The difficulty comes, I think, from a misconception of what taking experience 'seriously' or as 'valid' involves. Grant, using the example of feminist debates around S/M, claims that from the point of 'female experience' both sets of experiences (of those women defending, and those condem-

⁴⁸ Ibid p110

⁴⁹ Hawkesworth *Knowers* p545

ning S/M) must be taken seriously.⁵⁰ To which I would reply 'of course'. The problem arises with her next sentence (which by no means follows from the first) as she states, unjustifiably, that thus "contradictory arguments must simultaneously be true."⁵¹ But taking people's understanding of their experiences seriously, does not imply that we have to say that they cannot be mistaken; that their interpretations can't be challenged, cannot be revised or amended in the light of further information. Certainly, it does not imply that everything anyone says regarding their experience is true. We know that experiences are open to differing interpretations, can be reinterpreted, and that we can actually be wrong about them. The undoubted 'realness' of our experience does not necessarily entail the 'rightness' of our understanding of it. However important experience is, it cannot *alone* ensure the adequacy of our beliefs (as critics sometimes characterise the claim). Our understanding does not follow automatically from some obvious or 'intrinsic' nature of an experience, but depends on our previous (interpreted) experience, our stock of knowledge, the concepts and discourses available to us, our understanding of the circumstances in which the experience occurs, and so on; so that it is far from fixed or inevitable. We still need other criteria to discriminate and judge between possible or rival interpretations.

But having said this, neither is assessing or interpre-

⁵⁰ Grant p111

⁵¹ Ibid p111

ting our experience a matter of whim, or free choice. Experience isn't everything, but it certainly doesn't count for nothing - far from it. For though it is not transparent to our understanding, neither can our understandings ignore or float free of it, or make of it just what we will - experience provides us with a definite 'something' that has to be taken account of, or accommodated in our theories. How we understand our experience is, as I have said, in no way given; but neither is it absolutely open - you cannot interpret or understand it just *anyhow* - it places definite constraints on how we can come to describe the world, what we can come to believe, what we can say or know. Our experience marks the site of our basic relationship with the world, it is our 'point of contact', our 'grounding'⁵² in the wider reality of which we are part. We are not separate, detached beings who view the world 'from nowhere', or who can invent or describe the world as we like; but connected and situated knowers who come to know the world from somewhere within it through our experience of it, via the constraints it places upon us in our interaction with it, the possibilities that open to us in our practice within it.

This seems sometimes to be overlooked, or even denied, by theorists concentrating largely in discourse; seeing everything as discursively constructed without acknowledging how these discourses, while indeed shaping and creating our conceptions of 'reality', are themselves shaped and constrained by (more material) 'reality' both at the level of

⁵²See next chapter.

our experience, of our contact and interaction with the world we are situated in, and of the level of 'wider' reality that structures and limits what experiences we can be exposed to, what discourses and concepts etc we will have available to us to make sense of them. It seems sometimes as though they present us with world consisting only of competing discourses, amongst which we may choose; but not on the basis of anything in any sense 'outside' discourse, anything to any degree independent of it. For in this picture, any ideas, information, needs, desires or whatever we may use as basis for evaluating, rejecting or accepting discourses are themselves radically discursively constructed, as are we ourselves, and what we conceive of as reality. Now this is indeed so, in a way, but it ignores the extent to which discourses themselves, at the same time, are in some way 'reflections' or products of a, to some degree discursively independent, though interrelated 'reality'.

I stress this because it seems to me that there are phenomena or states or feelings, even knowledges that we can have, which are, to some and in varying extents, 'outside' of discourse. Many theorists seem to claim that we can only have knowledge, can only conceptualise, can only think about things, within and using language. This seems to me to be definitely wrong - there are so many things: sensations, feelings, impressions, meanings, memories that I/ we have and recognize and use, that just cannot be put into words, that there are not the words or concepts or discourses to express or evoke. I don't mean that they are somehow intrinsically or inevitably outside language, or that they

could not one day be, or are not, in another place/ time/ language, verbally conceptualized - most, at least, could be, given suitable conditions.⁵³ What I do claim, though, is that right here and now, there are many things which we experience which we recognize that we haven't the words for, that we cannot express accurately or adequately in the language/ discourses available to us, and that which no discourse seems to capture or allow. The things that most readily spring to my mind are those connected with sexuality, ecstatic or drug induced states where the lack of adequate language probably reflects social/ political prohibitions and restrictions but it also applies to music and all sorts of other areas. I don't wish to imply that there is anything essential or unmediated about these phenomena - it is just that they are non-verbal, non-propositional, non-discursive; and that what this means, is that all is definitely not a matter of language or discourse for if they were all we had available to us, we would not be able to recognize and explore what is not within them. There is a definite something in our experience that is not reliant on language or discourse; that is to some extent independent of it. To put it another way, interpretations are interpretations *of* something; even if that something is in a sense constructed or made into what it is by the interpretation itself. Our 'descriptions' of the 'world' are descriptions,

⁵³ (though I don't think verbal language will ever be the be all and end all of human conceptualization and communication - some things like music or visual images capture, express or evoke some things far better than words can)

not inventions, they do refer⁵⁴ and relate to something that they are descriptions of, even as we acknowledge their contingency and mediation, their social construction.

On a 'competing discourses' sort of picture all we could be able to do is choose between available discourses, on the basis of previous discourses we had been exposed to and constructed by; - whereas in 'real-life' we can reject discourses in the absence of an alternative, we can know that the words available to us are inadequate to describe that we feel; we can know that the use of certain words or concepts distorts or mis-describes what we experience, even though we have no others; we can know that available discourses just do not capture the 'reality' of our lives, while not having access to anything more adequate (yet).⁵⁵ This is where standpoint theory has particular appeal, as it emphasises, utilises and operates within the gaps and contradictions between one's experiences of the world and the discourses and theories available to conceptualise them in. In my own experience it has often been precisely these 'disjunctions' or 'lines of fault' to use Dorothy Smith's phrases that have served as an impetus and resource in

⁵⁴See Robert Scholes' *Reference and Difference* chapter 6 in *Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English* (Yale University Press N.Y. 1985) which bears on these points. (Scholes argues that we need to keep hold of the referential aspect of language and not see it purely as a system of differences.) See also his *Reading Like a Man* in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith (eds) *Men in Feminism*. Scholes says that experience is not just a *construct* but something that *constructs* (p215)

⁵⁵This connects to the 'problem with no name' type of phenomena discussed under feminist standpoint theory earlier.

critically questioning dominant theories (as well as re-examining my own experience). These 'disjunctions' occur as well *within* an individual's experience or self understandings - between different aspects of their lives or social location; and *between* differently situated individuals with different experiences and understandings, producing tensions which serve to establish a problematique, a place from which to explore the world and our own situations within it. I will return to the issue here very briefly alluded to, that of negotiating, or understanding across differences, in later chapters. In the following chapter I will continue with objections to standpoint theory, namely its supposed 'foundationalism', 'essentialism' and 'universalism'.

OBJECTIONS TO STANDPOINT THEORYFoundationalism, Universalism, Essentialism

Standpoint theories call for beginning enquiry in people's complex and sometimes contradictory experience. Sometimes this has been described in terms of a 'grounding' in experience, and I have myself used this term once or twice (Harding, for one, resists it). But when I have done so I have intended it not in any absolute or foundationalist sense, but in the sense of where an inquiry is (contingently and provisionally) located - where it begins from socially and conceptually. All thought proceeds from a particular complex situation, and though the more 'material', structural aspects of this location are relatively fixed (in that one cannot change 'gender' or 'race' at will - though their meanings and consequences can change with different contexts) other aspects of one's location and one's understandings of oneself and one's situation can change (within limits), so that a questioning and re-examination of one's accepted or taken for granted beliefs can alter the conceptual/ theoretical 'ground' that one begins from (hence its provisional nature). I refer to this process of revision both in the self-conscious sense related to the 'strong objectivity'/ reflexivity of Sandra Harding; and also in the sense that I would claim that all thought proceeds in this

way to different extents - all phenomena are understood not in isolation but in relation to (a conception of) the context they occur in, within a larger conceptual background, and thus any change or challenge to this requires some accommodation in order to deal with it.

But this conceptual 'ground' (if you call it that - you don't have to) is not a 'foundational' one in that it doesn't provide *foundations* - it doesn't provide the stability, security or certainty desired by foundationalist epistemologies. One's situated experience or interaction with the world is the location from which we come to know - we all have to know the world from somewhere. But that 'somewhere' (those multiple and specific 'somewheres') though crucial to the knowledge we produce, are not epistemologically secure or uncontested; they are neither obvious or stable. A standpoint theory along the lines of Harding's (or mine) calls for our situatedness to be acknowledged, and for our epistemological locations (which are both and at the same time, material/ political and conceptual/ theoretical) to be continually and critically examined - they are thus changing, under tension and in the process of revision, and cannot do the work a foundationalist account would require of them.

I stress this because a common criticism of standpoint theory is its supposed foundationalism - specifically its supposed "use of experience as a foundation [for its] theory of knowledge",¹ or its supposed claim that "social position

¹Lazreg *Women's Experience* p19

in society is the ultimate guarantee in truth-finding procedures or practices".² This question of foundations is often linked by critics to the whole problem of objectivism/relativism. Halberg defines an "objectivist view" as "one which holds on to a conviction concerning some kind of foundations for knowledge"³ and then goes on to say, quite blithely, that "the feminist version of objectivism is referred to as "feminist standpoint epistemology", which, she says, "is founded on the claim that women have a cognitively privileged position in society, so that their knowledge is superior to men's knowledge. This privileged position is taken to be rooted, or grounded by, women's experiences"⁴. This, she says, is challenged by postmodernist thinking, whose position, she says, is "really a radical one, because it challenges what was at the heart of the entire Enlightenment project, viz - the very idea of a foundation for Knowledge".⁵ Postmodernist challenges "undermine the feminist epistemological project" because they claim that "[a]ll thought is biased and there exists no position from which a correct view, in an absolute sense, may be grounded".⁶

Now this last claim (besides the word 'biased' which holds quite an objectivist ring to me) is one that stand-

² Halberg p4

³ Ibid p4

⁴ Ibid p4

⁵ Ibid p4

⁶ Ibid p4

point and indeed most/ all feminist epistemologists would quite happily agree with. Yet Halberg sees feminist epistemology as being untenable unless it can defend the idea of "a cognitively privileged position" (which she means in an absolute/ foundationalist sense, not in the sense implied by feminist standpoint theory) - the crucial issue being for her the extent to which "it is tenable to uphold women's experience as a legitimation of a grounding for knowledge".⁷ But it is she herself who assumes that standpoint theory relies on such a foundation (in order that she might then reject it).⁸ Standpoint theory does not assume that (anyone's) experience provides them with a guaranteed access to truth, or a firm or certain ground upon which to build knowledge.⁹ What it does argue is that the epistemological role of experience should be acknowledged, and that that experience should be considered in relation to the complex situation in which it is located. (But if standpoint theory does not take experience (or position) as providing a *foundation*, neither does it go to the opposite extreme and see one's experience and location as having no significance or bearing on knowledge - it certainly doesn't see knowledge as floating free of experience, or having no hold or basis in material (experienced) reality - it just argues that that

⁷ Ibid p4

⁸ Ibid see p6

⁹ See Harding *Whose Science?* pp137,167 where she states that though the articulation of women's experiences does play an important role in feminist epistemologies, standpoint theory does not hold that experience provides knowledge with firm foundations.

basis cannot be treated as foundational.

Halberg's use of "bias"¹⁰ leads to some unnecessary difficulties - describing things in terms of the male 'bias' of traditional theories, she describes the difficulty for feminist epistemology as either (1) - acknowledging that feminist knowledge is also biased, which, she says, leaves us facing the kind of relativism which entails that different theories are equally true/ false; or (2) - explaining why feminist knowledge is not biased (the 'objectivist' approach she sees standpoint theory as following - truth presumably being seen by her as following unproblematically from 'women's experiences']).¹¹ Yet what she terms 'bias' (let's call it perspectivity/ social mediation/ situatedness) is not *necessarily* opposed to truth - you could for instance be both 'biased' *and* 'right' (in a non-relativist sense).¹² Halberg says "unless one supposes that male biased theories somehow misdescribe reality and misrepresent how things are, it is difficult to make sense of much feminist criticism".¹³ (Feminist criticism, of course, *does* suppose that these theories misdescribe reality, yet not *simply* because they are 'male biased'.) This assumption, however, says Halberg "leads to some kind of objectivism, but

¹⁰Hawkesworth *Knowers* p556 also talks of feminist analyses refuting androcentric "bias".

¹¹Halberg p4

¹²If you wanted to describe it in terms of 'bias' you would have to see bias in terms of a non-acknowledgement of locatedness/ perspectivity/ mediation. Feminist theory would then *not* be (or would be less) 'biased' because it sees itself as situated and mediated.

¹³Halberg p4

objectivism is at the same time associated with a masculine epistemology which feminism sets out to oppose. Thus we land in the difficult situation of having to defend a kind of 'feminist objectivism' while rejecting all other kinds of objectivist claims. Consequently feminist epistemologists need very strong and convincing arguments."¹⁴ Feminist (standpoint) epistemologists however do not defend *objectivism*, but defend a (revised/ improved) concept of objectivity against objectivist (and relativist) constructions of it. And they do, I think, have convincing arguments for it. But they do not, as Halberg claims, "have to answer some complicated questions about why women and/ or feminists have correct versions of how things really are, and why they are the only ones who enjoy this privileged position".¹⁵

Feminist standpoint theorists do not, of course, argue that *only* feminists can, or do, have a correct version of how things really are (and they certainly would not argue that 'women' do). They do see feminist theories as *better* than the 'traditional' 'white male western' produced theories they criticize, (for all the contingent, historical, situated reasons I outlined earlier in my discussion of standpoint theory) but they would not presume themselves to be totally correct (in the sense of not being open to improvement/ correction/ revision.) Feminist theorists concentrate on gendered relations, but as these relations cannot be completely separated out from other relations like

¹⁴ Ibid p4

¹⁵ Ibid p4

those of race and class; and as feminist theorists acknowledge that their experience and beliefs are mediated by their location within all these interacting relations, they recognize that their claims are open to challenge from, and informing by, those who are located differently. Feminist theorists see the greater adequacy of their theories (in relation to dominant/ traditional ones) as stemming from their understanding of phenomena in terms of gendered structures and locations, not *simply* from their attention to women's lives and experiences (though the latter are an important resource in exploring gendered relations). Certainly feminist theory does not consist in a mere articulation of women's experiences, nor follow automatically from, or depend upon, a certain type of experience as some critics seem to suppose.¹⁶

And as all these critics point out, the same experiences are not shared by all women; women are always inserted in different social relations and do not live through 'similar' experiences in the same ways.¹⁷ But standpoint theorists do not 'forget' as Susan Hekman puts it, that women "are always found in particular situations within

¹⁶Halberg says that, if tenable, the argument rests on premises which postulate very similar and gender specific experiences within each sex (p5)
Hawkesworth speaks of a 'woman's standpoint' founded the 'universal experiences of women' *Knowers* (p544).
Grant argues that "all woman would have to have a set of experiences distinct enough to set them definitely apart from men" (p108)

¹⁷see eg Halberg p5, Grant pp108-110

varying social and historical contexts";¹⁸ nor do they assert a "homogeneous women's experience" which fails to do justice to "the multiplicity and diversity of women's experiences, and the powerful ways in which race, class, ethnicity, culture and language structure the individual's understanding of the world".¹⁹ Standpoint theory does *not* suppose that all women share the same experiences, or that they have certain *specific* experiences 'as women'. The claim that they do, arises, I think, from the critics misunderstanding of standpoint theory - most seem to conceive of (and describe) it in terms of a *perspective* - a putative 'woman's perspective'²⁰ based on a supposedly common or homogeneous experience or position - a claim that all women see the world from one or the same location, similarly experienced.²¹

But the claim is not, as Dorothy Smith emphasizes, that women share a common experience or viewpoint - they do not have the same perspective. What they do have in common are the social and economic relations which structure and condition their lives,²² one of the most crucial among these being gender relations. What 'women' have in common is their

¹⁸ Hekman p128

¹⁹ Hawkesworth *Knowers* p546

²⁰ see Hawkesworth *Knowers* p538, also p546; see also Halberg p6, Hekman p128, Grant p110

²¹ This is highlighted by Hawkesworth's claim that if we substitute 'feminist' for a 'woman's' perspective, we still have the problem of positing an unique set of 'feminist' experiences to ground it. (p546)

²² see Dorothy Smith *The Everyday World* pp78,86,107.

categorization as 'female' within structures that hierarchically divide and discriminate on the basis of gender dichotomies, which contributes significantly towards the ways their lives are conditioned.²³ But how they experience 'being female', what it means what its social consequences will be, will depend on, and differ according to, the effect of the other aspects shaping different women's lives. This does not mean that there will be *no* similarities of experience and perspective among variously located woman,²⁴ but they will depend in nature and extent on the historical/political context, and cannot be specified in advance. They will also cut differently along different axes - different women will have different similarities and differences to both other women and variously located men. But a recognition that there are these differences of experience and location amongst 'women' does not lead to the difficulties that many, like Halberg, Hawkesworth and Grant presume - namely that of an unstoppable fragmentation, a 'multipli-

²³ These gender divisions are seen by feminists as oppressive; both because their oppositional either/or construction can be seen as constraining and exclusionary of alternatives or other arrangements of characteristics, capacities and behaviours; and because their hierarchical construction causes one pole of the dichotomy to be negatively defined and valued, with negative consequences for those who instantiate this gender position, (relative to those otherwise similarly located who occupy the privileged gender location). Thus Stanley and Wise argue that women share "experiences of oppression" though not the same or specific experiences of oppression (*Method, Methodology and Epistemology* p21)

²⁴ *Absolute* difference being as unlikely (and unhelpful) as absolute sameness. Difference and sameness interact dialectically - we only recognize one against a context or assumption of the other; and exploration of either proceeds via a to and fro, shifting motion between them.

cation' of groups and 'interests' which ends up at best, in a "trivial and politically contradictory pluralism", at worst in an "extreme subjectivism" or "radical relativism".²⁵

For, as I have said, although there are indeed differences, there are *also* commonalities, and *both* have to be acknowledged and explained. Some differences (and commonalities) are relatively 'innocent', such as the products, say, of living in different/ similar climates/ geographical parts of the world. Others are differences of *power*, which have to be recognized as such in order to be challenged and opposed. There are also similarities of political location, commonalities of goal or vision which can be utilized and built upon, or after critical examination, rejected. For none of these latter differences or similarities are arbitrary, or matters of coincidence or whim - the differences between 'Western' and 'Third World' women, for instance, are not *surprising* or *unexplainable* or just 'brute' differences, but the products of political and economic *relations* between them. An acknowledgement and exploration of these differences, far from leading to fragmentation, leads us to see how they are *connected*, aspects of processes that constitute them both (just as an exploration of overt similarity can expose very different and opposed locations and relations). Examination of how we are linked and related can lead both to alliance or coalition, and to resistance and opposition, depending on the context. A recognition of difference or

²⁵ See Halberg p6
Grant p110

Hawkesworth Knowers p546

similarity does not, or should not, just stop there, in an unquestioning acceptance, but lead to investigation of *why* and *how* things came to be so.

And to ask, and attempt to answer such questions, especially across differences of location, culture, language, conceptual framework, and so on, standpoint theory has to be non-relativistic. It recognizes that all knowledge claims are *related* to a context, are made by situated and partial knowers in a particular historical/ political/ conceptual location; but it argues that they are (in certain ways and to certain degrees) communicable, understandable and assessable outside of that context (and in a way that acknowledges the perspectivity and situatedness of knowing, unlike the traditional objectivist appeal to an unmediated reality or a neutral framework). (I shall return to this topic later on in relation to understanding across differences.) Harding says that standpoint theory, in fact strengthens standards of objectivity by extending critical evaluation beyond the claim 'itself' to its social/ historical location²⁶ and background beliefs, requiring a "more robust notion of reflexivity than is currently available in the sociology of knowledge or philosophy of science".²⁷ (I will discuss Harding's 'strong reflexivity' in more detail later in connection with difference and reflexivity, and her understanding of locating oneself in relation to others.)

A criticism often allied to that of the supposed

²⁶Harding *Whose Science?* p142

²⁷Ibid p149

fragmentary/ relativistic tendencies of standpoint theory, is that of 'individualism' - either in that experiences are seen to be individual/ private/ 'subjective' in character as opposed to the social, public, 'objective' nature of knowledge;²⁸ or in that there is a tension between the supposed individuality of experience and the supposed reliance of standpoint theory on a collective, shared experience of women as a group;²⁹ or in that a recognition that women do not share the same experience leads inexorably to a fragmentation of groups or categories that ultimately leaves us only with a multiplicity of different individuals about whom no collective social claims may legitimately be made. Standpoint theory does emphasize that it is always particular situated knowers who 'experience' and 'know' the world. But these are not conceived of as the isolated, autonomous, unrelated knowers of traditional/ liberal theory

²⁸ see Lazreg *Women's Experience* p12. Lazreg also claims (p17) that the "individualist character of experience [as conceived by feminists] does not allow for intersubjectivity". I would disagree. Any adequate conception of experience sees it as intersubjectively constituted, informing and transforming.

Lazreg also says that the feminist conception of experience confines women to the realm of the experienceable. So that that which is not experienced (eg the experience of 'other' women of different cultures or races is implicitly not knowable or worthy of being known (p15). I don't think that this is necessarily so - it emphasizes that others' experience cannot automatically or unproblematically be known by 'us'; that we cannot assume to correctly empathize or understand or extrapolate what they experience from our understanding of our own experience (without effort and self-questioning and doubt) - but it does carry with it the belief that attempting to know about, and learning from, other people's experiences is valuable, informative and both ethically and epistemologically necessary.

²⁹ see Grant p112

who know the world from nowhere in a socially and subjectively unmediated way. Standpoint theory conceives of individuals, experience and knowledge as social - but social in the sense of inserted, produced within, complex historical, political, conceptual, discursive contexts and relations; as indeed would be any groups, categories or collectivities it refers to, or utilizes theoretically. If the individual 'subject' conceived of by standpoint theory is always relational, complexly located and constituted among multiple axes and structuring processes and relations, so too are its groups and categories. The choice is not one between 'individualism' and seeing things in terms of large, homogeneous, indifferentiated groups. Standpoint theory does not have to assume what Hawkesworth calls a 'collective singular subject'³⁰ (as for instance 'the proletariat' might function in some Marxist theory, or as 'woman' is supposed by critics to be used in much feminist theory.

Harding describes the subjects and agents of feminist knowledge to be "multiple and even contradictory"³¹ This is so, she says "in two different senses. For one thing, women exist only in historically specific cultural forms... These various lives are in many respect in conflict - not just different but opposed - yet each is potentially a starting point for feminist knowledge... Thus, feminist thought or knowledge is not just one unitary and coherent 'speech' but multiple and frequently contradictory knowings... Further,

³⁰ Hawkesworth *Knowers* p553

³¹ See Harding *Whose Science?* pp284/5

each individual feminist knower is also multiple in a way that mirrors the situation of women as a class. It is the thinker whose consciousness is bifurcated, the outsider within, the marginal person now also located at the centre, the person committed to two agendas that are themselves at least partially in conflict... who has generated feminist sciences and new knowledge. It is living from a contradictory position that generates feminist knowledge. So the logic of the standpoint directive to start thought from women's lives requires starting from multiple lives which are in many ways in conflict with one another and each of which has its own multiple and contradictory commitments. (In contrast, the subject of knowledge for both the conventional empiricist philosophy and for Marxism was supposed to be unitary and coherent.)"³²

If standpoint (and other similar) feminist theory refers to women as knowing subject/s, it is in the above sense, and not, as is often claimed, as instances of some universal or essential 'woman'. Standpoint theory does not assume that women are all the same 'as women' whatever their other differences, or that as women they share certain essential capacities or characteristics. As Harding says, on the contrary it "*analyses* the essentialism that androcentrism assigns to women, locates its historical conditions, and proposes ways to counter it".³³ By essentialism I mean

³² Ibid p284/5

³³ Harding *Feminism, Science and the AntiEnlightenment Critiques* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* p99

an appeal to what Diana Fuss calls "the 'real' true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which define the 'whatness' of a given entity,"³⁴ "that which is most irreducible, unchanging and therefore constitutive of a given person or thing".³⁵ Standpoint theory (and indeed almost all feminist theory) does not ascribe to any idea of 'woman' having any 'true', fixed or unchanging, 'real' essence. (Teresa de Lauretis points out that most feminists "agree that women are made not born, that gender is not an innate feature... but a sociological construction... that patriarchy is historical",³⁶ and that even those feminists most commonly accused of 'essentialism' (usually designated 'cultural' feminists) have a definition of women that is more a *project*, than a "description of existent reality".³⁷ I have already said that 'women' are not to be seen as some kind of "natural kind"³⁸ but as a contingent and historical political/ social category, whose content and significance varies with, and cannot be stipulated outside of, the contexts of their use. But having said this, it is still *some* kind of a kind, and very crucially, an explanatory one

³⁴ Diana Fuss *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (Routledge London 1990) pxi

³⁵ Ibid pxi

³⁶ Teresa de Lauretis *Upping the Anti-(sic) in Feminist Theory* in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller (eds) *Conflicts in Feminism* p257

³⁷ Ibid p257

³⁸ There often being a close association between assumptions of 'real' essence, and what is held to be 'natural', physically given and explanatory.

at that; and there are still conditions and limits to its use and application.

De Lauretis,³⁹ and Fuss, following John Locke, refer to it as a 'nominal essence' - a "linguistic convenience, a classificatory fiction⁴⁰ we need to categorize and to label" - "nominal essences are not 'discovered' so much as assigned or produced - produced specifically by language".⁴¹ It is a "*linguistic* rather than natural kind",⁴² says Fuss. (While I agree that 'woman' is not a 'natural' kind, and *is* linguistic; it is not *merely* so, in the way that say, 'cardigans' are. 'Woman' is a 'social' kind (but then so are cardigans) but of a crucially material and consequential and explanatorily necessary sort. I thus don't know of a term that quite captures it - not 'natural' but not simply 'nominal' either.) Fuss points out that we cannot escape appealing to *any* kind of essence at all. She argues that even apparently radically 'constructivist' positions are often built upon hidden essentialisms,⁴³ that "essentialism, when held most under suspicion by constructivists, is often effectively doing its work elsewhere, under other guises"⁴⁴ - in assumptions that essentialism is 'essentially' bad or reactionary

³⁹ de Lauretis *Upping the Anti* p257

⁴⁰ 'fiction' in the sense of being a creation - but not fictional in the sense of having no bearing on reality, no material conditions or consequences.

⁴¹ Fuss p4

⁴² Ibid p5

⁴³ Ibid p13

⁴⁴ Ibid p1

for instance, the very act of invoking the charge often involving acting "as if essentialism had an essence".⁴⁵ Appeals to nominal essence, in recognizing categories as socially constructed and changing, avoid some of the difficulties incurred in relying on ideas of 'real' essence (e.g. notions that essences are fixed and always and everywhere the same) but they still rely on some kind of 'essence', in their being 'something' to these categories that motivates or warrants their use, however contingent, contextual and historically produced these essences might be. Fuss says that attention to essentialism⁴⁶ has "encouraged more careful attention to cultural and historical specificities where perhaps we have hitherto been too quick to universalise, but on the other hand [it has] foreclosed more ambitious investigation of specificity and difference by fostering a certain paranoia around the perceived threat of essentialism".⁴⁷

Essentialism cannot be escaped *simply* by appealing to the social and historical - such claims often rely on notions of the 'social' as 'essentially' changing or changeable, for instance;⁴⁸ while the specifying of historical particularity, though narrowing the range and applicability of claims, often merely introduces lots of micro essences in place of universal ones. (Thus, she point out,

⁴⁵ Ibid p21

⁴⁶ Here meant in the sense of her definition, of invoking real or true essences.

⁴⁷ Ibid p1

⁴⁸ Ibid see p6

specifying the "sub categories of women" does not necessary preclude essentialism." 'French bourgeois women' or 'Anglo American Lesbian' while crucially emphasising in their very specificity that 'woman' is by no means a monolithic category" can merely serve only to fragment it into "multiple identities, each with its own self-contained self referential essence".⁴⁹) Fuss argues that "'essentialism' is neither good or bad, progressive or reactionary, beneficial or dangerous. The question we should be asking is not "is this text essentialist" (and therefore 'bad') but rather, "if this text is essentialist, *what motivates its deployment?*... Where, how and why is it evoked?".⁵⁰ We cannot say that essentialism is *essentially* reactionary, "the radicality or conservatism of essentialism depends, to a significant degree, on *who* is utilizing it, *how* it is deployed, and *where* its effects are concentrated".⁵¹ Essentialism "can be deployed as a tool of ideological domination" in the hands of ruling groups, but in the hands of the subjugated it can be used for liberatory purposes (as in the case of using humanism to "undo by overdoing" humanism).⁵² Fuss therefore suggests that feminists should hold onto "the idea of woman as a class"⁵³ as a 'nominal essence' to be used for political purposes.

⁴⁹ Ibid p19,20

⁵⁰ Ibid pxi

⁵¹ Ibid p20

⁵² Ibid p32

⁵³ Ibid p36

I wish to emphasise this because it is often argued that feminists cannot/ should not employ the category 'woman' in the way they do, because it is essentialist (and therefore 'bad') - bad for various reasons - because essentialism is an inherently reactionary stance; because reliance on it is theoretically/ empirically inadequate given differences between people and the lack of common (real) essences; because appeals to essences/ categories/ classes always exclude and divide and are hence ethically unsatisfactory; because appeals to (real or nominal) essences in oppressive contexts invariably rely on, or are contaminated by, stereotypes and negative associations which the oppressed would otherwise wish to reject.

Opposition to 'essentialism' is often opposition to appeals to 'real' essence. I have already argued that feminist standpoint theorists do not rely on any notion of real essence. I do think that they use the category 'woman' in a way that conceives of it as a (not merely) 'nominal' essence; and I also see this as necessary if we are to adequately conceptualise/ describe/ explain our lives. Use of the category 'woman' is inescapable if as feminists (or anyone else) we wish to understand our social experience and situation - not that I wish to imply that it should ideally be escaped, as I do not believe that all appeals to essence (especially 'nominal essence') are inherently reactionary. I agree with Fuss that though appeals to essence (especially 'real' essence) can be deployed in reactionary ways by dominant groups, (and since most Western theorizing has been done by members of dominant groups it *has* often/ usually

been reactionary/ oppressive in content and consequence) I do think that appeals to essences/ kinds can be made from subjugated positions in ways that are not conservative or reactionary, or do not serve those ends. As to the theoretical/ empirical adequacy of social/ political kinds like 'women', that I think is again a matter for investigation within any context within which it is used. Often categories like 'woman' can or will be used in ways that are 'empirically'/ ethically/ politically inadequate, but that can only be ascertained by examining its actual *situated* use - we can't just claim that it is always and everywhere 'essentially' inadequate in some universal and non-situated way.

We have to use categories to think, to communicate - language largely consists of categories; which are all socially produced, their meanings all contextually mediated. All categories include some sort of 'essence' - the 'something' the category picks out that differentiates it from other categories, that provokes response and recognition in knowers. All are general, they mark what is both specific and common about various things/ states/ properties that (within specific contexts) motivate such a classification. But that does not imply that there are no differences between things/ states/ properties so categorized,⁵⁴ that all things classified in a certain way are all the same in every way. No category 'captures' anything in its entirety so that

⁵⁴Sean Sayers points out that while 'logical' identity excludes change or difference, 'normal' concepts of identity do not. (p36)

it is that category and nothing else. All things/ phenomena can be categorized in multiple ways, depending on the context, depending on what is most significant/ useful/ important in that practical/ political circumstance to those who are making the categorisations. Description/ categorisation is perspectival and relational - whatever anything 'is', it is so to particular knowers within specific situations.⁵⁵ Invoking any category in relation to a thing/ property/ state always leaves out other aspects which could be acknowledged. This does not mean that these aspects are necessarily denied, but that they are not, in this context, emphasised. To specify, be particular, we indicate, or use combinations of categories to narrow down or focus the reference; but these still never 'capture'/ describe/ represent all that is/ could be significant or meaningful about something.

The applicability or legitimacy or usefulness of a category is a contextual, contingent thing, and depends on the location of use, not just the category 'itself' as in isolation, unutilised, (as does the meaning). A feminist cannot evade the use of the category 'women' if she wishes to explain or understand or transform her existence, as her existence is conditioned by gender relations that constitute her as female in relation to others, and any adequate theory or politics is going to have to take this as a "necessary

⁵⁵Categories/ conceptions of 'men'/ 'women', along with all the properties assigned to them, are not 'in themselves' but relational - to or for us, and therefore depends on who 'we' are.

point of departure".⁵⁶ That this category does not refer to anything 'real' or 'natural' or given, that this category is a social and political construct, a product of hierarchical and oppressive relations, does not change this. The meaning of the category 'women' will depend both on the context and the situation within it of the people using and being categorized by it. It will be conditioned by all the other relations mediating its application and affects, but its definition and meaning will always, in gendered societies, be relative (in oppositional and subordinating ways) to what it means to be 'male'. And as long as people are categorized (in structural, systematic ways) as 'men' and 'women', 'women' will have to use the category, if only to subvert and resist it. We can't just invent new categories 'from nowhere', free of the material/ conceptual conditions we find ourselves in - we have got to use the categories we've 'got', that constitute us even as we attempt to reject or change them. But making use of categories doesn't necessarily mean accepting or not questioning them, but rather using them consciously, cautiously, critically and creatively within particular situations, within a project to

⁵⁶ See Lisa Alcoff p407 "the concept and category of woman is the necessary point of departure for any feminist theory and feminist politics". This is so, she says, even though "as a concept it is radically problematic" (407) - and feminist theorists face the dilemma of having to "deconstruct and de-essentialize" "our very self-definition" (406) We cannot, she says, reject the concept of 'woman' while retaining the category of 'women' [for if] there are women there must exist a basis for the category and a criterion for inclusion within it. This... need not posit a universal and homogeneous essence, but there must be [criterial nevertheless" (407).

transform the conditions and consequences of their invocation. Ignoring, or keeping silent about them won't make them go away, and indeed leaving the category 'women' only to be used by those privileged and oppressing on its basis can only further its negative implications.

As long as there are oppressive gender relations 'women' (i.e. those negatively located by/ in those relations) will exist as a category, even if they are 'women' only because they are constructed to be so, even if there will always be important differences between them, even though the category does not capture all that is important/significant about the lives of those who are located as 'women'. Obviously no 'women' are just or only or purely a 'woman'. Race, class, sexuality and all the other structuring factors operant in any context will intersect and mutually condition each other so that 'being women' will have different meanings and consequences in different circumstances, depending on how people are positioned and related. But as the work of Elizabeth Spelman⁵⁷ - who emphasises and illustrates the political and theoretical inadequacy of positing a generic or essential 'woman' or femaleness (along the lines of the generic 'man' of humanness of Western philosophy) - still indicates; the fact that there are different 'kinds' of differently located women doesn't mean that there are *no* women, of any kind, *at all*; or that gender is not an important and significant relation simply because it is not entirely isolable, separable from

⁵⁷See Elizabeth V. Spelman *Inessential Woman*

context or conditioning by other relations.⁵⁸

The contingent and constructed nature of social categories like 'women' does not make them entirely 'fictional' or immaterial; they are no less significant or real in their consequences for not being 'natural kinds'. As Susan Bordo argues, gender and racial dualisms are "discursive formations", "social constructions", but "each of these dualities has had profound consequences for the construction of experience of those who live them".⁵⁹ Obviously gender or race "never exhibits itself in pure form but in the contexts of lives that are shaped by a multiplicity of influences, which cannot be neatly sorted out. This doesn't mean, however.... that abstractions or generalisations about gender [or race, are necessarily] methodologically illicit or perniciously homogenizing of difference".⁶⁰ "Generalizations about gender can obscure and exclude" but this cannot be decided by "fiat but must be decided from context to context".⁶¹ Even as we would wish ultimately to 'undo' oppressive and exclusionary dichotomies like those of gender or race, we cannot afford to dismiss them while they

⁵⁸ Spelman says that it is not easy to think race/ class/ gender in ways that do not obscure or exclude. But the crucial question "is how the links between them are conceived" (p115) - she believes that if they are conceived as mutually mediating and informing there is more chance of thinking about them adequately.

⁵⁹ Susan Bordo *Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Scepticism* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* p149

⁶⁰ Ibid p150

⁶¹ Ibid p149

structure our lives.⁶² For the crucial thing about categories like those of gender is that they are political categories, descriptive of relations of power and hierarchy; and they are *explanatory* - we could not adequately understand, or change our lives, experiences and beliefs unless we conceptualized them through these terms. Too insistent a focus on heterogeneity (as on homogeneity) prevents such an understanding; ignores, or as Bordo says, *obscures* the "patterns of white, male privilege," "the dualistic, hierarchical nature of the actualities of power in Western culture".⁶³ Thus Lisa Alcoff argues that poststructuralist claims that feminists should not use and therefore reduplicate; but instead attempt to dismantle the category 'woman' by asserting total difference and undecidability, simply serves to make gender invisible again.⁶⁴ It also, she says "undercuts our ability to oppose the dominant trend (and one might argue, the dominant danger) in mainstream western intellectual thought, that is, the insistence on a universal, neutral, perspectiveless epistemology" in which "human

⁶²See Harding *The Instability* p662

⁶³Bordo *Feminism, Postmodernism* p149

⁶⁴Alcoff p417-420

particularities are irrelevant".⁶⁵ (I will return to this point later).

Linda Nicholson and Nancy Fraser also claim that avoiding "totalization and essentialism" does not demand the elimination of all 'big theory' or generalizations, so long as theorizing situates its categories within cultural and historical frameworks and contexts.⁶⁶ The implication here is that it is not so much the use of certain categories, like 'women', (at all) but rather the *unlocated* use of them that is the problem. If the use of categories was explicitly situated, through their users, and thus opened to examination in relation to the context, the historical/ social/ conceptual location of the users' claims; it would be possible both to defend or attack (as appropriate) the specific use of these categories. As I said earlier, in relation to Fuss, the 'reactionary' or promising aspects of categories do not inhere solely in the categories 'in themselves' as conceived of in isolation, but in the context of their use. This context is not decided just by the

⁶⁵ Ibid p420 (It does so because of the non-acknowledgement/ exploration by poststructuralism of the specifically situated nature of its thought (in a structural/ materialist sense) and its dismissal of located, materially, subjectively constituted experience.)
Alcoff says that the poststructuralist rejection of subjectivity, its denial of the epistemological significance of the subject and situation, colludes with the liberal thesis that the particularities of knowers are irrelevant (p420/1)
See also Anne Marie Goetz pp492,3
Teresa de Lauretis *Upping the Anti* p260

⁶⁶ See Linda Nicholson *Introduction to Feminism/ Postmodernism* pp8/9;
Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson *Social Criticism without Philosophy* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* pp34,35.

general socio-historical situation, but by where various knowers/ users of categories are situated within it and in relation to each other - it depends on *who* uses these categories, and why and to what intent and effect. As Fuss says, that which can be oppressive in the hands of dominant groups, can be deployed to other ends by those oppressed by them.⁶⁷ Spelman makes a similar point over claims of commonality - say of those between white and black women. These, made by white women, when it suits them and at their terms, can be arrogant and presumptuous, dismissive of crucial differences of privilege and power. But claims of commonality made by subjugated groups, against their exclusion and construction as other, can have different effects.⁶⁸ "The question of permissibility, if you will," says Fuss (specifically in relation to "engaging in essentialism" though I think it applies generally to uses of categories and discourses) "is therefore framed and

⁶⁷The classic example is that of the reclamation and subversion of the term 'queer'. Consider though, that it still matters *who* uses it and in what contexts. At what point, and in what contexts, does it become non-oppressive for say, a 'heterosexual' woman, who is not directly oppressed by dominant meanings and uses of the term, to use it, and in ways that do not feed into the general heterosexist privilege and discrimination?

⁶⁸See Spelman pp138-140

determined by the subject position from which one speaks".⁶⁹

This, I think, indicates the answer to those who warn against the invocation of the category 'woman' because doing so will activate patriarchal/ androcentric meanings, stereotypes and associations; duplicate "misogynistic strategies";⁷⁰ reproduce and reinforce the very divisions and dualisms feminists wish to dismantle. Very often, the uses to which the category is put (especially by men or non-feminist women, but also by feminists) *do* do this, but the

⁶⁹Fuss p32 This is, I think, one of the reasons why I find poststructuralist/ Derridean projects 'to displace' the 'essence' of 'woman' so suspicious. Like Fuss (pp12-19) I think 'the essence' is merely redeployed (perhaps inevitably) - but crucially, it feels to me that even if/ however 'well meant' the Derridean deconstruction/ redefinition/ replication of the essence of 'woman', and his use of 'feminine' metaphors (especially the 'hymen') - it cannot be undertaken from the subject position he occupies, without being extremely reactionary (the more so for attempting to obscure what is precisely in contest and under crucial examination - specific material gendered relations in which he is firmly and particularly located). The very attempt, from his position, to make pronouncements about 'woman' shows a lack of awareness of his own situatedness in relation both to gendered structures and concrete particular *women*. (Which is, I think, linked to the point made by Linda Alcoff about poststructuralist assertions of 'difference' serving to hide the differences that matter, and so reinforcing the supposed universality and non-situatedness of knowledge through a pluralizing of non-decidable difference) (see Alcoff pp420/1). Anne Marie Goetz quotes Bidy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty as saying "it is equally important to point out the political limitations of an insistence on 'indeterminacy' which implicitly, when not explicitly, denies the critic's own situatedness in the social, and in effect refuses to acknowledge the critic's own institutional home" (Martin and Mohanty quoted in Goetz p491) She goes on to say that "Martin and Mohanty, and other theorists such as de Lauretis, suggest that the progression out of the political paralysis of poststructuralism is the [feminist] attention to the subjective experience of specificity, of the 'situatedness in the social' (Goetz p491)

⁷⁰The phrase is Alcoff's p407

claim is that feminists *can*, with awareness of the dangers and attention to the particularities of women's circumstances, use it differently (in combination, dialectical interaction with, feminist *practice*) in ways that subvert and transform its meanings and consequences. If we want to change and 'undo' the categories that structure our lives and understandings, this can only be done in conscious, critical and *situated* use, not by theoretical fiat or proclamation.

To return to Alcoff's point about the poststructuralist tendency to discredit "the notion of an epistemologically significant, specific subjectivity,"⁷¹ Halberg asks if differences among/ between/ within women are acknowledged, and they therefore (she presumes) "are not thought of as having some epistemological communality, what is the point of trying to distinguish women's thinking from men's since it doesn't say anything that is epistemologically interesting?"⁷² But acknowledging differences among women doesn't necessarily undermine the epistemological significance of women as a category. The claim is not that all women are the same as knowers, or share the same perspective, but that "[i]nsights are expected from attending to the position and experiences of women in a way which would not be yielded by attending, for example to the group of those with green eyes",⁷³ as Kathleen Lennon put it. This is

⁷¹Alcoff p421

⁷²Halberg p6 (Grant makes a similar point p110)

⁷³Lennon p11

because, right here and now, anyway, 'those with green eyes' is not a structuring or explanatory category - trying to understand society/ people's experiences and beliefs through that lens would not yield any systematic or fruitful insights, as people are not conditioned by having green eyes in the same way as they are by being constituted as women. And by attending to how things 'are' from where different women are located "orthodoxies are challengeable, insights gained and new truths uncovered which were not detectable until we paid attention to women's lives... and experiences".⁷⁴ This is because most Western theorizing has been done from the lives and experiences of (ruling) men - thus not only has much about the lives of different women (and other men) been ignored or misunderstood; but the ruling theories are themselves inadequate for not taking account of the fact of their own partiality and situatedness, and for not seriously attending to the lives of those differently (and usually disadvantageously) placed. Gender, race, class etc are *relations* and cannot be comprehended except *in relation* to the lives of those differently affected by them. Even if knowers acknowledged their perspectivity and situatedness, as 'white' or 'male' for instance; they would not be able to comprehend it at all adequately unless they seriously considered their experiences and understandings in comparison *and connection* to those of knowers who were 'black' or 'female' say. Starting inquiry from the specificity of women's different lives is not *optional*, or only of

⁷⁴ Ibid p12

concern to feminists, but necessary if *anyone* wishes to understand the social relations in which we are all located.

Alcoff writes that "our identity [is] always a construction yet also a necessary point of departure".⁷⁵ "Claiming identity as a woman as a political point of departure... makes it possible to see, for instance, gender biased language that in the absence of that departure point women often do not even notice".⁷⁶ She argues that if we "conceive of the subject as positionality, we can conceive of it as non-essentialized and emergent from a historical experience and yet retain our political ability to take gender as an important point of departure. Thus we can say at one and the same time that gender is not natural, biological, universal, ahistorical or essential and yet still claim that gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a *position* [my emphasis] from which to act politically".⁷⁷ She says that when "the concept 'woman' is defined not by a particular set of attributes but by a particular position, the internal characteristics of the person thus identified are not denoted so much as the external context within which that person is situated. The

⁷⁵Alcoff p432.

⁷⁶ Ibid p432 She says it "is true that anti-feminist women can and often do, identify themselves strongly as women and with women as a group, but this is usually explained by them within the context of an essentialist theory of femininity. Claiming that one's politics is grounded in one's essential identity avoids problematising both identity and the connection between identity and politics"

⁷⁷ Ibid p433

external situation determines the person's relative position, just as the position of a pawn in a chess board is considered safe or dangerous, powerful or weak, according to its relation to the other chess pieces. The essentialist definition of woman invokes her identity independent of her external situation... [t]he positional definition, on the other hand, invokes her identity relative to a constantly shifting context, to a situation that includes a network of elements involving others, the objective economic conditions, cultural and political institutions and ideologies and so on".⁷⁸

The position of women is relative and not innate or fixed, but neither is it "'undecidable'. Through social critique and analysis we can identify women via their position relative to an existing cultural and social network".⁷⁹ And if "it is possible to identify women by their position within this network of relations, then", she claims, "it becomes possible to ground a feminist argument".⁸⁰ She does not wish to imply, however "that the concept of 'woman' is determined solely by external elements and that the woman herself is merely a passive recipient of an identity created by these forces." Rather, "it is a relational term identifiable only within a (constantly moving) context"; but "she herself is part of the historicized fluid movement and she therefore actively contributes to

⁷⁸ Ibid p433

⁷⁹ Ibid p434

⁸⁰ Ibid p433

the context within which her position can be delineated".⁸¹
This position, then, can be "actively utilized... as a
location for the construction of meaning.... rather than
simply [being] the place from where it is discovered".⁸²
Alcoff develops her position on 'identity' in response/
relation to de Lauretis' conception of the production/
construction of subjectivity via (situated) experience. I
will not go into this here, yet, because I first want to
discuss the frequently made suggestion that a 'postmodern'
approach would enable feminists to deal more adequately with
the difficulties raised in this chapter, most especially the
problem of dealing with difference.

⁸¹ Ibid p434

⁸² Ibid p434

POSTMODERNISM AND DIFFERENCEa) Introduction

Feminist theorists have presented a critique of the key categories and concepts of 'modern'/'Enlightenment'/'humanist' thought; demonstrating that what has been presented as 'human' or 'universal' has in fact been a product of the perspective of dominant white male westerners of the last few centuries; dependent on and exploitative of other genders, classes, races and cultures, whose own perspectives and experiences have been silenced, suppressed or distorted in the process. In contrast to the misleading and unattainable ideal of transcendent reason and a view from nowhere, feminists have argued that all knowledge is situated and limited by its positioning, that it reflects our social experience, our understandings of our interests, our values - that objectivity seen in terms of aperspectivity, of political and personal disengagement, of value-neutrality, is neither possible or desirable. Feminists have argued for the need for theorists to be aware of the historical, social and political context from which knowledge claims are made; to acknowledge and examine the conditioned and mediated nature of their knowledge; to resist assuming that how things appear/ are is natural or normal or given or inevitable; and to be wary of generalizing from their experience onto the lives of others.

However, there has been criticism of much feminist theory; from Black, 'third world', lesbian and other feminists; and women who don't identify with feminism, who feel that their knowledge and experience has been ignored, marginalized or silenced by a feminism that reflects only/largely the perspective of white, western, middle class, (heterosexual) women; that feminist theory itself indulges in the same false universalism, the same lack of critical awareness of its own situatedness, that it criticizes in Enlightenment theory. Instead of 'Man' we are now, it seems, presented with a generic 'woman'; a term like the universal 'man' or 'human' that hides or denies crucial differences in situation and experience, privilege and power - its contents based not on actual commonalities between people; but on the experiences and interests of some who have the position and ability to impose these terms and define what they mean for themselves and others.

Critics like Elizabeth Spelman¹ argue that white middle class feminists have taken their experiences as the norm, against which the experiences of other women, mediated by other class, race and cultural positionings, (if taken into consideration at all) are considered 'different'. Because they do not directly feel oppressed by structural inequalities like those of race and class, white middle class feminists are not aware how far their experience of being female is mediated by their being 'white' and 'middle class' etc - they tend to assume that all women have the

¹ See Spelman *Inessential Woman*

experiences they do, 'as women', with Black women, for instance, then experiencing the added disadvantage of being Black in a racist society. White middle class feminists do not pay sufficient attention to their own situatedness; to how their experiences and beliefs are structured by their social location; and they especially are not concerned enough with their own privilege - both in the way that it shapes and limits their thought, and in the way they participate in and benefit from, many structures of domination (while being oppressed by others).

Black critics have argued that "white mainstream feminist theory....does not speak to the experiences of Black women and where it attempts to do so it is often from a racist perspective and reasoning".² Mainstream feminism is racist and Eurocentric - its "problematics, concepts and assumptions"³ are those of (mostly white) westerners and do not have the same relevance, or indeed, are often contradictory to those of women in the majority of the world, or to Black women in the 'west'. It is not simply that white western women are speaking from a specific location - for everyone does - but that their location lies within nations that are internationally powerful and oppressive with respect to the rest of the world, and they are thus economically and politically privileged at the expense of women and men elsewhere, as well as in relation to Black

²Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar *Challenging Imperial Feminism* in *Feminist Review* No 17 July 1984

³Harding *Whose Science* p193

people within the west.

Nevertheless, white women have often made assumptions about "universal sisterhood" - "assumptions about women as a cross-culturally singular homogeneous group with the same interests, perspectives and goals and similar experiences."⁴ They have tended to understand their experience as theirs as 'women' (not as specifically white western etc women) and to assume that all women are women in the same way as they are, and share the same experiences, concerns etc. They have thus assumed that what is important, problematic, desirable or valid for them is so for all women everywhere. Thus it has not been considered necessary to test their understandings against those of other women who are located differently; for location (except in one's position as 'a woman') has not usually been considered significant against the supposed universality of women's interests - especially the question of one's *own* location vis a vis others.

Because of the tendency to see their own situation in terms of their being 'women' and their oppressors thus as 'male', white middle class feminists have often not been able to understand how many Black/ 'third world' women (while recognizing and resisting gendered oppressions) recognize men as allies in struggles against racism/ colonialism/ capitalism, and also regard white women as oppressors. Many white women have accepted a picture of 'men' in general being the 'baddies'; with them as the innocent

⁴Chandra Talpade Mohanty *Feminist Encounters: Locating the Politics of Experience* in Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips (eds) *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates* (Polity Press Cambridge 1992)

'victims', socially and politically powerless, and not responsible for the things 'men' have done and do. They thus almost see themselves as 'outside' history, society or economic structures, and do not regard themselves as complicit in, and accountable for, what they or their countrymen or governments etc have done.

They thus resist any acknowledgement of their own part, their own implication, in racism or colonialism or the exploitation of the 'third world'; or how much of what they take for granted as normal or necessary is based on, and in fact depends on, the oppression and subjugation and exploitation of others, (whether this be via cheap sweated labour producing their clothes or electronic goods, the destruction of environments and sustainable agricultures and economies in producing cash crops like their sugar or coffee, the testing of medicines or contraceptives on Black or third world people etc, etc).

Where white western women *do* consider the lives and experiences of Black or 'third world' women (and don't pick out the bits that confirm their existent beliefs and expectations) they then 'discover' them 'different' to their own supposed norm or normality - thus they might judge them lacking in (western conceptions of) feminist consciousness, or too conformist or unquestioning of things western women reject or resist. Perhaps they seem to them unusually unfortunate, lacking resources or services western women enjoy as usual, or suffering misfortunes or problems western women usually escape. Or in contrast, they might idealize 'foreign', different women, considering them exotic and

colourful and interesting; in tune with 'nature', or whatever. Whatever the case, 'other' women and cultures are seen in static, stereotyped and homogeneous ways - the passive, oppressed Asian woman, the strong dominant Afro-Caribbean woman⁵ etc - stereotypes which do not acknowledge the reality and complexity of women's lives, the changing 'nature' and diversity within cultures. And in each case, their difference serves to separate them, so that when it is acknowledged it is often merely mentioned, listed, tagged on in an afterthought or addendum or interesting aside - what is not done is to explore how the experience of white and 'other' women are *related*.

When Black women/ feminists accuse white feminists of racism, their charge is not that white women are speaking from a 'racially' specific position; but that they fail to acknowledge both that position (and its significance for their experience and thought) and that it *is* in relationship, and crucially a *power* relationship, with that of Black women. White women often see racism as a matter of individual attitude or prejudice, rather than it being a social structure or political relationship in which all, Black or white, are involved; and so sometimes believe that those who do not share or express 'prejudiced' beliefs are not implicated in racism. Black women argue that white women have to acknowledge the significance and privilege of their own racial location, and must also "acknowledge the material basis of their power in relation to Black people, both women

⁵ See Amos and Parmar p9.

and men".⁶ They must recognize that their 'interests' are not necessarily shared by Black women as they have supposed; and indeed have often been those of white men, or colonialism or the capitalist west. They must especially cease denying the reality of Black women's lives, by telling them what their needs and problems and priorities really are, and recognize that Black women have common interests and cause with Black men.

Valerie Amos and Prahitba Parmar argue that the priorities of white feminists have been those "issues which in the main have contributed to an improvement in the material situation of a small number of white middle class women often at the expense of their Black and working class 'sisters'"⁷ - that there has been little recognition of "the ways in which gains made by white women have been and still are at the expense of Black women",⁸ and "the fundamental ways in which white women have benefitted from the oppression of Black people".⁹ They and Kum Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson point to the legacy of racism and eugenicism in the Birth Control movements,¹⁰ the imperialist nationalism of the suffragette movement,¹¹ the failure of

⁶ Kum Kum Bhavnani and Margaret Coulson *Transforming Socialist Feminism: The Challenge of Racism in Feminist Review* 23 June 1986

⁷ Amos and Parmar p4

⁸ Ibid p5

⁹ Ibid p5

¹⁰ Amos and Parmar p13, Bhavnani and Coulson p82.

¹¹ Bhavnani and Coulson p82.

anti-rape campaigns to challenge racist stereotypes of Black male sexuality and the way they played into racist and fascist hands by routeing 'Reclaim the Night' marches through Black areas.¹²

Our presents are not only different, but are related, as are our pasts, our histories, and neither can be considered or evaluated in isolation. Differences of location can result in women facing quite different yet related experiences and concerns - a classic example being that while white middle class women have been struggling to gain freer and safer access to contraception and abortion, Black women have often had to struggle to have the children they want against enforced sterilization or administration of Depo Provera, or doctors who are only too eager to provide abortion for women they consider 'unfit' or 'undesirable' for various reasons. It has to a large part been the experiences and struggles of Black and 'Third World' women, that has led to the change in focus to *Reproductive* rights

¹²Bhavnani and Coulson p82, Amos and Parmar p14

from the narrower campaign for Abortion rights.¹³

This last example perhaps points in the right direction. For as Amos and Parmar say, the problem has not simply been the 'absence' of Black women from white feminist theory, and thus the answer is not merely one of "rendering them visible". The "process of accounting for the historical and contemporary position" of Black women challenges "some of the central categories and assumptions" of mainstream feminist thought,¹⁴ and responding to that challenge will require a revision and reworking of that thought. Black women do not want to be "added on" to (the margins) of white feminist theory, but taken "*centrally*" to their analyses, in such a way that they both inform and transform it.¹⁵

¹³This is one example of something that white women often experience as uniquely 'patriarchal' oppression, an oppression they experience as 'women'. But as Marilyn Frye points out - what she calls "the pressures of compulsory motherhood" (see Marilyn Frye *On Being White: Thinking Toward a Feminist Understanding of Race and Race Supremacy* in her *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (The Crossing Press Trumansburg N.Y. 1983) p123) are applied to them as *white* women and are not only "pressures to keep women down, but pressure to keep the white population up", (something that is not immediately visible from their own experience, but only when they attend to the experiences of Black women. Doing so not only forces revision of their understanding of 'gendered' oppression: - while the forces operant do work to prevent or undermine 'women's' choice and control over their own bodies and fertility, the pressures are *not* simply for (all) women to have children, or that resources/ practices that make possible the delaying/ preventing or terminating of pregnancies be restricted; for it matters crucially what 'kind' of woman you are (in terms of race, class, sexuality, age etc) how these pressures and resources are applied or denied - it also forces recognition of one's own location, not just as a 'woman', but as a white 'middle class' heterosexual woman, or whatever.

¹⁴Amos and Parmar p4.

¹⁵See Bhavnani and Coulson p83

Alongside these critiques that argue that mainstream feminist theory excludes, or does not take seriously, differences of race, class, religion, sexual orientation, age, ability etc; and partly in response to them, there has been within 'white middle class' feminism itself a growing wariness and opposition to 'essentialism' and universalism. Assumptions about human or female nature or the conditions of social life made by some earlier feminist writers have been criticized or rejected; there is no longer an emphasis on mono-causal explanations of the oppression of women, and a distrust of theories that posit universal social factors like a nature/ culture or public/ private split, or a cross-cultural similarity of practices or division of labour to explain women's subordinate positions. Theories like these are seen as falsely generalizing and insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity. From 'postmodern' theory has also come a call to reject universalism, essentialism and foundationalism - both because theoretically inadequate (even illegitimate?) but also because of a vaguely and abstractly expressed ethical concern that such theory is 'totalizing', 'exclusionary' and "suppressive of difference" in general.¹⁶

In the light of these criticisms some feminists have recently argued for a feminist postmodernism or postmodern

¹⁶In contrast to the specific claims of, for instance, Black or lesbian feminists that much feminist theory excludes, distorts or doesn't take proper account of *their* knowledge and experience; and therefore *misunderstands*, not only them in their 'difference', but crucially itself and its makers (see later).

feminism;¹⁷ arguing variously that feminism should consciously become postmodern, rejecting its remaining humanist/Enlightenment based presumptions; or that we should somehow combine or integrate the strengths of feminist and postmodern theory, which are seen as ideally complementary, capable of correcting each others' weaknesses (the respective weaknesses being seen, as Fraser and Nicholson put it, as "androcentrism", "political naivete" and "anaemic conceptions of social criticism" on the part of postmodernism, with feminist theory having a tendency to lapse into foundationalism and essentialism.)¹⁸ As Linda Nicholson says "there are many points of overlap between a postmodern stance and positions long held by feminists".¹⁹ Besides appearing to perhaps be "a natural ally" against a common foe, postmodernism, she says, "offers feminism some useful ideas about method, particularly a wariness towards generalizations which transcend the boundaries of culture and region".²⁰

This concern with the difficulties of theorizing in the face of difference and complexity is one of the main grounds upon which she argues that feminism should become more

¹⁷ See e.g. Hekman, Fraser and Nicholson, Nicholson (*Introduction*), Chris Weedon *Feminist Practice and Post-structuralist Theory* (Basil Blackwell Oxford 1987). (Although Weedon argues specifically for a 'poststructuralist' feminism, the area of theory she refers to is roughly the same as that of those who argue for a 'postmodernist' one.)

¹⁸ See Fraser and Nicholson pp19,20.

¹⁹ Nicholson (*Introduction*) p5.

²⁰ Ibid p5.

postmodern or incorporate postmodern insights. It is also the main concern that I am addressing in relation to postmodernism - that of responding to the challenge of difference - (and, in contrast to Nicholson, one of the main reasons for my rejection of it.)²¹ There are obviously other areas of concern or contention, especially those of the postmodern conception of the subject and of lived experience, which bear heavily on topics I am investigating, particularly as they relate to a neglect/ denial/ inadequate understanding of 'position' or situatedness (which again

²¹Nicholson's (hers and Fraser's) actual position is not so very far from my own, and indeed one I would largely accept. Her/ their acceptance of postmodernism is "qualified"(p5), and though they "hope to encourage feminist theory to become more consistently postmodern" (p34) not "any form of postmodernism" will do - e.g. *not* the version developed by Lyotard, which they criticize in their paper. They argue that postmodernism "*need not*" (foreswear all large-scale social analyses) or "*could*" (avoid a celebration of difference for its own sake) or that it "*would not be difficult*" (for postmodernists to situate their claims historically) etc (pp9,10) [my emphases] so that it seems that their postmodernism is a *project*, something not yet existent, but to be created in relation to feminist theory and its critiques. While such a postmodernism would be quite acceptable to me, I'm not sure if such a theory would be specifically 'postmodern'. It seems to me that what Nicholson and Fraser are really talking about is non-essentialist, non-foundationalist theory; which is not necessarily the same thing as postmodernism. Postmodernism might be anti-essentialist and non-foundationalist, but then so are many other theories, and not all such theories are 'postmodern'. It is important to preserve the distinction, as postmodernism includes elements beyond those focused on by Nicholson and Fraser, which militate against its usefulness to feminists or other subordinated groups. Halberg also seems to equate postmodernism with anti-foundationalism (see Halberg p4). Hawkesworth, in reply to Hekman's critique of her *Knowers, Knowing, Known* argues that Hekman too conflates anti-foundationalism with postmodernism, so that what is anti-foundational must be postmodern. (p422) She too points out that "all postmodernists may be anti-foundational, but all anti-foundationalists are by no means postmodern".

feeds into the whole question of difference) but I can't go into them in any detail here. Suffice it to emphasize that this concern I am attempting to address here, is one of vital political/ ethical importance to feminists, and not just a question of theoretical 'correctness' or 'up-to-dateness'.

I am using the term 'postmodern' or 'postmodernism' (as I do 'feminist' and 'Enlightenment' etc) in a very general and inclusive sense; in response, largely, to the way the term is used by many of those arguing for (or against) a postmodern feminism - as a pointer to a certain way of theorizing; that whatever the differences between theorists termed by themselves or others as 'Postmodern',²² has some distinctive features in contrast to traditional Enlightenment theory, especially Enlightenment Humanism, which it

²²Under the term 'postmodern' I include such theorists as Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault and Derrida. I make a distinction between 'Postmodernism' and 'Poststructuralism', though often the terms are used almost inter-changeably; and indeed, it is difficult to divide the two neatly down the middle as they have many common features and common influences; but for now I wish to preserve 'poststructuralism' for those theorists whose work is influenced by, or takes as its critical point of departure anti-humanist structuralist Marxism and anthropology, the structural linguistics of Saussure and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Derrida (and Foucault) would thus also be poststructuralists, Rorty would very definitely not be. Obviously there are big differences between the theorists here classified as postmodern; but this does not obscure their commonalities, which are sufficient to see them as representative of a particular kind of approach, especially in contrast to the 'traditional' theory they all criticize. I am not going to concentrate on individual theorists' positions on various matters, but rather present an account informed by a consideration of what appears significant about them generally - so what I say will not be true, entirely, of any one theorist, and might apply to some more than others.

takes as a negative point of reference. Postmodern theory has many aspects: here I will concern myself only with those relating directly to the questions of universalism, essentialism and 'difference'. Postmodernism criticizes Enlightenment humanist thinking for "its search for a foundation for knowledge" and "its universalizing and totalizing claims", for its failure to recognize all knowledge as partial, perspectival, "historically and linguistically mediated."²³ It rejects ideas of unity, identity and homogeneity - pointing to "the partial and excluding quality of the supposedly inclusive 'we' of much humanist discourse".²⁴ Instead it offers a "theoretical celebration of difference",²⁵ of partiality and plurality. It opposes the search for coherence and closure, the desire for 'the right answer', for simplified, stable (or dialectical) wholes; and argues instead for the continuation of 'conversation' (conversation, unlike the search for 'truth' being non-teleological, having no end, and not aiming at "a single, stable, representation of reality"²⁶). Postmodernism resists attempts at finding sameness and commonality, and opposes

²³ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Macmillan London 1991) p4.

²⁴ Kate Soper *Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism in Radical Philosophy* 55 Summer 1990 p11. (Yet as Soper points out why are/ should 'we' (or anti-humanists) "be concerned about the exclusionary quality/ effects of humanist discourse, except on some sort of inclusionary humanistic criteria". Kate Soper *Constructa Ergo Sum* Chapter 6 in *Troubled Pleasures: Writings on Politics, Gender and Hedonism* (Verso London 1990) p149

²⁵ Soper *Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism* p11

²⁶ Sabina Lovibond *Feminism and Postmodernism* p7

the ideal of consensus, with its aim of eliminating conflict through gradual convergence to one point of view - the aspiration to 'Truth' being seen as inevitably leading to the suppression of diversity, difference²⁷ and individuality, through insistence on conformity and homogeneity.

Postmodern theory rejects modern assumptions of social coherence and notions of causality and continuity in favour of "multiplicity, fragmentation and indeterminacy".²⁸ History is conceived of as "a non-evolutionary fragmented field of disconnected knowledges";²⁹ power as diffuse, dispersed, subjectless and anonymous; though productive - constitutive of bodies and identities.³⁰ Postmodernism rejects general diagnoses, grand theory, all 'synthesising' discourse, holistic social analyses or those that explain in terms of macrostructures, transhistorical or transcultural factors, as 'totalizing' or 'terrorizing' - arguing instead for a 'plurality', a 'patchwork' of non-unifiable microanalyses, and a micropolitics that valorizes the local and particular in critique and resistance³¹ as an antidote to repressive modern theorizing, the "tyranny of globalizing discourses". All knowledge/ discourse is power because "the rules determining discourse enforce norms of what is

²⁷ Ibid see p8.

²⁸ Best and Kellner p57

²⁹ Ibid p39.

³⁰ Ibid p49.

³¹ 'Resistance is emphasized as against the Enlightenment appeal to emancipation/ liberation; and especially the connections supposed between 'Reason', 'Freedom' and 'Truth' within that tradition.

rational, sane or true,- and to speak from outside these rules is to risk marginalization and exclusion.³²

Postmodernists go "beyond earlier historicist claims about the inevitable 'situatedness' of human thought within culture to focus on the very criteria by which claims to knowledge are legitimized", claiming that the criteria "demarking the true and the false... were internal to the traditions of modernity and could not be legitimated outside of these traditions".³³ Discourses/ language games etc cannot be assessed/ subjected to critique from without, but can rather be subverted, destabilized or undermined from within. There is no "overarching language game, no privileged discourse, no general theory.... within which struggles between different language games could be adjudicated".³⁴ Justification and legitimation are social/ political *practices* and are always context- and (internally) rule-dependent. All discourses "are local, heterogeneous and incommensurable. No non-discourse dependent or transcendental rules exist that could govern all discourses or a choice between them. Truth claims are in principle 'undecidable'".³⁵ "According to Lyotard, any attempt to seek the Truth, rather than play within a circumscribed language game entails an obligation to "legitimate the rules" of the

³² Ibid p57.

³³ Nicolson (*Introduction*) p3/4.

³⁴ Best and Kellner p163

³⁵ Jane Flax *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (University of California Press Berkeley 1990) p36

game. All language games generate their own rules about how to play, what counts as a successful move, and so forth. But by definition these rules are context dependent and valid only within a particular game. Games and their rules are incommensurable. Hence "any more general truth claims would have to be made by constructing a meta'discourse' that has the appearance of universality and neutrality".³⁶

The discourses of the enlightenment are seen to appeal for legitimation to metanarratives, such as the march of progress, the dialectics of history or the search for Truth, to justify their practices. Postmodernism (defined by Lyotard as "incredulity towards metanarratives"³⁷) rejects this appeal to grand schemas of legitimation in favour of the pragmatic construction of local rules and criteria by participants. 'Truth', thus, is not seen as in Enlightenment discourse as universal and independent of context and contingent historical practices, but as internal to a language game - that which is produced by adhering to its rules. Utilization of meta-discourse to adjudicate disputes between language games/ practices is seen as oppressive, exclusionary and delegitimizing of marginal/ subordinate discourses. Instead of suppressing difference through attempts to find commensurability and sameness, difference should be accepted as inevitable; articulated and tolerated.

Given that feminists are concerned with problems of

³⁶ Ibid p202.

³⁷ Jean François Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Manchester University Press Manchester 1984) pxxiv

essentialism and universalism; with making false assumptions and generalizations from their own (limited and partial) perspectives; with marginalizing, excluding or denying the perspectives of others - it is understandable that postmodern theory, with its wariness of theory that transcends the boundaries of place and practice, with its emphasis on partiality and heterogeneity, with its apparent attention to, and respect for, 'difference'; should be an attractive approach to adopt or espouse. What I want to argue, however, is that this is mistaken - that despite certain similarities between feminist and postmodernist critiques of Enlightenment/ androcentric thought, despite and apparently common opposition to many of its central categories and methods - feminism and postmodernism come from very different perspectives, with different reasons, interests and objectives in making their critiques of Enlightenment thought. The common aims are superficial only - they might use similar terms, but *why* they use them; what they *mean* by difference, location, situatedness etc, are very different, and not compatible. Taking up a postmodern approach to 'difference', far from assisting feminists to engage seriously with the challenge it offers, and thus to revise and improve its theories in the light of it; would be to do just the opposite - it seems to me that a postmodern 'acknowledgement' of difference is in fact a way of evading it, and the threat it poses to dominant ways of seeing the

world.³⁸

³⁸ See Nancy Hartsock's *Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* for a similar claim that despite "their apparent congruence with [her project of a feminist understanding of the world that is sensitive to difference (p158)] postmodern theories would "hinder rather than help its accomplishment". (159) She says, "For those of us who want to understand the world systematically in order to change it, postmodern theories at their best give little guidance... At worst [they] can recapitulate the effects of Enlightenment theories" (p159) and represent "a dangerous approach for any marginalized group to adopt" (p160).

POSTMODERNISM AND DIFFERENCEb) Relation

When feminists pointed out that the purportedly universal categories of Enlightenment thought were not universal at all, but based on a false generalization from, and naturalization of, the experience of (some) men; they pointed out that their experience was very different to that described in these theories. However, they were not *simply* claiming difference (after all, they hardly had to do that - as women they had been defined and constructed as different (to the male 'norm') all along: any inclusion of them in 'universal' categories being largely in name only, and at the terms of ruling men.) Nor were they *simply* arguing that their different experience or perspective should be acknowledged and heard along with the dominant 'male' perspective; *nor* only that that perspective should be acknowledged as merely applicable to men (of a certain social position). Even if many feminists *began* by making these points it soon became clear that dominant theories and categories were inadequate not simply in universalizing beyond their scope, i.e. that they were partial in the sense of being limited, not universally applicable; but that they were also ideological and distorted; in short to a greater or lesser extent false. The different perspective of women could not just be *added* - attempts to 'add' women to liberal or Marxist

theory, for instance, showed up gaps, inconsistencies and contradictions in these theories that exposed them as inadequate; at the very least in need of radical revision and transformation. The assertion of feminist 'difference' was and is, basically a challenge and a critique.¹

And that is how, I think, feminists should regard the claims of 'difference' between women. As I understand it, it is not *simply* that 'other' women want to be recognized as different from white, western middle class women (especially as when white western women *do* consider the experiences of other women (when not assuming them to be similar) it is often as 'different' to their presumed 'norm' and often so in stereotyped or racist ways.² Nor is the argument *simply* that different experiences or perspectives should be heard or acknowledged in 'mainstream' feminist theory. While they should obviously not be excluded or suppressed, the crucial

¹Consider, for example, the liberal notion of the autonomous, self-seeking individual; rationally and freely choosing his life-path. If this notion seemed very hard to reconcile with the experience and realities of many women's lives, the recognition of this disjunction between dominant theory and lived experience did not remain at the level of an assertion of difference (i.e. 'we women are different' or 'its different for us') or the claim that liberal theory only applied adequately to (ruling) men and that women's lives were, in contrast shaped by relationships, responsibilities, constraint and dependencies. Even if these moves were made, a consideration of these differences, *and the links between them*, the processes creating and connecting them, soon demonstrated that liberal theory was inadequate even as a description of the reality of ruling men's lives, as it took for granted, obscured or denied, their *own* radical dependence on (and exploitation of) others. Attending to female (or indeed working class men's) 'difference' thus called for a critical examination and revision of the dominant theory.

²See e.g. Amos and Parmar p9.

question is *how* these different perspectives are to be included - will they merely be 'tolerated', or treated as interesting or 'exotic', but largely irrelevant asides; explained away in terms that preserve the truth of the privileged theory - or will they be taken *seriously*; as Bhavnani and Coulson say, "centrally", in a way that *transforms* white feminist analysis?³ Elizabeth Spelman argues that it is not sufficient to "add more stories" of "different" women "without saying anything about how the significance of the new additions will be assessed"⁴ - i.e. whether 'mainstream' feminist theory is prepared to *change* in *response* to them.⁵ Women critical of, or excluded by, a white western, middle class or whatever perspective are not just offering their 'difference' to be acknowledged, but a *challenge*. To repeat Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar's argument, the inability of 'contemporary' (mid 1980's) feminist theory "to adequately account for the experience of Black Women...is not a simple question of their absence, consequently the task is not one of rendering their visibility. On the contrary [they argue]... that the process of accounting for their historical and contemporary position, does, in itself, challenge the use of some of the central

³See Bhavnani and Coulson p83

⁴Spelman p163

⁵She says if "the feminist attempt to deal with 'difference' means simply the attempt to include the lives and concerns of some women without seriously challenging white middle class privilege, then all the talk in the world about difference is simply disingenuous. Tolerance is easy if those who are asked to express it needn't change a whit." (p183)

categories and assumptions of mainstream feminist thought".⁶

As I see it, Black women are not *only* claiming that much feminist theory is based on false generalizations from the experience of certain women with a certain structural and historical position in the world, and thus that it has a far more limited applicability than claimed. This is perhaps true; but it could imply that all we have to do is declare our limitedness and situatedness, and leave space for others to offer their own equally limited and situated perspectives - I have my white western etc view of the world and you have yours. Perhaps this might be better than making sweeping and false generalizations, but it is not enough an its own; for it basically leaves my perspective intact and unthreatened, though more limited in applicability than before. But if I am really to take other's experiences seriously, as I think Black feminist and other critics intend; I have to ask what it means for my understanding of my *own* experience, how the two are related. I have to recognize not just that their experience is different, is mediated and structured by racism, for instance, but that mine is too, in related but different ways that might not be directly or immediately visible to me; and that my understanding of my experience, how things seem to me, may not be adequate or sufficient - that I may indeed be *wrong* about it. I have to accept that others are offering their different experience at least partly in *critique* of my understanding of the world, and that I might have to change or revise my theories and

⁶Amos and Parmar p4.

understandings in the light of it. And it is this, I think, that a postmodernist 'acceptance' of difference escapes, or actually doesn't allow.

To repeat Sandra Harding's point⁷ - there are 'mere' differences, differences of simple diversity such as might be manifested in (some of) the differences of culture and experience between say, Puerto Rican and Mexican women; and there are differences, such as those between 'white' and 'Black', or 'western' and 'third World' women which are not those simply of diversity and multiplicity, but are *relations*, products of the same "structures of domination" that create both situations and sets of experience. And as she says, we need theories of knowledge that recognize the difference. A postmodern "tolerance/ celebration" of difference *might*⁸ be adequate in the first of these senses, but it definitely cannot deal adequately with the second; and it is the second kind to which white western feminist theory has to respond (and which postmodern theory refuses to address.) As Frederic Jameson says, postmodern "pluralism" "envelops and illicitly identifies two distinct dimensions of social complexity. There is the vertical dimension of late capitalist or corporate institutions, and then the horizontal one of increasingly multiple social groups. Celebrations of pluralism pass off the first under the guise of the

⁷ In *Feminism, Science and the Anti-Enlightenment Critiques* p59

⁸ I say *might* because I think a postmodern conception of difference and situation is insufficiently 'materialist', and relational, which prevents it from being sufficiently reflexive and therefore from maximally realizing the insights even 'mere' difference can provide/ produce.

second".⁹

The relations that the (for e.g. Black feminist) challenge of difference forces us to confront are those of power. As many of those who responded to Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh's article *Ethnocentrism and Socialist Feminist Theory*¹⁰ pointed out;¹¹ it is not specifically or only *ethnocentrism*, (i.e. speaking from a culturally specific location)¹² that Black feminists are accusing white feminists of - an (inevitable) perspectivity, which could and should however to some extent be ameliorated by "extending the field of vision";¹³ but *racism*, which is a relation of privilege and oppression. To focus on the former, when it is the second that is being charged, is to "depoliticise the issues".¹⁴ It is not *just* that we (all) happen to be speaking from specific sites - for we could, (in theory) be doing so and yet have no differences of power and privilege between us. The charge is, however, that we are in these

⁹ Jameson *History and Class Consciousness* p69

¹⁰ See Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh *Ethnocentrism and Socialist Feminist Theory* in *Feminist Review* no 20, June 1985.

¹¹ See e.g. responses by Caroline Ramazanoglu and Hamida Kazi in *Feminist Review* no 22 Feb 1986; Also Bhavnani and Coulson *Transforming Socialist Feminism*

¹² Barrett and McIntosh say "we do accept the central point made against white feminists such as ourselves - that our work has spoken from an unacknowledged but ethnically specific position; its apparent universal applicability has been specious" (p25) - though they do also argue for a recognition of 'race' and 'racism' as opposed to a focus on ethnicity (pp26-28)

¹³ See Ramazanoglu p84

¹⁴ Kazi p89

relations of power; and that in pretending that we are all similar, or that we are all merely different we "evade challenge, or take it up in a very limited, or even politically reactionary way."¹⁵

Concentrating on power means keeping in mind that it is a relation, that our different experiences and perspectives are mutually implicated, part of the same processes that structure our lives in related but different ways depending on how we are situated along various axes of political and economic power. Seeing such difference as relational requires not seeing one manifestation as unproblematic and autonomous, as (however historically and contingently) given, with the other as merely unsimilar in comparison; but seeing the two as *connected*. To take an analogy from development theory, it requires not seeing the 'west' as 'developed', as though it developed all on its own through its own best efforts or capacities, or simply good fortune or chance; with the 'Third World' as 'undeveloped' in comparison, as simply the way it is/ was, or come to be; but seeing the two as inter-related and inter-dependent, with the 'West' dependent on the 'Third World' - its 'development' being *simultaneously* the *undevelopment* and exploitation of the 'Third World'; such that the one cannot adequately be understood (or changed) except in relation to the other. To simply see the 'west' as 'developed' and the 'Third World' as less or not developed, and to only notice the difference, is to completely (and wilfully) misunder-

¹⁵Bhavnani and Coulson p82

stand them. One cannot understand the 'west' simply in its own terms, its own self-centered version of history and events; but must rather explore its relations, its dependencies, suppressions, exclusions.¹⁶

And to do this we need to utilize large-scale structural and historical analyses of social and economic systems, and concepts and categories that deal with relations like gender, race, class and so on. Of course, what is meant and involved by any such categories in any particular situation must be specified in relation to that particular context, and cannot be assumed to apply universally and unproblematically outside of any concrete use; but that does not mean that such categories and ways of thinking aren't useful, or indeed, necessary, in coming to understand not only the larger context, but the specific and local one. To appeal to such categories or systematic analyses is not to argue that the particular, the small-scale, or even the personal is not important, or can be ignored; but that they can only be adequately understood in relation to the wider context that shapes and supports them. We should, for instance, obviously respect and pay attention to, cultural and historical diversity and specificity; but this does not mean abandoning all cross-cultural or trans-historical categories. Instead taking other people/ cultures/ eras seriously often demands paying attention to how they are

¹⁶Edward Said (in *Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors* in *Cultural Inquiry* Vol 15 1989) p223 describes the whole point of Fanon's work as being "to force the European metropolis to think its history together with the history of colonies..."

related and situated with respect to others, how they are inserted within wider economic systems or historical trends, and so on.

I cannot see how you could understand the position and experiences of, say, a small scale coffee grower in Tanzania, or, crucially, 'ourselves' here in the west (including our consumption of coffee) unless you could situate each within the wider political, social and historical context in which it is located, and thus see how they are mutually dependent and inter-related. This is both because what happens at the individual or local level is the way it is because of structural and institutional processes operating at the wider societal or even global level, and also because the operation of such structures is often not visible at the local or individual level, or if so only in a limited and distorted way. As Dorothy Smith says, the "structures that underlie or generate the characteristics of our directly experienced world are social structures and bring us into unseen relations with others".¹⁷ "It is not possible to account for one's directly experienced world *or how it is related to the worlds which others directly experience* who are differently placed by remaining within the boundaries of the former"¹⁸ (my emphasis). "To account... for the relation between the two experiences (or more) and the two positions from which these experiences begin involves positing a total socio-economic order "in back" of that moment... Further how

¹⁷ Smith *Women's Perspective* p95

¹⁸ Ibid p94

our knowledge of the world is mediated to us becomes a problem. It is a problem in knowing how that world is organized for us prior to our participation as knowers in that process... Accounting for that mode of knowing and the social organization which sets it up for us again leads us back into an analysis of the total socio-economic order of which it is part".¹⁹ Attending to the 'local' requires 'going beyond' it, seeing it in relation and context.

Yet the postmodern denouncement of 'totalizing' theory (especially by Lyotard and Foucault) seems, as Kate Soper says "to rule out any holistic analyses of societies" of the kind that for example "allows us to define them as 'capitalist' or 'patriarchal'".²⁰ This is a charge commonly made by critics of postmodernism, yet it is also acknowledged by some advocates of a postmodern feminism, like Fraser and Nicholson, who argue that Lyotard's position, which they describe as "genuinely exemplary of the larger tendency" of postmodernism,²¹ does not "permit an adequate critical grasp of gender dominance and subordination".²² There is, they say, "no place in Lyotard's universe for critique of pervasive axes of stratification, for critique of broad-based relations of dominance and subordination along lines like gender, race and class."²³ His

¹⁹ Ibid p94

²⁰ Soper *Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism* p14

²¹ Fraser and Nicholson p21

²² Ibid p20

²³ Ibid p23

position precludes "identification and critique of macro-structures of inequality and injustice which cut across the boundaries separating relatively discrete practices and institutions",²⁴ ruling illegitimate "large scale historical narrative and social-theoretical analysis."²⁵ Lyotard's (and much of postmodernism's) target is in large part Marxism, which is seen as too totalizing and all-encompassing a discourse, occlusive of the "diversity and plurality of human practices"²⁶ and "societal differences and oppositions".²⁷ This may indeed be true, but this critique is not accompanied by an attempt at a "better social theory. Rather... the project of social theory [is rejected] *tout court*".²⁸

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner argue that postmodernists fail to distinguish between kinds of macrotheories or "master narratives" - seeing them all as simplistic, reductionist, totalizing and terroristic.²⁹ Yet in lumping them all together they themselves "do violence" to their diversity, and contradict their evocation of plurality by excluding grand narratives from play.³⁰ As they and Fraser and Nicholson point out, despite the "strictures against large

²⁴ Ibid p23

²⁵ Ibid p25

²⁶ Ibid p23

²⁷ Ibid p24

²⁸ Ibid p24

²⁹ Best and Kellner pp72 and 172

³⁰ Ibid pp72 and 172

totalizing stories" Lyotard (and other postmodernists) narrate fairly tall tales about large scale social trends themselves,³¹ and condemn or recommend certain ways of conceptualizing or theorizing in very general, undifferentiated and unlocated ways³² (see next chapter). Linda Nicholson argues that "postmodernism need not demand the elimination of all big theory... to avoid totalization and essentialism".³³ Indeed, whatever they 'demand', postmodernists do not avoid "all big theory" - what they do attempt to avoid is precisely the type of theory Fraser and Nicholson argue that we need if we are to grasp "phenomena as pervasive and multifaceted as male dominance" i.e. large historical narratives, "empirical and social-theoretical analyses of macrostructures and institutions"³⁴ which are explicitly historically situated and attuned to the cultural specificity of different societies and periods as well as those of different groups within them.³⁵ (This, of course, as well as attention to the local and the micropolitics of everyday life.)

It is the *structural*, the *relational* and the *systematically* unequal or oppressive that drops out of postmodern

³¹ Fraser and Nicholson p25

³² See Best and Kellner pp171-3

³³ Nicholson *Introduction* p9

³⁴ Fraser and Nicholson p25

³⁵ Ibid p34

theory.³⁶ This emerges again in Foucault's presentation of power as somehow impersonal and anonymous, as Best and Kellner say, "exercised apart from the actions and intentions of human subjects."³⁷ This "brackets the question of who controls and uses power for which interests to focus on the means by which it operates."³⁸ Whatever the insights made possible by this approach, "it occludes the extent to which power is... administered by specific and identifiable agents in positions of economic and political power".³⁹ Nancy Hartsock argues that Foucault writes from the perspective of the "colonizer" (in analogy with Albert Memmi's description of the relation between *The Colonizer and the Colonized*),⁴⁰ the dominator, the "self proclaimed majority" and that "perhaps in part because power relations are less visible to those who are in [that] position... systematically unequal relations of power ultimately vanish from [his] account of power"⁴¹ so that the "whole thing comes to

³⁶ Seyla Benhabib says "the difficulty with political pluralism old and new" (she describes the political position that follows from an epistemology like Lyotard's as a neo-liberal interest group pluralism) "is the neglect of *structural* sources of inequality influence, resource and power among competing groups" (*Epistemologies of Postmodernism: a Rejoinder to Jean-François Lyotard* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* pp122,123)

³⁷ Best and Kellner p70

³⁸ Ibid p70

³⁹ Ibid p70

⁴⁰ See Albert Memmi *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (Beacon Press Boston 1965)

⁴¹ Hartsock *Foucault on Power* p165

look very homogeneous".⁴² But, as Sabina Lovibond says "if there can be no systematic political approach to questions of wealth, power and labour, how can there be any effective challenge to a social order which distributes its benefits and burdens in a systematically unequal way..."⁴³ Rorty, for one, says he is less sure than Fraser and Nicholson "about the need for, and utility of, 'social-theoretical analyses of large scale inequalities'" because he is "less sure than Fraser about the possibility that the basic institutional framework of [our] [his brackets] society could be unjust"!! and hence about "the utility of a theory that could specify links among apparently discrete social problems via the

⁴² Ibid p170

⁴³ Lovibond p22

basic institutional structure."⁴⁴

As opposed to this, Frederic Jameson, (who is a Marxist theorist of the postmodern) argues that we do need something like a Lukàcsian theory of totality - "totality" not in terms of a theory that purports to explain everything, but "a framework in which various kinds of knowledge are positioned, pursued and evaluated" - a collective project rather than an individual one.⁴⁵ In this sense then "totalization" far from implying 'terror' or even

⁴⁴Richard Rorty *Feminism and Pragmatism in Radical Philosophy* 59 (Autumn 1991) p11. He says that unlike Fraser, he does not see "attractive alternatives (more or less Marxist in shape) to such institutions as private ownership of the means of production and constitutional democracy" (p11).

He also claims that Sabina Lovibond, in her critique of postmodernism, is "committed to universalism" in that she sees inequality as bad as *such*. Rorty says he hopes feminists will drop universalism, which he sees as involving "dropping the notion that the subordination of women is *intrinsically* abominable" (p5). Yet he later (p14) says that "pragmatists" (he is a self-proclaimed pragmatist) "should agree with everyone else that "slavery is absolutely wrong" has always been true - even in periods when this sentence would have sounded crazy to everybody concerned... All that pragmatists need" he says "is the claim that this sentence is not *made* true by something other than the beliefs which we would use to support it - and, in particular, not by something like the True Nature of Human Beings."

Rorty's favourite feminist statements are ones that say things like "we are not attempting to be objective about it...", that "can be read as" saying that "the voice in which women will some day speak" would *not* "be better at representing reality than present-day masculinist discourse" (p5).

⁴⁵Jameson *History and Class Consciousness* p60

'totalitarianism'⁴⁶ "means nothing more forbidding than alliance politics"⁴⁷ - yet an alliance politics built on *substantive* bases, sought as a result of theorizing that can contextualize, make connections, investigate interrelationships, as well as attend to difference. Jameson argues that "[d]ifference itself cannot be genuinely understood outside a relational and systemic context" and that "a totalizing analysis is necessary to map the homogenizing and systemic effects of capitalism itself".⁴⁸ Emphasis on "difference, particularity and homogeneity" can both reify "singularly and specificity" and divert attention "away from the tendencies of Capitalism toward sameness, uniformity and generality, such as are expressed in mass production and consumption, propaganda, mass media, social conformity, and global market relations."⁴⁹

The real issue, he says, is that "of constructing a sufficiently sophisticated framework which can map the full complexity of cultural texts and social practices in a non-reductive way".⁵⁰ Jameson argues for what he calls an

⁴⁶ Jameson resists any collapsing of the "philosophical concept of totality" into "totalitarianism" - see his *Cognitive Mapping* in Cary Nelson and Laurence Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press Chicago 1988) p354. (He sees dissatisfaction with the concept of totality as a "*symptom*, a function of the increasing difficulties" of thinking interrelationships in a postmodern space) (p356).

⁴⁷ Jameson *History and Class Consciousness* p62

⁴⁸ Best and Kellner p187

⁴⁹ Ibid p187

⁵⁰ Ibid p187

aesthetics of "cognitive mapping".⁵¹ He sees, since the period of Monopoly/ Imperialist Capitalism, "a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure, or between a phenomenological description of the life of an individual and a more properly structural model of the conditions of existence of the experience",⁵² with the two drifting "ever more farther apart" - the phenomenological experience of the individual limited to a tiny corner of the social world e.g. "a certain section of London" but "the truth of that experience no longer [coinciding] with the place in which it takes place" but lying "rather, in India, or Jamaica or Hong Kong... bound up with the whole colonial system of the British Empire that determines the very quality of the individual's subjective life. Yet those structural co-ordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are not even conceptualizable for most people."⁵³ Jameson sees this as leading to an aesthetic

⁵¹ See Jameson *Cognitive Mapping* p347 on.

("Aesthetics" because the paper was presented at a conference on "Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture" - where, he says, he frequently felt that he was "one of the few Marxists left" (p347), and because he sees 'science'/ social science as a discourse "(which is ultimately impossible) without a subject. In this ideal discourse... you model the real independent of its relations to individual subjects, including your own." The "real problem is that it is increasingly hard for people to put that together with their own experience as individual... subjects, in daily life." He sees Aesthetics as "something that addresses individual experience rather than something that conceptualizes the real in a more abstract way" (p358 in reply to a question by Nancy Fraser).

⁵² Ibid p349

⁵³ Ibid p349

of "monadic relativism"⁵⁴ with each consciousness closed off in a privatized world which no longer interacts with each other. This trend is exacerbated within our period of multinational/ 'late' Capitalism with its postmodern sense of space - saturated, fragmented, "a perceptual barrage of immediacy" where distance and most especially orientation have been suppressed, so that individuals are inserted into a "multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities";⁵⁵ the lived experience of the subject becoming fragmented, decentered, dispersed - no longer even the focus for a "point of view."

This creates urgent political problems, for within this space subjects find themselves unable to position or orient themselves individually or collectively, their "incapacity to map socially"⁵⁶ vitiating "their capacities to act and struggle".⁵⁷ The problem is one of the *representation*⁵⁸ of this space - he therefore "privileges a spatial politics where individuals would be able to map their place within society"⁵⁹ - negotiate, 'span' or 'coordinate' the gap between "the local positioning of the individual subject" and the "structures in which he or she is situated".⁶⁰ His

⁵⁴ Ibid p350

⁵⁵ Ibid p351

⁵⁶ Ibid p353

⁵⁷ Best and Kellner p188

⁵⁸ Jameson says he uses that "charged word" as a synonym of "figuration" *Cognitive Mapping* p348.

⁵⁹ Best and Kellner p188

⁶⁰ Jameson *Cognitive Mapping* p353

calls for a "cognitive mapping", are an extension of an earlier Lukàcsian theory of narrative - narratives making connections between events and contextualizing them "within a larger milieu outside of which they are incomprehensible".⁶¹ Cognitive mapping "does not represent the world in the classical mimetic sense" postmodernists so oppose, "but rather transcodes it through historically conditioned forms".⁶² Against any uncritical rejection of representation he argues that we live within an external world which is mappable; and that by means of maps we can both understand and act in that world".⁶³ (Jameson is in fact sympathetic to a standpoint theory⁶⁴ stemming from that of Lukàcs and developed by feminist standpoint theorists like Hartsock, Harding and Jaggar; and which he sees as implicit in the claims of Black and other oppressed groups.)

Best and Kellner also argue that we must not abandon social theory but rather attempt "more sophisticated and

⁶¹ Best and Kellner p189

⁶² Ibid p189

⁶³ Ibid p190

⁶⁴ See Jameson *History and Class Consciousness* pp64-69

contemporary *maps*"⁶⁵ - "big pictures" which enable us to see how things interact and are interrelated, how they are organized and connected, so that we can "intelligently analyse, discuss and intervene in social processes".⁶⁶ They argue that the postmodern rejection of dialectics has left it too one-sided and reductive⁶⁷ - evoking difference without also finding points of convergence, common interests or concrete bases for alliance.⁶⁸ Postmodernism's neglect/obscuring of systematic and structural factors reduce its politics to a harmless one "of style and personal identity that leaves relations of domination intact and unchallenged",⁶⁹ and can serve to reify and fetishize difference (reification being to posit things outside of the relationships that constitute them) producing rigid barriers between individuals and groups, which can lead to chauvinism of various kinds.⁷⁰ Best and Kellner argue that we need *dialectical* theory - dialectics being a method of describing

⁶⁵ Best and Kellner p259

'Maps', are, I think an excellent analogy for theory, for they can/ should be thought of not as an attempt to exactly reproduce 'reality'; but to enable their users to act more effectively within it, by emphasizing, detailing or connecting what is, within any context, most significant for the practical/ political purposes of the maps makers and users - consider, for example, the different and specific features and qualities of the London Underground Map, or admiralty charts of the coasts, or a quick diagram of how to get to someone's house from the station.

⁶⁶ Ibid p260

⁶⁷ Ibid see pp214, 222-224

⁶⁸ Ibid p212

⁶⁹ Ibid p213

⁷⁰ Ibid p213.

relationships and interconnections, how phenomena are constituted and mediated⁷¹ - theory that can attend to both difference and similarity/ commonality; that understands particularities as constituted by structures and processes.⁷² In "rejecting dialectics, postmodern theory tends to be... fragmentary and empiricist, failing to articulate significant mediations, or connections, between various social phenomena"⁷³ they claim. I agree with this, and believe that in taking such an approach postmodernists fail (or do not want to see) other's 'difference' as related to their own; and both as constructed through and dependent on, the same processes, As Donna Haraway says "in the consciousness of our failures, we risk lapsing into boundless difference and giving up on the confusing task of making partial real, connection. Some differences are playful; some are poles of world historical systems of domination. Epistemology is about knowing the difference".⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid p224

⁷² Ibid pp222-224

⁷³ Ibid pp223,224

⁷⁴ Haraway *A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology and Socialist Feminism in the 1980's* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* p203.

POSTMODERNISM AND DIFFERENCEc) Situation

Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes S.P.Mohanty as criticizing the "implicit assumption in contemporary cultural theory that pluralism is an adequate substitute for political analyses of dependent relationships and larger historical configurations".¹ She quotes him as saying "a nagging question [remains]. How do we negotiate between my history and yours? How would it be possible for us to recover our commonality, not the humanistic myth of our shared human attributes which are meant to distinguish us all from animals, but, more significantly, the imbrication of our various pasts and presents; the ineluctable relationships of shared and contested meanings, values, material resources? It is necessary to assert our dense particularities, our lived and imagined differences. But could we afford to leave unexamined the question of how our differences are intertwined and indeed heirarchically organized? Could we, in other words, really afford to have entirely different histories, to see our selves as living - and having lived -

¹Chandra Talpade Mohanty p90

in entirely heterogeneous and discrete spaces?"²

Chandra Talpade Mohanty says that one effect of postmodern critiques of essentialism has been the transformation of questions of *historical interconnection* "into questions of discrete and separable histories".³ It is vital to keep in mind that differences are contingent and historical *constructions*, the products of oppressive and hierarchical *relationships*; and that when taken up or emphasized by *the oppressed* (even when doing so includes a celebration of the qualities and characteristics, the 'differences' assigned them within these unequal relationships) 'difference' is so articulated *to undo* these relationships - in a sense to eliminate the difference; not in the sense of becoming the same/ or equal to the oppressors, but in the sense of so transforming the relationship and its constituents that it is no longer one of domination and imputed difference/ inferiority. The *mere acknowledgement* of difference, especially by those located as 'oppressors', implies either the acceptance of these oppressive structures (which are, like the 'difference' itself, their supports and 'creations' so

²S.P.Mohanty quoted in Chandra Talpade Mohanty pp90,91 (from *Us and Them: On the Philosophical Basis of Political Criticism* in *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 1989 pp1-31 (p13))

³Mohanty p75

to speak) or a false reification or essentialism⁴ of difference - as something given and unchangeable, existing out of context and relation.

Chandra Mohanty argues that instead of "discourses of diversity and pluralism", or formulations of the "universality" of gendered oppression, we should "*historicize and locate*".⁵ Linda Nicholson warns that "postmodernism must avoid any simple celebration of difference and partiality for its own sake",⁶ acknowledging that "the mere abstract invocation of difference could... be used in the service of conservative ends". The "extent to which we insist on difference and how we describe "the differences that make a difference" is... a political act"⁷ and should follow from and be limited to "the demands of specific political contexts". She says it "would not be difficult" for postmodernists to situate their "defence of specific values" (such as difference) "within a historical context".⁸ But this, I think, is precisely where the difficulty comes in - I would argue that postmodern approaches don't/ cannot situate themselves, or do so only in a politically/ theoretically

⁴ See Marnia Lazreg's *Feminism and Difference* p339, where she argues that an antihumanist/ 'discourse analysis'/ deconstructionist approach "deprives the proponents of difference of any basis for understanding the relationship between the varieties of modes of being different in the world. Difference [thus paradoxically for a supposedly anti-essentialist approach] *becomes essentialized*" [my emphasis]

⁵ Ibid p75

⁶ Nicholson *Introduction* p10

⁷ Ibid p10

⁸ Ibid p10

inadequate way. Postmodernists *do* locate themselves, but usually in terms of broad historical eras or trends in very inclusive and undifferentiated ways - not, for instance, as occupying very specific yet contested and challengeable locations *within* these historical contexts - a sort of self-location that obscures/ denies what subordinate groups find most significant about them.

Despite the postmodern emphasis on contingency and the historical constitution and contextuality of categories and criteria; in its conception of difference it seems to me not to be historical (and certainly not materialist) *enough* - it locates phenomena or ideas very broadly and sweepingly, without paying attention to structural differences *within* these historical contexts; e.g. the different experiences of, and relations to, various phenomena of those situated differently in terms of gender, class, race etc. As said before, it tends to reify difference; to see it as standing alone, out of process and context, with insufficient attention to how it has been historically and politically constructed; and specifically to what ends and whose benefit - to how the construction of 'woman', 'Africans', 'the Orient' etc, as 'Other'/ 'different', i.e. inferior, to white western males, has served to justify and legitimate, make possible; the exploitation, oppression or colonization of these (constructed) others. As Nancy Hartsock says, the 'difference' of the 'colonized', the 'Orient' or 'woman' has been *created* in opposition to, and in the same process as, the identity/ self definition of the colonizers, the West,

and men.' Difference is a relation (and in the sense under discussion here, not a symmetrical or equal one) - but as a relation, 'women' (for e.g), as 'different' or 'similar', are always so *in relation to* somebody else (within a particular context) and so such difference can only be comprehended against and in connection to that other, tacitly assumed (but often hidden) partner.

And it is critical attention to that presumed but unexamined and unlocated 'partner' or 'other to difference', the assumed 'norm', that particularly tends to drop out in postmodern accounts. As Jane Flax asks, who is this 'we', this 'us', that the postmodern philosopher is addressing or speaking for?¹⁰ Postmodernists do tend to talk on terms of 'we', but this 'we' is not acknowledged or implied to be (what from other subordinate perspectives it can be seen to be) the constituency of ruling white male westerners, *structurally* and *materially* privileged, oppressive and exploitative of others (as opposed to the naively self-satisfied 'cultural' sense implied in Rorty's identity as a liberal/ capitalist North American, or his oft repeated 'we pragmatists')¹¹ - again just who is this 'we', and what does it assume, or tacitly presuppose or exclude?) Linda Kintz points out that the Derridean recommendation that women give up attempting to articulate a specifically female subject of experience, in favour of a strategy of 'in-

⁹ See Hartsock *Foucault and Power* pp160-162

¹⁰ Flax *Thinking Fragments* p191

¹¹ See e.g. Rorty *Feminism and Pragmatism*

difference' is "posed from the very terrain of the binary oppositions he warns us against".¹² He assumes that the "attempt to describe the construction of the female subject as specifically different from the male subject"¹³ would replicate, reinforce phallogocentrism. But such advice can "only be offered from a male subject place since it depends on presenting women as 'other'¹⁴ and as 'imitating'/'mimicking' if they speak (write) 'like a man'. She argues that "Derrida's brilliant readings have been centred on a Subject who is male, white and European [but] that critique of subjectivity has been generalized"¹⁵ to cover all subjects, even those who were not included in the core group of subjects"¹⁶ in the first place. The concept of the Subject, while claiming universality, had only applied properly to "the male of the dominant class",¹⁷ but *still* assuming its universality, deconstructionists have gone from Subject to subject, with no pause for gender differentiation, or for race or class distinctions". She says "[t]here has been a conflation here, one based on the bothersome generic 'he' and its repressing of differentiated subjectivity, its

¹²Linda Kintz *In-different Criticism: The Deconstructive Parole* in Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young (eds) *The Thinking Muse: Feminism and Modern French Philosophy* (University of Indiana Press Bloomington, Indiana 1989) p13

¹³Ibid p13

¹⁴See Kate Soper *Feminism, Humanism and Postmodernism* p15

¹⁵Kintz p115

¹⁶Ibid p116

¹⁷Ibid p115

erasure of the female as a locus of experience or subjectivity [my emphasis]. We have received, rather than a deconstruction of subjectivity, a deconstruction of white, male, bourgeois subjectivity, the 'I' generalized to the universality of the 'we', with the concomitant extension of the applicability of deconstruction to all, indifferently, indifferently".¹⁸ But, she asks, "can 'we' talk about subjectivity and its crises as if 'we' all experienced them in the same way?" (my scare-quotes). The logic of the postmodern position would surely point to an acknowledgement that we cannot, yet this is precisely what postmodern theories tend to do, in a most unreflective and indifferently way.

Jane Flax also argues that despite "the rhetoric of 'reading like a woman' or displacing 'phallogocentrism', postmodernists are unaware of the deeply gendered nature of their own recounting and interpretations of the Western story and the strategies they oppose to its master narratives".¹⁹ (See her *Thinking Fragments* for a more detailed critique of Derrida, Foucault and Rorty.)²⁰ Nancy Hartsock says that reading Foucault persuades her that Foucault's world is not her world, but instead a world in

¹⁸ Ibid p116

She asks (in relation to deconstructionist evocations of indeterminacy) to what extent do existing determinations make in-different positions impossible - the latter losing sight of [denying?] very important historical differences in attempting to "start from where we would like to end up" (p116)

¹⁹ Flax *Thinking Fragments* p214

²⁰ Ibid see especially pp209-216

which she feels profoundly alien.²¹ Indeed, she says "when he argues that this is our world I am reminded of a joke told about... the Lone Ranger and Tonto, his 'faithful Indian companion' (and subordinate). As the story goes, the two are chased and then surrounded by hostile Indians. As he comes to recognize the danger, the Lone Ranger turns to Tonto and asks "What do we do now?" To which Tonto replies "What do you mean 'we', white boy?"²² This, I think, captures some of my reaction to much postmodern theory, and is basically the same criticism feminists and others have made against humanist/ enlightenment theory - the lack of attention to *who* is speaking, to *whom*, and from *where*.

Anna Yeatman says that postmodernism "represents a crisis of authority for the Western knowing subject posed by the refusal to stay silent on the part of those whom this subject had cast as other: natives, colonials, women... By insisting on their own voice and status as subjects, these erstwhile objects of modern western knowledge have disrupted the epistemological order of domination inscribed within modern, western knowledge".²³ She says that postmodernism can be interpreted from the 'standpoint' of what she calls 'the master subject', "contemplating the issues of legitimacy for his authority which arise from the refusal of those

²¹ Hartsock *Foucault on Power* p166

A feeling I share in relation to postmodern theory in general

²² Ibid p166

²³ Anna Yeatman *Postmodern Epistemological Politics and Social Science* in Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (eds) *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (forthcoming) p1 of manuscript

cast as other to stay silent"²⁴ or from that "of those who are placed as the disruptive and challenging voices of the other"²⁵ - and that "postmodernism is quite different depending on which of these standpoints is adopted".²⁶ For the former, "postmodernism is a general sea-change, reflecting the combined aspects of various social, cultural and technological changes. The revolt of the other is acknowledged in an overgeneralized, abstract way. It remains unspecified and *uninvestigated*"²⁷ (my emphases). "From the standpoint of those who are contesting their status as Other, postmodernism appears as the efforts of the modern, imperial, patriarchal master subject to manage the extent and direction of the crisis for his authority".²⁸ She describes Edward Said as viewing postmodernism as "'reaction' of the kind that seeks to preempt and co-opt... a reaction which accommodates by depoliticizing the challenges to the order of the modern master subject"²⁹ - an evaluation I share.

Said says of Lyotard's account of the 'great narratives' of emancipation and enlightenment losing their legitimating power and being replaced by smaller local narratives that base their legitimacy on performativity, a "user's ability to manipulate the codes in order to get

²⁴ Ibid p1

²⁵ Ibid p1

²⁶ Ibid p1

²⁷ Ibid p1

²⁸ Ibid p1

²⁹ Ibid p1

things done";- that according to his (Lyotard's) account this "came about for entirely European or Western reasons: the great narratives just lost their power".³⁰ If we situate this "within the imperial dynamic, Lyotard's argument appears not as an explanation but as a symptom. He *separates* western postmodernism from the non-European world, and from the consequences of European modernism and modernization in the colonized world. In effect then postmodernism, with its aesthetic of quotation, nostalgia and indifferentiation, stands free of its own history...".³¹ "The striking thing about Lyotard's argument, he says "and perhaps the very reason for its widespread popularity, is how it not only misreads but misrepresents the major challenge to the great narratives and the reason why their power may now appear to have abated."³² One of the reasons for the crisis of modernism was "the disturbing appearance in Europe of various Others... who challenge or resist settled Metropoli-

³⁰ Said *Representing the Colonized* p222

³¹ Ibid p222

³² Ibid p222

tan histories, forms, modes of thought".³³ "Europe and the West... were being asked to take the other seriously".³⁴

But this they have not done (nor would, I think, a properly postmodern feminism take seriously the challenge 'others' bring to it.) If postmodernism is in some way a reaction to the claims made by women, Black and colonized people etc it is certainly not a *response*, in any adequate sense (indeed to me it does seem to be *reaction* - attempts by a dominant group to avert or counter challenge and prevent change). Postmodern theorists, for all their evocation of 'difference' and heterogeneity, seem to spend very little time seeking out, listening to, or attentively replying to the claims of all these 'Others' whose existence

³³ Ibid p222/3

Marnia Lazreg also situates postmodern assertions of 'difference' not in western academic developments, but in the context of the "collapse of the colonial empires, the rise of consumer societies and the crises of late capitalist states" (*Feminism and Difference* p338); and the rise of French anti-humanism in "the collapse of the French colonial empire, more specifically the end of the Algerian war" (p340).

Many feminist theorists have, like Nancy Hartsock, found it "highly suspicious" that just when so many marginalised groups have been engaged in redefinition and critique that doubts about subjecthood, agency, progress and the possibilities for general theory have emerged. "Why is it", she says, "that just at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes problematic? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be theorized. Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of systematically and rationally organizing human society become dubious and suspect" (Hartsock *Foucault on Power* p163,164)

See also Sabina Lovibond *Feminism and Postmodernism* p16

³⁴ Said *Representing the Colonized* p223

they now acknowledge and tolerate.³⁵ In fact, most of the (little) attention ever given to feminism is in terms of kindly advice from master theorists on how feminists should or shouldn't attempt to understand things (most specifically not in any ways that could threaten the position of these same masters, it seems.) Jane Flax says that "the philosopher" may (in response to the voices of subjugated groups) "attempt to dictate the form these voices ought to take (conversation), to cut off clamorous accounts of alternate experiences by proclaiming the non-existence of subjectivity, or to forestall discomfoting heterogeneous demands for justice by disconnecting all possible interrelations between knowledge[s], truths and emancipation[s] ... each of these tactics appears at some point within postmodern texts".³⁶ Certainly "Postmodernist discourses ... undoubtedly lack any serious discussion of feminist theories, even when these theories overlap, supplement or support postmo-

³⁵Rorty has actually, though, recently (autumn 91) written an article on *Feminism and Pragmatism*. Though it is yet again one of those pieces where 'expert' self-conceivably sophisticated theorists tell feminists how they should or shouldn't go about theorizing - at least he appears to have read the work of a fair number of feminist theorists, which is more than can be said for many.

³⁶Jane Flax *Thinking Fragments* p191

dernist claims³⁷ which "profoundly effects their texture".³⁸

Christine di Stefano describes the "feminist case against postmodernism [as consisting] of several related claims. First, that postmodernism expresses the claims and needs of a constituency (white, privileged, men of the industrialized west) that has already had an Enlightenment for itself... secondly, that the objects of postmodernism's various critical and deconstructive efforts have been the creations of a similarly specific and partial constituency... Third, that mainstream postmodernist theory

³⁷ Ibid (pp210/211) (See Flax pp211-216 for critiques of Rorty, Foucault and Derrida and their neglect/ reproduction of gendered oppression as evidenced in their lack of attention to feminist critique, their apparent total non-information by feminist narratives, the lack of any systematic consideration of gender, the abstract 'transcendental' quality of Derrida's concept of 'woman' which has no referent in any concrete, embodied, historical, specific beings or their social experience, no acknowledgement of differentiation by race or class or culture etc; but which in fact replicates, gains its 'plausibility' from its congruence with stereotypes of femininity and 'phallogocentric metaphysics').

³⁸ Flax sees the inadequacy of postmodern narratives about subjectivity as "partially determined by the absence of any systematic consideration of gender and gender relations"(p216). "Within postmodernist discourses" she says "there is no attempt to incorporate or do justice to the specificity of women's experiences or desires as discussed by women... Women's experiences of subjectivity [however] suggest there are alternatives to the two presumed within postmodernist discourses..." (p210) (See Flax p216 for her critique of the postmodern conception of self/ subjectivity) Flax is actually sympathetic to a postmodern approach, but sees its conception of subjectivity and its neglect of gender relations as deeply problematic. She says the "absence or disappearance of concrete women and gender relations suggests the possibility that postmodernism may be "phallogocentrism's last ruse" (p216) See also Rosi Braidotti's *Envy: Or with your Brains and my Looks* in Alice Jardine and Paul Smith *Men in Feminism* especially pp236-238 for comments that relate to the points made by Flax (and Hartsock and Kintz)

(Derrida, Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault) has been remarkably blind and insensitive to questions of gender in its own purportedly politicized rereadings of history, politics and culture...³⁹ The apparent unawareness on the part of postmodernism "of the deeply gendered nature"⁴⁰ of its own theories and strategies is related to, and partly a product of, the postmodern conception of difference. For all the postmodern nodding to history, differences paradoxically appear not so much historically constituted as 'brute'; as contingently yet somehow 'ontologically' given. I have argued that differences should be seen as *related*, as located and connected within wider structural networks processes - differences should thus be seen as "*situational*, not intrinsic" as Donna Haraway puts it.⁴¹

Though postmodernism does have a concept of locale, of diversity of situation and context, this turns out to be very different to that expressed in the feminist conception of situatedness and perspectivity (especially that formulated in standpoint theory). The feminist notion of situation is a *materialist*,⁴² and structural one, derived from Marxist

³⁹Christine di Stefano *Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity and Postmodernism* in Linda Nicholson (ed) *Feminism/ Postmodernism* p75/76
(A final point she mentions is that it would "if seriously adopted by feminists... make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible").

⁴⁰Flax *Thinking Fragments* p214

⁴¹Haraway *Situated Knowledges* p594

⁴²As is that of Black feminist critics who argue for example that white feminists "must acknowledge the *material* basis of their power in relation to black people" (Bhavnani and Coulson p82) [my emphasis].

theory: your relatively 'fixed' and 'objective' location within economic and political relations is seen as shaping and mediating your experience of the world, affecting how it seems to you and what you can come to know. Everyone sees the world from a specific 'somewhere' and that location has implications both for you and your life, and your understanding of it and the world. Furthermore, 'objective' knowledge of how you are situated will not only transform and improve your understandings of both yourself and the world, but will enable you to act more effectively within the world to change it. The postmodern conception of difference and location seems much less materialist, much less reflexive, much more superficial and 'consumerist'.⁴³

Someone once compared it to looking round an ethnological museum⁴⁴ - I think it is probably more like privileged, affluent westerners looking round a shop in an ethnological museum - where there are all these nice, colourful, aesthetic, ethnic things to buy and have and appropriate; without any consideration of what they mean ethically or politically; how and why they got there; especially who exploited whom in the process. Just all this diversity and no doubt.

⁴³ Jameson speaks of the harnessing of "the celebration of Difference and of Heterogeneity" "to the celebration of consumer goods, free enterprise, and the eternal wonder and excitement of the market itself" (*History and Class Consciousness...*P62)

⁴⁴ Apparently Baudrillard, I've been told. Seyla Benhabib liken's Lyotard's stance, that of an observer "gazing in wonderment at the variety of discursive species" (Lyotard *The Postmodern Condition* p26) to that of a curator of an ethnological museum. (Seyla Benhabib *Epistemologies of Postmodernism* pp119,129)

Or else it is a view of the world inspired by Tourism⁴⁵ - we can be in the Seychelles one week, Tunisia the next, and seemingly never effect or be affected by either. It seems more like a style or fashion that can be adopted (provided one has the resources) than a concrete situation.

As both Susan Bordo and Donna Haraway have pointed out,⁴⁶ the view from nowhere has been replaced by an equally impossible "view from everywhere" - which is just as disembodied; just as disclaiming of one's own situatedness, one's own implication in structures of domination and exploitation as the view from Nowhere was. Bordo argues that while arising out of a "critique of modernist epistemological positions", postmodernists are animated by their "own fantasies of attaining an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence - a fantasy [she calls] a 'dream of everywhere'",⁴⁷ marked by "a new configuration of detachment, a new imagination of disembodiment".⁴⁸ In the Cartesian view, the knower has to *transcend* the body (that which fixes the knower in time and space and therefore situates and relativises perception and thought) "if one is to achieve the view from nowhere, God's

⁴⁵ Elspeth Probyn also describes an attitude toward difference suggested by the experience of tourism "where diversity is experienced in its most superficial manifestations" (described by Nicholson in her *Introduction* p14)

⁴⁶ See Susan Bordo *Feminism, Postmodernism and Gender Scepticism* pp142-5
And Haraway *Situated Knowledges* pp581-501, especially pp584,587

⁴⁷ Bordo *Feminism, Postmodernism* p136

⁴⁸ *Ibid* p143

Eye view" from which "one can see nature as *it really is*, undistorted by human perspective".⁴⁹

In postmodernism, the body "is reconceived". No longer "an obstacle to knowledge for ['objective'] 'knowledge' in the Cartesian sense is an impossibility... " the body is seen instead as constantly shifting (in shape and location); moving, changing, multiple and fragmentary, "capable of revealing endlessly new "points of view" on things"⁵⁰ - which both obscures its *located* and *limited* nature and evades an assumption of responsibility for a specific shape and place. "What sort of body is it" she asks, "that is free to change its shape and location at will, that can become anyone and travel anywhere? If the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all."⁵¹ This "erasure of the body is not effected, as in the Cartesian version through a trip to 'nowhere', but in a resistance to the recognition that one is always *somewhere*, and limited".⁵² A feminist standpoint, in contrast, is from a very specific somewhere, and cannot be changed as the mood takes one - if you are 'female' and 'western' and 'white' or whatever, then that is what you have to deal with and attend to - you cannot decide to be somewhere/ someone else, if your situation or experience, or

⁴⁹ Ibid p143

⁵⁰ Ibid p144

⁵¹ Ibid p145

⁵² Ibid p145

other's criticisms, became uncomfortable - it is a recognition of limit and inevitable partiality, but this does not entitle it to be used as an excuse.⁵³

Donna Haraway calls for "politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating."⁵⁴ She suggests that "insisting metaphorically on the partiality and embodiment of all vision, allows us to construct a usable, but not innocent, doctrine of objectivity"⁵⁵ - an objectivity conceived in terms of "situated knowledges"⁵⁶ informed by a recognition of the way our 'seeing' is mediated by/ through 'visual systems' and a consideration and exploration of how these systems work⁵⁷ - one that opposes various forms of "unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims", those that cannot be "called into account".⁵⁸ The traditional/ conventional account of knowledge, besides its untenable 'view from nowhere' aspects (which should be ditched) also includes, as I have said earlier, features of accountability and openness to criticism and challenge from others; which I think should be retained, or strengthened. Yet it seems to

⁵³ Sandra Harding says that the postmodern project "can appear of a piece with masculine and bourgeois desire to justify one's actions by denying one's social, embodied, location in history; to attempt to transcend one's objective location in politics by appeal to a mea-culpa, all understanding, bird's eye view... of the frailty of mere humans" (*The Instability* p656)

⁵⁴ Haraway *Situated Knowledges* p589

⁵⁵ Ibid p582

⁵⁶ Ibid p581

⁵⁷ Ibid p583

⁵⁸ Ibid p583

me that it is precisely this, the valuable aspect of objectivity, that goes in the postmodern approach, leaving a subtly reinstated view from nowhere/ everywhere; without the critical promise. Haraway calls for "power sensitive"; not pluralist "conversation"⁵⁹, for an objectivity that implies "critical positioning" and "partial connection".⁶⁰ It is because subjectivity and 'vision' are always partial, she says, that the knowing self is "*therefore* able to join with another, to see together, without claiming to be the other".⁶¹ Such "engaged, accountable positioning" seeks

⁵⁹ Ibid p589

⁶⁰ Ibid p586

⁶¹ Ibid p586

partiality "not for its own sake,"⁶² but rather for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledge make possible"⁶³

"Such preferred [and critical] positioning is as hostile", says Haraway "to various forms of relativism as to the most explicitly totalizing versions of claims to scientific authority. But the alternative to relativism is not totalization and single vision... [but] partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connection... Relativism is a way of being nowhere while

⁶² Many Black or 'third world' critics of 'mainstream' feminist theories do so not in terms of asserting particularity and separation, but as part of a (redefined) 'humanist' project - a *reconnecting*, 'wider' struggle that sees *links* between various groups, issues and struggles; and ultimately shares an international/global concern to end oppression, exploitation etc. (See e.g. Patricia Hill Collins pp37-39, 236/7 Marnia Lazreg argues for a recognition that "common bonds" tie men and women of different cultures together (*Feminism and Difference* p339) and also calls for "a certain form of humanism" to be reaffirmed, rather than replacing traditional humanistic philosophy "with the essentialism of difference" (p339). "Old Style humanism", she says, "despite its shortcomings [made] itself vulnerable to criticism by appealing to its unfulfilled promise" and provided colonized societies with a tool with which to fight for their 'freedom' (p340). What, she asks, can anti-humanism offer 'different' peoples in their struggle *against* their relegation as different in terms of race, colour and nationality" (p340) See also Oshadi Mangena's *Against Fragmentation: the need for Holism* (*Journal of Gender Studies* Vol 1 no. 1 May 1991). Mangena argues against a fragmentative approach and for a holistic and dialectical one that emphasizes the interaction and interconnectedness of "situational experience". While rejecting a "falsifying universalism", Mangena is opposed to a postmodern feminism whose conception of difference makes it impossible to reach "an understanding of the whole situation," instead simply invoking "a multiplicity of different perspectives, conflicting and contradictory [which]... can neither challenge or mutually inform each other". (p10)

⁶³ Haraway *Situated Knowledges* p590

claiming to be everywhere equally. The 'equality' of positioning is a denial of responsibility and critical inquiry. Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well".⁶⁴ And because, like Haraway, I want a conception of objectivity that emphasizes accountability, partiality *and* connection - I oppose the relativist implication inherent in much postmodern theory in favour of a belief that we can and must communicate, assess and criticize across differences of discourse, language, location and culture.

⁶⁴ Ibid p584

POSTMODERNISM AND DIFFERENCEd) Relativism

In explicitly associating postmodernism with relativism, I am repeating, and agreeing with, a charge made by other feminist critics¹ which is, perhaps, contentious. Some supporters of a postmodern approach deny that it leads to relativism. Susan Hekman, for instance, argues that postmodernism is not relativist² but that "the postmoderns" (sic) argue that the search for absolute grounding is misconceived; and that all knowledge is contextual and historical - they thus do not reject truth but argue that it is perspectival and relational. But to this I would echo Mary Hawkesworth's reply that if this is all Postmodernism assumes "then what is unique about postmodernism. Several of the major strands of Modernism such as scepticism, hermeneu-

¹ See for e.g. Hawkesworth *Knowers* p555-7, *Reply to Hekman* p422,
Harding *The Instability* p656, *Whose Science?*
p187,
Yeatman p293, for instance.

² See Hekman *Gender and Knowledge* pp135/5, 152/3 also
Comment on Hawkesworth's 'Knowers, Knowing, Known' (*Signs*
Vol 15 no2 1990) p418

tics, Marxism and critical theory³ concur that truth is perspectival and historically situated, hence contextual and relational. How is postmodernism different from these alternatives? How is feminist postmodernism different from feminist standpoint theories [to which Hekman is very opposed]? I do not see how postmodernism can preserve its claim to distinctiveness if it embraces merely what Hekman ascribes to it"⁴ - this very minimalist postmodernism could easily be compatible with/ contained within modernism, precluding any need to argue for a specifically postmodern position.

Obviously, all knowledge is a product of certain specific circumstances - the product of a relation between a knower/ knowers in certain particular social/ political/ geographical locations and the 'world' as it appears to her/ them; mediated by the concepts/ codes/ discourses etc at her/ their disposal. Any knowledge claims should thus be seen in *relation* to the context of their production; and not in isolation, as though 'made from nowhere'. Sometimes, this sort of position is termed 'minimal' or conceptual relativism, though I do not call it that myself. What I mean by 'relativism', what Sandra Harding calls judgemental or

³Best and Kellner describe a "whole tradition of modern theory" very similar to that evoked by Hawkesworth - (Marx, Dewey, Weber, Hermeneutics, Critical Theory etc) as "eschewing the quest for certainty, foundations and universal laws", as being fallibilistic and open; but which crucially call "for theory to be reflexive and self-critical, aware of its presuppositions, interests and limitations (p257). These latter are aspects I find lacking in postmodern theories.

⁴Hawkesworth *Reply to Hekman* p422

epistemological relativism,⁵ and others have termed 'radical relativism' is the claim that you cannot judge or compare between knowledge claims made by different people within different contexts, "language games" etc. It is this that I am opposing under the name of postmodernism - the idea that difference or contextuality or incommensurability imply no possibilities of understanding, comparison or assessment across discourses, conceptual schemes, cultures etc - that the only criteria we have are local and 'internal' ones *which cannot be appealed to across context and situation* - that if we give up the myth of the Archimedean point from which we can see reality unmediated by our perspectivity and subjectivity; or if we abandon the notion of there being one neutral, universal and all encompassing framework within which we can come to describe, understand and compare any claims and so settle our differences; - then we have to retreat into a scenario of a plurality of *closed* conceptual schemes or perspectives, which can only be comprehended, and whose various claims can only be evaluated, from within.

Sandra Harding says it "is worth keeping in mind that the articulation of relativism as a intellectual position emerges historically only as an attempt to dissolve challenges to the legitimacy of purportedly universal beliefs and ways of life. It is... a solution to a problem

⁵See Harding *Whose Science* pp139,142,152

only from the perspective of the dominating groups.⁶ Reality may indeed appear to have many different structures from the perspectives of our different locations on social relations, but some of these appearances are ideologies in the strong sense of the term; they are not only false and 'interested' beliefs but also ones that are used to structure social relations for the rest of us. For subjugated groups, a relativist stance... accepts the dominant groups insistence that their right to hold distorted beliefs... is intellectually legitimate".⁷ As long as various 'others' were not allowed to, or prevented from speaking 'back', ruling white male westerners could speak for and to all, and criticize and judge the claims of any. Now that those others are speaking for themselves and to these ruling white westerners, in critical and challenging ways, suddenly the barriers between discourses/ cultures etc come down, in what

⁶There is also the related point that many aspects of postmodern/ poststructuralist thinking e.g. 'indeterminacy', relativism, pluralism etc are really only possible from dominant positions - they are only adoptable by groups who; precisely because of their dominant position, the power, resources and security they otherwise enjoy and which are to a large extent 'guaranteed'; are able to 'afford' them. See Linda Kintz's *Indifferent Criticism* where she wonders if the indeterminate/ indiscriminate concept of gender Derrida advises, is "possible within his system precisely because heterosexuality and the power of the male as speaker is guaranteed on a larger stage? Has the risk been guaranteed in such a way as to make this indeterminate subjectivity safe for the speaker which the culture identifies as masculine?"

⁷Harding *Instability* p657 see also *Whose Science?* p153 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes pluralism as traditionally "the method employed by the *central* authorities to neutralize opposition by seeming to accept it. The gesture of pluralism on the part of the *marginal* can only mean capitulation to the centre" (Spivak quoted in Michèle Barrett *The Concept of Difference* p32)

seems like a very defensive gesture; one which attempts to protect the ruling self conceptions and positions from threat or transformation, while acceding only their non-universality - even their limit, contingency and historical location being 'acknowledged' in a way that prevents challenge and assessment from 'outside'.

Marginalized groups are told that they can celebrate their 'difference', but this difference won't be allowed to make a difference to those in power. We can have 'conversations' as though we were all equal in our colourful diversity; but we won't be allowed to challenge anyone, to say they are wrong, to point out the structural supports for their position, or how it relates to ours. We are told to doubt radically ourselves and our subjectivity, our conceptions of the world and our possibilities of understanding and especially transforming it. Dominant groups might be able to afford to pretend to do that; after all, their position seems assured, especially if we give up trying to change it; but it seems crazy for anyone in a subordinate position to accept such 'advice' - advice which allows dominant groups to maintain their privilege while deflecting the threat of criticism or opposition, dissolving challenges to the legitimacy of their position. By appealing to the partiality and perspectivity of all human thought, while neglecting or forbidding any structural analyses of power and inequality; any 'objective' or determining conception or investigation of location, any consideration of a wider context or more encompassing truths that connect and explain our differences; postmodernism hides the implications of its

own specific situatedness behind a screen of multiple but essentially incomparable, unrelated differences. I would argue that feminism should resist any moves in this direction - indeed it seems to me that 'difference' can only be taken seriously, in a way that matters, if one's motives and stance are definitely *not* postmodern in inspiration. A postmodern feminism will do nothing to address the challenge Black feminists and others have levelled against white middle class feminists - rather it will serve to "let them off the hook" - letting them evade its implications behind an apparent acknowledgement of difference - 'difference' serving here merely to imply diversity rather than exposing privilege and structural location, and challenging distortions.⁸

Elizabeth Spelman has asked "whether attempts to talk about 'difference' simply preserve the privilege they were supposed to challenge",⁹ arguing that "privilege will thrive as long as there are lots of ways of appearing to talk about differences... without really doing so".¹⁰ She is speaking specifically about differences *among women*, about white

⁸ Marnia Lazreg argues that academic feminists "should not be allowed to hide behind a deconstructionist approach to legitimate its misapprehension of difference", nor be allowed to seek refuge in [a] Foucauldian conception of power" as in doing so "the actual instrumentality of power that some women (for example, academic women) exercise over other women (such as Third World women) is neglected" (*Feminism and Difference* p338)

She also says "As it now stands, difference is seen as mere division. The danger of this underdeveloped view lies in its verging on *indifference*" (p341)

⁹ Spelman p164

¹⁰ Ibid p166

middle class feminist response to the challenges made by Black feminists and others, but I think her comments would apply particularly well to a specifically postmodern feminist 'response' and captures much of how I see postmodernism in general 'replying' to the challenges of 'others'. She says "as long as I am simply tolerating your view point, not actually seeking it out and taking seriously how it represents a critique of my own... I have not given any indication that I might be prepared to change my privileged position. This is especially clear if on examination of what I am now 'allowing' you to say, it turns out that there are limits on what I will allow you to talk about, or how I will allow you to talk about it."¹¹

She says "it may seem as if it is impossible, given the heterogeneity of women and women's situation, to make any well-founded yet non-trivial statements about all women. If that is impossible however, its impossibility does not follow simply from the fact that such statements cannot be based on the situation of white middle class women... To assume otherwise is again an expression of privilege... for it amounts to my claiming that if there is any general case to be made, it can only be made on the basis of my case. It is a way of trying to ensure that if I get dislodged from centre stage, no one or nothing else is going to replace me. It is as if to say: if I can't win the contest, we'll just have to stop the contest. Either my position is authoritative or no position is. If I've been wrong, nobody can be

¹¹ Ibid p183

right"¹² "In short", she says "there are two quite different ways to ensure that my picture of the world remains unchallenged. One is to present my particular picture as *the* picture... the other is to insist that any other picture is going to have just the same problems as mine... So if in the first case no one can challenge me because I must be right, in the second case no one can challenge me because we are all equally wrong (or what amounts to the same thing, equally right).¹³ If I can't maintain my position of privilege as being sole arbiter of truth, I at least can insist that no-one is... I may not be right, but there is nothing against which I can be judged to be wrong, or any way 'more wrong' than any one else."¹⁴ - which, she points out, is "quite different from admitting to the possibility not only that I am wrong but that someone else might be right"¹⁵ - (which latter, is, I think, the attitude we should/ have to take).

Elizabeth Grosz says that feminist theory "is *relational* rather than relativist - it occupies a position ... and is connected to other practices, rather than in relativism, having no fixed position. It is neither neutral... (as the objectivist or absolutist maintains) nor purely free floating, a position any subject can adopt at will (as the

¹² Ibid p184

¹³ Lazreg (*Feminism and Difference* p340) says "The point is neither to subsume other women under one's own experience nor uphold a separate truth for them"

¹⁴ Ibid p184

¹⁵ Ibid p184

subjectivist or relativist maintains). Thus it is neither a question of adopting ahistorical, universal criteria nor an 'anything goes' attitude... absolutism and relativism both ignore the concrete functioning of power relations and the necessity of *occupying a position*¹⁶ [my emphasis]. Keeping in mind that knowledge is situated means keeping in mind its limits and partiality, its perspectivity, the ways our knowledge is shaped and mediated by its location. Attention to epistemological location exposes the political nature of knowledge and the implication of power within it - how knowledges are not just a pure 'gathering', 'ordering', 'creating' or 'connecting' of 'facts'/ ideas; but structure and shape our lives, and operate to justify and legitimate power relations (as well as to condemn or question them) - how knowledge is both enabling *and* disempowering, constraining *and* creating of possibilities, expressive *and* silencing, connecting *and* divisive etc - and how within hierarchical social structures at least positioning is unequal; how various perspectives are relatively 'dominant' or 'subjugated', 'authoritative' or 'marginalized' etc in relation to others; which again has both positive and negative consequences depending on location and context. Lorraine Code says (re Alcoff's conception of 'positionality') that the point is not to advocate quiescent liberal tolerance... [but] to analyse, assess, assume accountability for the

¹⁶ Elizabeth Grosz *The In(ter)vention of Feminist Knowledges* in Barbara Caine, E.A.Grosz and Marie de Lepervanche (eds) *Crossing Boundaries: Feminism and the Critique of Knowledges* (Allen and Udwin Sydney 1988) p100

positions one occupies, while engaging in critical dialogue with, or resistance against, occupants of other positions, in cognizance of their political implications." She says positions are at once "loci for the construction of meaning... foci for sociopolitical critique".¹⁷

Standpoint theory, despite its emphasis on the situatedness of knowledge, the dependence of knowledge on social context; its conceptual and historical 'relativity'; is definitely not relativist - it explicitly holds that some perspectives/ theories/ ways of 'seeing' can be better/ more true/ more valid than others (again within context and unabsolutely); and it also holds that different perspectives/ discourses/ frameworks etc are/ can be mutually informative, mutually critical - open to comparison and assessment, if not *completely* from 'outside', at least not wholly or only from completely within. Standpoint theory emphasizes not only the possibility; but the positive and productive consequences, of being neither completely 'within', nor an 'absolute outsider' - of occupying a location (in structure or discourse) *uneasily*; of not fully 'belonging' or being able to speak with authority/ 'authenticity' from a certain position. It is this kind of location, that of the "outsider within" to use Patricia Hill Collins' phrase; or the marginalized *within* dominant discourse; that is valorized by standpoint theory, which points to tensions and discordancies that may result from occupying complex and 'difficult' positions - of 'straddling' or moving between mutually

¹⁷ Code p180

incompatible and never completely satisfactory discourses; of occupying various apparently contradictory positions/discourses 'at once' etc - tensions which can be used critically and productively to examine these locations. Comparison and critique are thus not made from nowhere, but from where we 'are' - with 'where we are' not being some closed, self contained unassailable location; but something multifaceted and open; aspects of which are always adapting and changing in encounter and context; and which can be 'played off' against each other in a mutually informative and transformative way.

All knowledge claims are locally, contingently, contextually made, within a specific conceptual/ social/ historical situation - but this does not mean that they are not open to wider communication, that they have no significance for, or bearing upon, others; that they have no application and validity outside of the particularity of their origin. Standpoint theory, while emphasizing, and capitalizing on 'difference' also stresses *connection* and *openness* (as opposed to the *closed* and discrete practices, language games and discourses of relativism.) If we just want to preserve our perspective intact, without challenge or revision, then a picture of us all separated off into a plurality of

shut,¹⁸ basically static, self-contained little 'communities' is perhaps attractive. But standpoint theory does/should imply the contrary; that perspectives are not 'protected' from criticism or informing from others; but are *open* - open to challenge from others who are differently located; and open to learning from them, changing/ improving in response to them; if we are prepared to risk or test our understandings and self conceptions in the encounter [see bit on Gadamer following] and revise them if need be. Understanding across differences (of location, time, culture, discourse or whatever) is a *reflexive* and *dialectical* process, an interplay of perspectives, in which theirs informs me not only about them and their situation, but of me and mine; my now altered self understanding now re-entering the dialogue and understanding them differently, which

¹⁸For who decides where the boundaries are, where 'internal' critical moves overstep, or come from beyond, the 'limits'? What distinguishes an 'illegitimate' move from change? - how *do* closed systems change, or interact with/ respond to their environment (do they not have one?)

If all we are allowed is local 'language games' or whatever, with their own internal rules for what counts as 'truth'; then truth is basically a matter of power and the dominant status quo (mixed with a bit of pragmatism): this is what counts as 'truth' within this context, and you can't challenge it from within - for then you are breaking the rules which alone dictate what is true or false, right or wrong (and so basically making false/ illegitimate claims); and neither can you challenge it from without - for either you are applying 'foreign' criteria from some other language game or practice which are not relevant or applicable out of their own limited, self contained sphere; or you are held to be claiming access to some sort of universal or neutral criteria, independent of any conceptual scheme, framework etc; which, it is generally agreed is not possible.

What I want to argue is that both of these alternatives are wrong - that we can understand/ compare/ criticize *across differences, from where we are situated* (see next chapters)

again changes my self conceptions and so on [again, see next sections].

I have already described Sandra Harding as arguing that standpoint theory calls for neither the 'weak objectivity' (as she characterizes it) of objectivism/ positivism, *nor* relativism;¹⁹ but what she calls "strong objectivity"²⁰ - which extends critical scrutiny beyond any claim/ hypothesis 'itself' to the context (both micro and macro processes and tendencies) in which it is produced.²¹ "Strong objectivity" explicitly values the perspectives of "outsiders within" and those of the marginalized/ subjugated for the critical light they throw on dominant understandings/ positions.²² "To enact or operationalize the directive of strong objectivity" she says, "is to value the Other's perspective and to pass over in thought into the social condition that creates it - not in order to stay there, to 'go native', or merge the self with the Other, but in order to look back at the self in all its cultural particularity from a more distant, critical, objectifying location".²³ (I have reservations

¹⁹Harding points out that relativism is "internally related to objectivism" - it still assumes that 'true' knowledge (in a stronger, more inclusive sense than that implied by relativism) could only be produced from nowhere (or everywhere) (*Whose Science?* p153)

²⁰See Harding *Whose Science?* pp149-163

²¹Ibid p149

²²Ibid pp150,151

²³Ibid p151

Note the similarities to Nagel - though here with an emphasis on difference and learning from the perspective of others missing in Nagel.

about the "passing over in thought" and "looking back at the self" which might just stem from a (to me) slightly unfortunate choice of metaphor,²⁴ or might perhaps be more substantive; but I won't go into that now - suffice it to say that I am in broad agreement with this sort of approach and certainly agree with her following claim that "strong objectivity requires that we investigate the relation between subject and object rather than deny the existence of, or seek unilateral control over, this relation."²⁵ So if, as Harding (and I) do, you wish to avoid both objectivism and relativism; and think it imperative both to use your understanding of your epistemological location to critically assess and inform others; as well as to reflexively examine your situatedness in the light of other's claims and revise your understandings accordingly: how do you learn from/ understand/ evaluate across 'differences'? - it is this I shall address in the next couple of chapters.

²⁴Harding, for instance, says "A notion of strong reflexivity would require that the objects of inquiry be conceptualized as gazing back in all their cultural particularity and that the researcher, through theory and methods, stand behind them, gazing back at his (sic) own socially situated research project in all its cultural particularity and its relationships to other projects of his culture - many of which (policy development in international relations, for example, or industrial expansion) can be seen only from locations far away from the scientist's actual daily work" (p163)

Again - I am bothered by the "standing behind" and "gazing back through theory and methods", although I think the general idea behind it, of "strong" reflexivity is right. In my own discussion of the possibility/ nature of understanding/ learning from 'the other's perspective' I try to describe the process as happening 'from where we are (situated)' without the (to me) problematic use of metaphors of gazing back *from* i.e. somehow moving *to*, or inhabiting, the other's situation.

²⁵ Ibid p152

UNDERSTANDING ACROSS DIFFERENCES

Sandra Harding asks "How can *we* actively study and learn about our dominant group selves and our culture without either replicating the conventional ethnocentric perspectives that rely on our spontaneous consciousness of the experiences in our lives, or inappropriately appropriating the experience of those Others whose voices have led us to see the need to rethink our views of ourselves? We have not *had* their experiences and do not live their lives."¹

"Feminist standpoint epistemology focuses on... the epistemological importance of the gap between the understanding of the world available if one starts from the lives of people in the exploited, oppressed and dominated groups and the understandings provided by the dominant conceptual schemes."² But "the understandings generated by contradictory identities"³ are not intended "to be available, accessible only to those women"⁴ from whose lives they are generated. Standpoint theorists like Patricia Hill Collins insist that others "can learn from and learn to use the

¹ Harding *Whose Science?* p271

² Ibid p276

³ Ibid p277

⁴ Ibid p277

knowledge generated"⁵ by African American women, for example. It is because of their contribution that 'we' can now see aspects of race and gender relations that they have pointed out, says Harding. "Moreover, it is not just *about* African Americans that I learn *from* them; from Collins and other African American thinkers I have also learned certain things about European American experience, identity and privilege which I previously took for granted simply as components either of human experience or of my purportedly individual experience."⁶

"It would appear", says Harding, "to be not a luxury but a necessity for feminism that European Americans should use the analyses provided by women (and men) of Third World descent to actively seek to understand European lives. For me to do so is not an exercise in white narcissism, as some might think, but a necessary moment in understanding other people and my relations to them by understanding how I am situated in these relationships from the perspectives of their lives. I am to enter this discourse precisely as a European American... a white woman. I am to take responsibility for my identity, my racial social location, by learning how I am connected to other whites and to people of color; by learning what the consequences of my beliefs and behaviours as a European American woman will be. The self-understanding I seek is to emerge as a result of locating myself as a European American person in the analyses

⁵ Ibid p277

⁶ Ibid p277

originally generated by thinkers of Third World descent and then continuing in the analyses by thinking about my world with the help of the accounts they have provided - yet still out of my own different social location".⁷

I would concur with this - but I would also emphasize the last "*yet still out of my own different social location.*" Harding continues "I can only be a white who intends to take responsibility for her racial location; I cannot be a person of Third World descent."⁸ Yet there are elements in her description of what she calls the process of "reinventing ourselves as Other" that strike me as departing from this recognition of limit and 'firm' situatedness, in favour of something more 'transcendental' as it were, or more 'mobile' (in the sense criticized by Susan Bordo). Talking of "passing over in thought" to the Other's perspective to look back at the self,⁹ of "through theory and methods" standing behind the objects of inquiry, "gazing back"¹⁰ bother me.

Of course, in a sense, there is something to this - if we attend to someone's impression/ criticism of ourselves, we do *to a degree* and *in a sense*, see ourselves as others see us, or as we appear from other's perspectives, (though not in the *same* way - we do not reproduce exactly their understandings or perspectives - it is always mediated by

⁷ Ibid pp282,283

⁸ Ibid p283

⁹ Ibid p157

¹⁰ Ibid p163

our own). From the rest of what Harding says, I am sure she would agree with this, and there is probably very little difference between Harding's intent and mine, the 'dispute' being most likely more over metaphor/ descriptive resources, than actual 'content' or meaning. Nevertheless, I think it important to resist any idea of escaping or ignoring our locatedness, as might perhaps be suggested by an implication that we could somehow 'hop' over to another's location and look back at ourselves, seeing ourselves *from that location* (not ours) as they see us. As I have said before, I think we should explore the possibilities of learning from Others (in the way Harding outlines in the passages I quoted at the beginning of this chapter) *from where we are*, without recourse to any trip to nowhere/ everywhere, or even someone else's location, to do so.

The question of the possibilities, the limits and 'nature' of understanding across 'differences' (especially apparently radical differences of culture and ways of describing/ explaining/ acting within 'the world') is one that (obviously?) concerns Social Anthropologists. Anthropology's entire practice and theory is based on the assumption that some such understanding is possible, but how that understanding is conceived, and the epistemological and political presuppositions and consequences of these various conceptions, vary widely and are in contest. I will not here describe that debate, or the various positions that have been taken up on the subject, but instead want to concentrate on one (famous) contribution to that debate - Peter

Winch's *Understanding a Primitive (sic) Society*¹¹ - which, I think, nicely delineates the nature of the 'problem' facing the Anthropologist (or anyone), and which *points* to the direction in which an adequate response would lie (but does not itself provide it in detail).

Winch's approach is, in fact, usually taken to be an example, and he to be a 'vigorous proponent', of epistemological (not merely cultural) relativism.¹² I do not think that this is so, or at least this is not the inevitable consequence of his position as expressed in *Understanding a Primitive Society* - as should hopefully become clear in what follows. The first part of Winch's article is devoted to a discussion of E.E Evans Pritchard's *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*.¹³ The Azande, says Winch "hold beliefs that we cannot possibly share and engage in practices which it is particularly difficult for us to comprehend. They believe that certain of their members are witches, exercising a malign, occult influence on the lives of their fellows. They engage in rites to counteract witchcraft; they consult oracles and use magic medicines to

¹¹ In Brian Wilson (ed) *Rationality* (Basil Blackwell Oxford 1970)

¹² See for e.g. J.H.M. Beattie *Objectivity and Social Anthropology* in S.C. Brown (ed) *Objectivity and Cultural Diversity* Royal Institute of Philosophy Lecture Series 17 (Cambridge University Press Cambridge 1984) - Beattie while providing no argument that Winch is not such an 'extreme'/'absolute' relativist as is commonly asserted, is careful to say he is "represented as being" or "taken as" one. See pp1,14,15

¹³ (Clarendon Press Oxford 1937. A large proportion of the debate on understanding other cultures, relativism etc, is conducted with reference to one or another work by Evans Pritchard in fact.

protect themselves from harm."¹⁴

An Anthropologist studying the Azande has to make their beliefs and practices intelligible to herself and her readers, and in doing so she has to satisfy the criteria of rationality and truth determined by her own culture - in this case a culture in which such criteria are "deeply affected by the achievements and methods of the sciences"¹⁵ and to which beliefs in witchcraft are "almost a paradigm of the irrational."¹⁶ This is the situation that Evans Pritchard found himself in. Winch says that Evans Pritchard does *not* say (as some might, or did) that Zande witchcraft beliefs are the product of inferior intelligence, or that our 'scientific' framework is the product of superior intelligence. Evans Pritchard argues that both we and the Azande come to hold our beliefs in the same way - not through our own observations and logical inferences based upon them but by being born into a culture and adopting/inhabiting the beliefs of that culture, whether these be 'mystical' or 'scientific'. The Azande do not *think* 'mystically' and we 'scientifically' - in "either case like mental processes are involved, and... the content of thought is similarly derived".¹⁷ Thus far Winch and Evans Pritchard are in agreement; but Evans Pritchard still assumes that the *content* of 'our' beliefs is 'scientific' and (therefore)

¹⁴Winch p78

¹⁵Ibid p79

¹⁶Ibid p79

¹⁷Evans Pritchard quoted in Winch p80

'true' and 'objective', in accord with reality; and that of the Azande is not - being correspondingly unscientific or mystical and therefore false - and this is where Winch parts company.

Winch says that Evans Pritchard believes that scientific notions "accord with objective reality"¹⁸ while those of the Azande do not - the Azande and western scientists have different conceptions of reality, but the scientific ones agree/ correspond with what "reality actually is like"¹⁹ whereas Azande beliefs do not have that relation to it. Winch says that the difficulty lies in a sense with the expression "agreement with reality". While he endorses the idea that people's beliefs must be checkable against some independent 'reality' if one is not to slide into "an extreme Protagorean relativism"²⁰ it is important to recognize the fact that "the check of the independently real",²¹ that of agreement with reality, or the real/ unreal distinction, operate *within* language - it is within various uses of language that conceptions of reality have their place. If "we wish to understand the significance of these concepts, we must examine the use they actually do have - in the language".²² Evans Pritchard, however, "is trying to work with a conception of reality which is not determined by its

¹⁸ Winch p81

¹⁹ Ibid p81

²⁰ Ibid p81

²¹ Ibid p81

²² Ibid p82

actual use in language. He wants something against which that use itself can be appraised".²³ But this, says Winch, "is not possible; and no more possible in the case of scientific discourse than it is in any other".²⁴

"We may ask", says Winch, "whether a particular scientific hypothesis agrees with reality and test this by observation and experiment. Given the experimental methods, and the established use of the theoretical terms entering into the hypothesis, then the question of whether it holds or not is settled by reference to something independent of what I, or anybody else, care to think. But the general nature of the data revealed by the experiment can only be specified in terms of criteria built into the methods of experiment employed and these, in turn, make sense only to someone who is conversant with the kind of scientific activity within which they are employed".²⁵ But what "Evans Pritchard wants to say is that the criteria applied in scientific experimentation constitute a true link between our ideas and an independent reality, whereas those characteristic of other systems of thought - in particular magical methods of thought - do not. It is evident that the expressions "true link" and "independent reality"... cannot themselves be explored by reference to the scientific universe of discourse, as this would beg the question. We have then to ask how, by reference to what established

²³ Ibid p82

²⁴ Ibid p82

²⁵ Ibid p82

universe of discourse, the use of these expressions *is* to be explained,"²⁶ - something Evans Pritchard has not answered.

We have no access to reality 'as it actually is' outside of any 'framework'/ language/ way of conceptualizing/ experiencing. What counts as 'real' or 'true' or contradictory or coherent etc is dependent on, and cannot be specified in isolation from, the 'framework' *and* context in which such categories and criteria are used. The 'scientific' way of systemizing and ordering reality is only one of the ways of making the world intelligible.²⁷ It is a mistake, says Winch, to interpret other modes as a kind of half-hearted, unsuccessful attempt at scientific reasoning. Religious beliefs or Zande witchcraft beliefs are *different* kinds of understanding, not primitive or misguided forms of science. When faced, as Evans Pritchard was, with two 'languages' which are "fundamentally different in kind, such that much of what may be expressed in one has no possible counterpart in the other"²⁸ we cannot simply assume that *one* (only one, and almost always 'our' 'language', our concep-

²⁶ Ibid pp82,83

²⁷ And only one of the ways even within western culture - there are others, such as religious ones, which are incommensurable with 'science', and yet many 'westerners' can and do often inhabit both without any/ much experience of conflict; any need to judge one right and the other wrong, or to explain one in terms of the other etc. It thus vastly oversimplifies/ distorts to characterize western thinking as 'scientific' in any monolithic way. Yet understandings like those of Anthropology do aspire to some of the status of a 'science' and do defer to a certain conception of scientific thought in their claims and practice.

²⁸ Ibid p91

tion of reality) must accord with what reality is really like outside of all language, and so that we (in this case, Europeans) are 'right' and that they (the Azande) are 'wrong'.²⁹

Obviously, if we attempt to evaluate 'their' claims in terms of our own very different 'language', using our categories and criteria and distinctions their claims might very well be judgeable as 'wrong'. But Winch argues that such moves are neither useful or legitimate. He argues that although 'rationality' is a necessary part of any language, what *constitutes* rationality in a particular society/ framework; what for instance *counts* as consistency or whatever, can only be determined against the actual context of use and the wider context of the way of life of the people who use the language.³⁰ He says for instance, of claims that Zande witchcraft beliefs are contradictory (and therefore inadequate/ untrue etc), that "the context from which the suggestion of contradiction is made"³¹ ('our' 'scientific' culture) is not the same as that in which witchcraft beliefs operate. To judge them contradictory, by our foreign criteria is not only illegitimate, but crucially to misunderstand, to commit "a category mistake"³² (In fact, thus, we get things wrong).

So - if we agree with Winch that there is no access to

²⁹ Ibid p89

³⁰ Ibid see p100

³¹ Ibid p93

³² Ibid p93

reality as it really is outside of all ways of conceptualizing/ perceiving 'it'; and if we accept too, that there are no 'neutral', 'objective' (in the objectivist sense) universal criteria available to us to apply impartially and unproblematically to all claims, or no one framework into which all others may be translated and then compared; and if we agree that to *impose* our particular framework and context dependent criteria outside of the context that supports and makes sense of them, outside the scope of their applicability and usefulness, is neither justified or helpful in coming to an adequate understanding - what then? Winch does argue that other's different beliefs should be interpreted within the context of their way of life.³³ But although there is something obviously right about this, as to interpret beliefs completely outside of their context would hardly be productive of understanding, one cannot understand/ know about their way of life *before* we interpret/ try to understand their beliefs - if we cannot understand their beliefs except in relation to their 'way of life', we cannot understand their way of life except as it is informed/ shaped by their beliefs. Furthermore, how far can you gain access to, or think your way into, the way of life of people you hope to understand? However worthwhile and valuable the

³³ Ibid p95. It is worth noting that Evans Pritchard, when living with the Azande, ran his household in their way (e.g. involving the consultation of oracles etc.) and found this "as satisfactory a way of running my home and affairs as any other I know of" (Evans Pritchard quoted in Winch p87) From within the 'way of life', Evans Pritchard found it pragmatically satisfactory. Yet it did not fit 'scientific' conceptions of rationality and reality and so could not be 'correct' by their 'objective' standards.

endeavour, there are limits to the extent to which it can be accomplished. One can, to various degrees, learn their language,³⁴ participate in their practices, share their way

³⁴To the extent that this is possible, this process should ideally be seen as one of 'learning' things 'new' or 'fresh' as a child does, and not one merely of *translating* them into our language, categories etc. Obviously one never learns a subsequent language in the same way as one learns the first - it is always mediated by the prior language - but to *only* translate would be to keep our categories, criteria, expectations etc intact and merely correlate their's with ours, classify them within our 'framework', which (to the degree of their incommensurability) would be to fundamentally distort and misunderstand them.

Incommensurability (the "claim that two theories are incommensurable is... the claim that there is no language, neutral or otherwise, into which both theories, conceived as sets of sentences, can be translated without residue or loss" [Thomas Kuhn quoted in Manuel Hernández Iglesias *Incommensurability Without Dogmas* (paper presented to Hull University Philosophy Department Graduate Research Seminar, University of Hull June 1992, p6)]) entails intranslatability, though this is always a matter of degree - there is always "some overlap" as Richard Bernstein puts it (*Beyond Objectivism* p85) between 'rival' paradigms/ languages etc. - the claim is not that there is *no* point of similarity/ commonality/ translatability between different theories or whatever, but that there is no framework in which each "could be *fully* expressed and which could therefore be used in a point-by-point comparison between them. (Ibid p86).

But intranslatability does not, as is commonly assumed, entail relativism. As Manuel Hernández Iglesias says, because we cannot translate, it does not mean that we cannot interpret or compare or come to understand. (Iglesias p15) To undermine relativism "it is not necessary to defend [the ideal] that all languages must be mutually translatable. All we need is the weaker claim that any language is in principle learnable" (Ibid p15). "Translation" is, says Kuhn, "of course only the first resort of those who ask comprehension. Communication can be established in its absence. But where translation is not feasible... interpretation and language acquisition, are required. These processes are not arcane. Historians, anthropologists and.. small children engage in them every day" (Kuhn quoted in Iglesias P18). I fully agree, though with emphasis to the fact that though anthropologists etc can and do *learn* languages, as opposed to merely translating them, their learning is still to varying extents mediated by their previous language/ beliefs etc.

of life; but the Anthropologist or immigrant or exile, however successfully they immerse themselves in a new or different culture, do not see or experience it exactly as those who have been born into it do - their understanding and experience will always be mediated by their prior beliefs/ experiences/ way of life.

I do not mean this in any negative sense, in fact I think it has many positive features - (for example, while the position of an *absolute* 'outsider' would not be very useful in coming to understand another culture or whatever [if the outsider remained strictly 'outside' that is] we don't have to assume that the best position for understanding is *necessarily* that of a 'pure' 'insider', or one that merely reproduces that 'inside' understanding. While obviously some things are not knowable/ understandable *except* from the inside; it is also true that from 'inside' some things are not 'visible' or are harder to realize, and actually become easier to 'see' from a certain distance).³⁵ - I just wish to emphasize that understanding another culture or whatever cannot be conceived of as some how leaping out of ours and into theirs, coming to see things exactly as they do. Our (hopeful) understanding of them is still *our* understanding, *from our* situation, not 'theirs', even though it is 'them' and 'their' understandings that we hope to understand. If we cannot understand them properly from entirely within our existing categories and concepts,

³⁵This obviously has connections to the standpoint emphasis on the 'outsider within', those who do not fully occupy certain positions within discourses, who see from a different perspective etc.

then neither can we simply suspend, discard or cancel ours and adopt theirs instead - any understanding we gain will be shaped and limited by our previous beliefs and experiences.

If Winch had stopped here, then his position would, I think, have been a relativist one. If understanding or critique can only take place from *within* a 'way of life' or whatever; then whether or not the anthropologist or whoever can get 'inside' another culture (to the extent that things appear to her exactly as they do to members of that culture) then we are faced with relativism. For if (as I suspect) she cannot, then she is stuck within her own culture and language, as members of the other culture are in theirs. And if she can make the leap to becoming an 'insider'; if, as Beattie says "we could jump over the fence and become *wholly* assimilated to 'their' category systems and world view, we would be no better off, only marooned on their side of the fence instead of our own"³⁶ - for now seeing things as members of that other culture do and not longer as a member of her own; there is still no encounter; no meeting, no exchange or mutual interrogation or informing between the two: we are still stuck within closed and exclusive ways of seeing the world.

Richard Bernstein points out that far from advocating relativism, any idea that rival or alternative paradigms or theories could not be compared, Kuhn introduced the notion of incommensurability to clarify what is and what is not, involved when we *do* compare paradigms. What Kuhn was

³⁶Beattie p17

opposing was the objectivist assumption that "there is (or must be) a single, universal framework of commensuration,³⁷ or "a set of rules ["which the epistemologist can discover"] which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached or what would settle the issue on any point where statements seem to conflict."³⁸ He wanted to emphasize that theories can be, and are, compared and evaluated in *multiple* (and subjectively informed) ways, that there are no fixed rules or algorithms. The "truth" of the incommensurability thesis, says Bernstein "is not *closure* [within the prison house of our own frameworks and ways of life] but openness"³⁹ and that "through the process of subtle, multiple comparison and contrast, we not only come to understand the alien phenomena that we are studying, but better come to understand ourselves".⁴⁰

Winch, for his part, goes on to say "We are not seeking a state in which things will appear to us just as they do to members of S [some other culture] and perhaps [?] such a state is unattainable anyway. But we are seeking a way of looking at things which goes beyond our previous way in that it has in some way taken account of and incorporated the other way that members of S have of looking at things. Seriously to study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own - not simply to bring the other way

³⁷ Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p85

³⁸ Ibid p85

³⁹ Ibid p91

⁴⁰ Ibid p91

within the existing boundaries of our own, because the point about the latter is that they *ex hypothesi* exclude that other".⁴¹ The task is not, he says, "like that of making intelligible a natural phenomenon, where we are limited only by what counts as intelligibility for us. We must somehow bring S's conception of intelligibility... into (intelligible!) relation with our own... That is, we have to create a new unity for the conception of intelligibility, having a certain relation to our old one and perhaps requiring a *considerable realignment of our categories*." [my emphasis].⁴²

For instance, Winch says of Zande explanation in terms of witchcraft that it does not apparently exclude explanation in terms of "natural causes"⁴³ - the Azande are perfectly able to describe the collapse of a granary in terms of the actions of termites etc. Explanation in terms of witchcraft attempts, he suggests, to explain *why* things happen, not *how* (something 'science' doesn't or cannot do). We "do not initially have a category that looks at all like the Zande category of magic."⁴⁴ Since it is we who want to understand the Zande category... the onus is on us to *extend* our understanding so as to make room for [it] rather than to insist on seeing it in terms of our own ready-made distinc-

⁴¹ Winch p99

⁴² Ibid pp98,99

⁴³ Ibid p86

⁴⁴ Though Winch does elsewhere suggest there are certain parallels/ similarities with certain of 'our' religious concepts. See e.g. p104

tion between science and non-science. Certainly the sort of understanding we seek requires that we see the Zande category in *relation* to our own already understood categories. But this neither means that it is right to 'evaluate' magic in terms of criteria belonging to these other categories, nor does it give any clue as to *which* of our existing categories of thought will provide the best point of reference from which we can understand the point of Zande practices".⁴⁵ This does not sound like relativism to me, but a critical process of comparison, revision and expansion; and crucially one that recognizes the need for *change* in response to the challenge other's different beliefs etc presents us.

Talal Asad quotes Rudolf Pannwitz as saying "the basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign language".⁴⁶ Asad says the "good translator" "does not immediately assume that unusual difficulty in conveying the sense of an alien discourse denotes a fault in the latter, but instead critically examines the normal state of his or her own language".⁴⁷ Asad importantly emphasizes the pervasiveness of power in such practices of translation, how

⁴⁵ Ibid p102 [first two emphases mine]

⁴⁶ Pannwitz quoted in Talal Asad *The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology* in James Clifford and George E. Marcus (eds) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press Berkeley 1986) p157

⁴⁷ Asad p157

anthropology is "enmeshed in conditions of power - professional, national, international".⁴⁸ Passing "beyond the limits of one's habitual usages... breaking down and reshaping... one's own language"⁴⁹ in encounter with another is not easy, in part because it depends, says Asad, "on the willingness of the 'translators' *language* to subject itself to this transforming power".⁵⁰ He puts it this way "to emphasize that the matter is largely something the translator cannot determine by individual activity (any more than the individual speaker can effect the evolution of his or her language)" but is "governed by institutionally defined power relations between the languages/ modes of life concerned. To put it crudely: because the languages of Third World societies [those Social Anthropologists have traditionally studied] are 'weaker' in relation to Western languages (especially to English) they are more likely to submit to forcible transformation in the translation process than the other way round".⁵¹

This is indeed so, and something to be combatted not merely by epistemological theory or, as he says individual practice. But it does also emphasize that languages/ 'ways of life' are not "self enclosed windowless monads" as

⁴⁸ Ibid p163

⁴⁹ Ibid p157

⁵⁰ Ibid p157

⁵¹ Ibid p157

Bernstein puts it,⁵² that we are not "prisoners caught in the framework of our theories, our expectations, our past experiences, our language"⁵³ (as Karl Popper mistakenly supposed Kuhn to be implying) - even though our encounters and relations are power laden and oppressive and far from egalitarian. Faced with a different 'framework' or perspective, employing different concepts or discourses; we cannot, if we seriously wish to understand, just employ our own criteria and concepts as they are, or were, up to the encounter - for as they stand they often deny or exclude or cannot deal with them in any satisfactory way. Nor can we attempt to attach a different way of looking at things onto our own so that it 'fits' nicely without any adjustment having to be made on our part, without anything having to be altered. Neither, of course, as we step outside our perspective to inhabit theirs, to know "what it is really like" from within, or step right outside any to compare theirs and ours with 'Reality' and see who has got it 'right'.

But the crucial phrase above was "without anything having to be altered". If we just want to preserve our perspective intact, without challenge or revision, then a picture of us all separated off into closed, static, self contained 'ways of life' or whatever would perhaps be attractive. But I want to argue that on the contrary perspectives are open, changing and mutually (though perhaps

⁵²Richard Bernstein *Incommensurability and Otherness Revisited* Chapter 3 in his *The New Constellation: The Ethical - Political Horizons of Modernity/ Postmodernity* (Polity Press Oxford 1991) p61

⁵³Karl Popper quoted in Bernstein *The New Constellation* p61

not equally) informing and transforming - that we can understand, compare and judge over differences of perspective, from where we are situated, *if* we are prepared to risk or test our understandings in the process. Understanding can occur in encounter with others, in response to the challenge their different experiences and understandings offer us, if we are prepared to question our own self-understandings in the light of theirs and revise them if need be. Understanding across differences involves a reflexive and dialectical interplay of perspectives. as hinted at in the work of Winch and others but best described, I think, in that of Hans-Georg Gadamer, and it is to his understanding of understanding that I now turn.

GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS

This is not a comprehensive or critical look at Gadamer. It is rather a re-statement of some of his main themes and ideas in so far as they relate to aspects of my own position as it has developed up to now. Gadamer concentrates primarily on art and history and texts: I cannot here devote any space to his discussion of art, though his concern with investigating "modes of experience" in which a truth is communicated or experienced that cannot be attained or verified by the "methodological means" of 'science'¹ is one I share, and would like to develop elsewhere. I am myself not so concerned with understanding across differences of time, as across social and political differences; but I think what he says about 'historical' understanding applies to social and political understanding as well. I am also less concerned than Gadamer is with the interpretation of texts. Obviously when understanding another historical context one has to rely to a large extent on texts. When attempting to understand the social and political situation of both oneself and others you do still have to rely heavily on texts (probably more so than I usually acknowledge) but not solely - we engage in personal dialogue and interaction of varying sorts and degrees with

¹Gadamer *Truth and Method* pxii

others; and audio and visual means of communication add to and alter the meaning of the words of those who are not present to us; so that interpretation in these cases is more than textual. Since I am describing Gadamer's position, I will sometimes be talking in his terms, e.g. in terms of texts or history. This stands as it is as an understanding of historical understanding; but can, I think, easily be translated into socio-political terms, where it most applies to what I am concerned with. - So for 'historical situation' you could read 'historical/ social/ political situation' to bridge the gap between his position and mine.

Richard Bernstein describes Gadamer's *Truth and Method* as a critique of Cartesianism - a critique of the supposed "dichotomy between subjective and objective; the conception of knowledge as being a correct representation of what is objective; the conviction that human reason can completely free itself of bias, prejudice and tradition; the ideal of a universal method by which we can first secure firm foundations of Knowledge and then build the ediface of a universal science; the belief that by the power of self reflection we can transcend our historical context and horizon and know things as they really are in themselves...".² Bernstein sees Gadamer as elaborating a way of thinking that moves beyond both objectivism and relativism, rejecting the oppositions so entrenched in Enlightenment thought.³ Gadamer does not merely "raise objections about the epistemological, methodo-

²Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p36

³Ibid p37

logical, or even metaphysical claims of Cartesianism. The basis of his critique," says Bernstein, "is *ontological*; he thinks Cartesianism is based on a misunderstanding of being, and in particular upon a misunderstanding of our being-in-the-world."⁴

Gadamer is concerned not so much with *knowledge*, as with *understanding*. There is a clear difference between knowing something and *understanding* something - with understanding involving something 'more', that without which knowledge loses its force; "a sense of the whole, the overview with its myriad ... associations and connotations that remain in the background and yet determine whether the emphasis and import [of what is to be known] are properly grasped."⁵ Gadamer, following Heidegger, says that "understanding is not just one of the possible behaviours of the subject"⁶ but its mode of being itself: it underlies and pervades everything we do; *everything* is understood and interpreted. (To Gadamer understanding and interpretation cannot be separated - understanding involves interpretation and interpretation involves understanding. "Interpretation is not an occasional act subsequent to understanding"⁷ but operant in the initial encounter with what is to be understood.) Gadamer is seeking to understand understanding

⁴ Ibid p118

⁵ David Cousins Hoy *The Critical Circle - Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (University of California Press London 1978) p48

⁶ Gadamer *Truth* pxviii

⁷ Ibid p274

itself - to reach a better understanding of it "than seems possible under the modern scientific notion of cognition."⁸ He is *not* supplying a *method* for understanding or gaining knowledge, but is attempting to describe how it *actually* works, rather than how it could or should be.⁹ Gadamer's hermeneutics is not "a methodology of the human sciences but an attempt to understand what the human sciences truly are, beyond their methodological self-consciousnesses"¹⁰ (which obviously involves a critique of these methodological and ontological assumptions.)

Gadamer denies the Enlightenment claim that there can be understanding that is free from prejudices,¹¹ norms and values, or detached from its own situatedness. He speaks of the human science's naive faith in method and the objectivity that can (supposedly) be gained by attempting to exclude all subjective elements, their assumption of the possibility of neutral objective observation; arguing that on the contrary, truth cannot be guaranteed by method, and that ignoring the situatedness and perspectivity of one's own understanding makes it not more but less objective.¹² There is, and can be "no absolute, aperspectival standpoint

⁸ Ibid pxiv

⁹ Ibid p465

¹⁰ Ibid pxiii

¹¹ Ibid see p446

¹² See e.g. Gadamer *The Problem of Historical Consciousness* in Paul Rabinow and William H. Sullivan (eds) *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (University of California Press Berkeley and LA 1979) p158

(a contradiction in terms)¹³ - all understanding is contingent, finite and conditioned, shaped by the context in which it takes place. By concealing its own situatedness and "by failing to recognize those presuppositions that govern its own approach to understanding" objectivism distorts knowledge and falls short of reaching that truth which (despite the finitude of our understanding) Gadamer says could be reached.¹⁴ Thus, while rejecting objectivism, he wishes to preserve truth and does not want to fall into a relativism or subjectivism that he sees as parasitic upon objectivism - preserving the dichotomy by accepting the original dualism and merely inverting it.

Gadamer maintains that much of what Aristotle said about *phronesis* or 'practical reason' is true of understanding in general. Practical reasoning is not concerned only with what is universal or always the same, but with the particular and changeable.¹⁵ It involves a mediation between the 'universal' and the particular in which both are co-determined, rather than relying on rules or Method or the reduction of one to the other.¹⁶ It is not detached from a knower's being but rather becomes constitutive of her

¹³Hoy p52

¹⁴Gadamer *Truth* p268
(He says "historical objectivism resembles statistics, which are such an excellent means of propaganda because they let the facts speak and hence simulate an objectivity that in reality depends on the legitimacy of the questions asked.)

¹⁵Hoy p58

¹⁶Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p146

praxis.¹⁷ It requires experience and perception as well as reflection and theory. (Perception not in the sensory sense, but in the sense in which we perceive/ recognize what something is, or what is needed.)¹⁸ Understanding and experience are inseparable - understanding requires experience and experience understanding. Practical Knowledge is directed toward concrete situations, but it involves more than just a distinction between the concrete and the general or abstract - there is a "positive ethical element" to it;¹⁹ it is moral and political in nature. Practical reasoning is concerned with how to act - it is the reasoning of deliberation and choice, of when and how and what to do. This cannot be fully determined independently of the situation in which the knower has to act, and the knower cannot attempt a detached observation of the situation from outside, as it were, being within it and part of it herself.²⁰

Gadamer emphasizes the necessary situatedness of understanding. All understanding is grounded in and constituted by the concrete historical situation in which it occurs. Our understanding is as much a creature of our time and place as we are; there is no absolute reason, only historical and situated reason.²¹ All our understanding is partial, limited and qualified - there is no aperspectival

¹⁷ Ibid p146

¹⁸ Hoy p58

¹⁹ Gadamer *Truth* p21

²⁰ Ibid see p280

²¹ Ibid p245

position from which to view the world, no point outside history or society from which we can come to know it. We cannot step outside the historical conditions we find ourselves in, and in which we understand. Gadamer defines "the concept of 'situation' by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision"²² [more visual metaphors]. Essential to the concept of situation is the concept of *Horizon*, which I shall come back to in a bit.

Our situation will determine in advance what seems interesting, "what seems worth inquiring about, and what will appear as an object of investigation".²³ It will determine the preunderstandings that we bring to any understanding of a subject matter [more about that later] and will lead or shape our interpretations of it. These preunderstandings can be made conscious to an extent, but self-reflection can never lead to clarification of *all* preunderstandings - "we will never achieve complete self-transparency or perfect or absolute knowledge"²⁴ - all interpretation must remain mediated and contextual. Acquiring awareness of our situation is not easy - the "idea of a situation means that we are not standing outside it"²⁵ as in the old ideal of objective knowledge. Since we are always within a situation, throwing "light on it is a task that is

²² Ibid p269

²³ Ibid p267

²⁴ Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p129

²⁵ Gadamer *Truth* p269

never completed entirely"²⁶ as casting light on old shadows creates new ones, and so on. Our consciousness of our situatedness will itself always be situated, we can never escape it. Gadamer uses the analogy of the vanishing point in the perspective of a painting in describing the perspective of the interpreter - we cannot look for or *adopt* this as our 'standpoint'; our point of view is already given when we look at the painting.²⁷ One's prejudices are not something you agree or disagree with, or can choose freely or arbitrarily.

Gadamer holds that prejudices are operant in every act of understanding. "Understanding always implies a pre-understanding which is in turn pre-figured by the determinate tradition in which the interpreter lies and which shapes [her] prejudices."²⁸ Our understanding is guided and conditioned by our prejudices, which arise out of our particular social/ historical situation. As said before, these are not something freely chosen by us; indeed we are usually not conscious of them. We can become conscious of (some) of them, but this consciousness does not reflect them away, or make us somehow 'unprejudiced'. Our consciousness of our conditionedness remains itself conditioned.²⁹ Prejudices are not, though, (as the Enlightenment conception of knowledge sees them) purely negative, an obstacle to the attainment of

²⁶ Ibid p269

²⁷ Ibid p293

²⁸ Gadamer *The Problem* p108

²⁹ Hoy p70

truth. All understanding necessarily involves prejudices - the fundamental prejudice of the Enlightenment being, says Gadamer, "the prejudice against prejudice itself"³⁰ - a belief that there can be an absolute unconditioned, unsituated, unmediated Reason. Absolute and unprejudiced reason is however, impossible - even Descartes, with his method of radical doubt did/ could not discard or bracket all prejudices.³¹

To gain an appropriate understanding of understanding, we have to remove this negative conception of prejudice and reaffirm its meaning as in pre- or provisional judgement³² without connotations of falsity or illegitimacy. Some prejudices might, on testing, indeed turn out to be false; but many are legitimate, and can be sources of truth. The fact that they are prejudices does not mean that they are *necessarily* wrong, or something we have to get rid of - prejudices are, on the contrary, the indispensable conditions of our experience and understanding. Prejudices "constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. [They] are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something - whereby what we encounter says something to us."³³ Prejudices operate constantly unnoticed in all our experiencing and

³⁰ Gadamer *Truth* p237

³¹ See Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p127

³² Gadamer *Truth* p240

³³ Gadamer *The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem* in David Linge (ed) *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (University of California Press London 1976) p9

understanding so that we only become aware of them when they are 'stimulated' or 'provoked', so to speak; when an encounter with something else (a person or text, for e.g.) makes them questionable in view of what the other says to us.³⁴ (This does not however mean that this prejudice is simply set aside or discarded, or another put in its place. As Gadamer says, prejudices are only "properly brought into play" through "being at risk".³⁵

Crucial to Gadamer's hermeneutics is the concept of "application". Gadamer sees application not as a separate moment, but as an integral part of all understanding - understanding/ interpretation is always *application*. By this he does not mean the later and conscious applying of concepts and theories to a situation; for example to 'make it relevant' to present concerns, or to 'put it to use' - the knower is not free to apply it or not apply it, as the very act of understanding *is* the act of applying it to one's situation. Application "is neither a subsequent or merely occasional part of understanding, but co-determines it as a whole from the very beginning".³⁶ It is "not the relating of some pre given universal to the particular situation"³⁷ - in understanding anything we apply it to ourselves, not afterward, but in the very act of understanding. Contrary to objectivist theories of understanding, there can be no

³⁴ Gadamer *Truth* p266

³⁵ *Ibid* p266

³⁶ *Ibid* p289

³⁷ *Ibid* p289

question as to whether knowledge *should* be engaged or relevant: it *is* - the interpreter must relate the text (or whatever) to her situation if she wants to understand it at all.³⁶ In seeking to understand something we cannot disregard ourselves and our situation; the meaning that is created will always be a relation, a product of ourselves and the subject matter; will always be mediated by our understandings and concerns.

(So, in reading Gadamer I do not first understand just what he means 'in itself' and then apply it to my position and concerns - my understanding of him is itself an application of his text to my position; I cannot separate myself and my previous understandings and concerns out from the meaning I obtain. As Gadamer says, no reader simply reads what is there: the person reading a text is herself part of the meaning she apprehends.³⁷ So my understanding will be different to that of someone who did not have the same preconceptions, interests and concerns on reading him, even though we might both be wholly committed to 'the meaning of the text' and both be understanding the same text. (This is why I think experience and situatedness are so important. Knowing is an encounter/ relation between what is to be known and the knower in a particular context that shapes and constrains it. Since understanding something is a product both of the 'subject matter', and you and your situation; since all knowing is mediated by all your

³⁶ Ibid pp274,289

³⁷ Ibid p304

previous understanding and experience; we have to pay attention not only to 'what is known' but to the knower herself, as she is also constitutive of the meaning created in the encounter. Thus the historical/ social location of the knower, her experiences and understandings of them, are an integral aspect of the knowledge she produces, and cannot be ignored or transcended.)⁴⁰

Gadamer's concept of 'Horizon' is an attempt at describing the situatedness or context-based character of interpretation. "The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point".⁴¹ Applying this analogy allows a distinction to be

⁴⁰ Thus I think we can say that some perspectives are inherently more promising or productive for coming to know some things, while others are conversely less so; in the sense both of certain things being less 'visible' from a certain location, and in the sense that someone in that position will not be likely to have had the experiences necessary to understand something, or for certain concepts to have relevance and meaning for them - they will not be able to grasp the meaning/ truth of a statement unless they share to some extent the context/ presuppositions etc on which it depends. To put it in somewhat Gadamerian terms - they will not be aware of the unstated question to which it is an answer. So, on one level there are infinite amounts of things we do not and cannot know, because they are dependent on the position and experience of the knower. And this, I think, must just be accepted (humbly?). But neither do you just leave it at that and retreat into a 'closed' circles/ horizons/ frameworks sort of scenario. For in another sense, the sense of Gadamer's 'fusion' of horizons (see bit that follows) we can understand and must pay attention to the experiences and perspectives of others - not because we can just grasp 'what it is like' from where they are in any unmediated way (and thus perhaps ourselves have many perspectives on a subject matter in some sort of attempt at the 'whole picture' or completeness) - but because we can only critically examine and improve our own understandings by attempting to take theirs into consideration, and testing and revising ours in the process (see bit that follows).

⁴¹ Ibid p269

made between near and far (e.g. in not being limited to what is nearest to us but able to see beyond it; or in being able to see the relative significance or position of things within it); it allows us to speak of possible expansion of horizon, of opening up new horizons etc, etc.⁴² It is impossible to separate oneself completely from one's horizon; but this does not mean, as some assume, that we are completely trapped within our horizons - horizons are flexible and "always in motion", they move with us, as we move within them.⁴³ There are no such things as closed horizons; they are limited and finite, but *open*, changing and fluid.

The past and present for example, are not, as Nietzsche pictured them, closed circles separated by absolute differences. The problem that arises from this picture - of how to get out of one circle or horizon and into another, is a false one. The "art of historical understanding" is not "one of learning to place ourselves within alien horizons" "unconnected in any way with our own"⁴⁴ - we do not have to "set ourselves within the spirit of the age, and think with its ideas and its thoughts, not our own".⁴⁵ To speak, as Nietzsche does, of historical consciousness as learning to place ourselves in many changing horizons, is not correct - to shut our eyes to ourselves in this way is in fact to have

⁴² Ibid p269

⁴³ Ibid p271

⁴⁴ Ibid p271

⁴⁵ Ibid p264

no acknowledged historical horizon.⁴⁶ This picture is derived from, and takes as its paradigm, the positivistic ideal of 'objective' neutral observation it supposedly wishes to deny. It is caught in the very picture it attacks.

One cannot disregard oneself and one's situation in understanding others. We cannot withdraw, close off or protect our own horizon from the encounter, imagining that we can simply place ourselves in, or reconstruct, theirs. Making our own standpoint safely hidden, or unattainable to others is to abandon the claim that they have any "truth valid and intelligible for ourselves. This [kind of] acknowledgement of the 'otherness' of the other... involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth".⁴⁷ Claiming, or appearing, to transcend our own conditionedness while recognizing the radical difference of the other is actually seeking to master the other, to deny that they have anything to say that is valid and applicable to us in our situation.⁴⁸ Instead we have to take account of our own situatedness and not overlook the claim of the other or what she has to say to us. This requires that we be open to the other and accept that some at least of what she says will likely be critical of us and our understandings.⁴⁹ Our prejudices at a particular point constitute our horizon, that beyond which at that particular place/ time/ circumstance we cannot

⁴⁶ Ibid p272

⁴⁷ Ibid pp270 (and 324)

⁴⁸ See Hoy p63

⁴⁹ See Gadamer *Truth* p324

see.⁵⁰ But our horizon is not fixed, it is continually moving and being formed in that we have continuously to test our prejudices and understandings in encounters with other people/ texts/ times.⁵¹ Gadamer wants to resist any kind of psychological account of historical understanding that relies on concepts like empathy, or attempting to 'be' the other.⁵² One can never disregard oneself in understanding another person, nor can one put oneself in her place. Yet Gadamer does not suggest that the other time/ text/ person is unknowable, that the gap between the two is absolute, "a yawning abyss".⁵³ The text/ person to be understood and the person doing the understanding "are not two alien entities isolated from one another... [but rather] they... stand in a state of relatedness to each other...[as parts] of an overriding historical... continuum; which... is the ultimate cause of the prejudices which guide our different understandings".⁵⁴

Despite (because of?) their distance and difference 'subject' and 'object' are not essentially separate, but are linked and related - historically/ politically/ spatially or whatever - as part of an open and shifting 'totality' or

⁵⁰ See Gadamer *Truth* p272

⁵¹ Ibid see p273

⁵² Ibid see p272

⁵³ Ibid p264

⁵⁴ Kurt Mueller Vollmer; (ed) *Introduction to The Hermeneutics Reader* (Basil Blackwell Oxford 1986) p38,39

'horizon' that embraces both.⁵⁵ The time/ person/ whatever is not knowable 'in itself', free from any mediation or conditioning by our own horizon - but understanding is nevertheless possible, and occurs through what Gadamer terms a "fusion of horizons", whereby we expand and revise our horizon in encounter with theirs.⁵⁶ Our horizons thus are never fixed or closed but continually in process of being tested and reformed. This 'fusion' does not mean that the other's horizon is appropriated, or reconstructed, or known/ experienced as the other does herself; but rather that this dialectical interaction with the other results in a *new* horizon, that is still conditional, incomplete and provisional. Gadamer sees this process as leading not to some ideal/ maximal state of complete knowledge; but to continual "openness to more experience"⁵⁷ "Our current horizon is [thus] constantly being formed through fusions in which our prejudices are confirmed, concretized and altered".⁵⁸

This process of constant movement and revision can never be brought to completion. Understanding never achieves finality, is always open and anticipatory - meaning can never be exhausted or brought to final closure. (Just as Gadamer sees no end to understanding, he is not concerned

⁵⁵ See Gadamer *Truth* p271

⁵⁶ See Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p144, Gadamer *Truth* p273, Jack Mendelson *The Habermas-Gadamer Debate* in *New German Critique* Vol 18 1979 p55, Hoy p139

⁵⁷ Hoy p60

⁵⁸ Mendelson p56

with the problem of beginnings. He is anti-foundationalist, critical of the search for a presuppositionless or certain starting point. Any inquiry obviously 'starts' *somewhere* - all understanding is historical and finitely situated. What is to be understood is understood in an already determined situation, and is mediated by that situation, by the prejudices that the knower brings to his understanding of the subject matter. But this is not a beginning in any foundationalist sense.⁵⁹ Nor is it certain, something absolute beyond question or investigation. The task of hermeneutics is to go back and examine that place we 'started' from - the very ground we base ourselves on must be continually rethought and revised as we proceed. The contingency and partiality too, of the situation we begin from, is not as foundationalists might see it; a regrettable source of distortion of the purity of our knowledge, but the very condition of its possibility. The apparent beginning of interpretation is in fact a response determined by the situation. Our understanding begins from where we are, as we attempt to answer 'questions' arising from our particular position.)

Gadamer thus affirms that we *can* understand across differences of time/ 'horizon' etc. Yet he does not aim to flatten out or dissolve these differences - it is important to emphasize that 'fusion' does not imply *reconciliation*⁶⁰ - it is more a *mediation*, a dialectical (but not synthe-

⁵⁹ See Gadamer *Truth* p429

⁶⁰ See Hoy p97

zing) interrelation. Gadamer in fact *emphacizes* differences in culture and history,⁶¹ but not as *obstacles* that have "to be overcome", but as rather "positive and productive" possibilities for understanding.⁶² 'Fusion' does not require a 'naive' assimilation or reconciliation of differences to cover up the tension between our horizon and others - rather it requires that these be brought out.⁶³ It is the tensions, the differences, between horizons that 'provokes' the prejudices operant in our understanding and enables us to become aware of them. But making prejudices conscious does not require that we necessarily do away with them, to effect the extinction of self/ situatedness demanded by objectivism - rather it requires that we 'test' and transform them in the encounter"⁶⁴ as the text/ other "asserts its truth" against

⁶¹David Cousins Hoy says "no thinker is as willing to emphasize such differences as Gadamer" (p6)

⁶²Gadamer *Truth* p264, *The Problem* p155
Distance and partiality are not negative phenomena that have to be transcended - all understanding will always be partial, situated in time and place and circumstance. Instead we must recognize them as positive conditions of understanding - we could not have the knowledge we do if we were not the partial and 'prejudiced' beings we are. Distance too, is productive - we often cannot see the present in its fuller context and significance, whereas temporal distance often lets its meaning emerge (though this meaning is never complete - there are always new understandings and contexts that reveal new meanings in a constant process of revision.) And it is only in encounter with what is 'new' and 'different' that our understanding develops and proceeds.

⁶³See Gadamer *Truth* p273
(These differences, while emphasized, must not be allowed to solidify into the closed and seperate perspectives of the Nietzschean picture - rather they must be explored and examined for the understanding thus made possible.)

⁶⁴Mendelson p55

them.⁶⁵ We are usually unaware of our prejudices until they become 'stimulated', questioned or put to the test by an encounter with an 'other'. But in doing so it does not mean that we have to uncritically believe everything they say,⁶⁶ or come to agree with them, or set aside our understandings and replace them with theirs (as if we could disregard ourselves in this way). What it does require is that we 'remain open' to them, be prepared for them to tell us something,⁶⁷ and consider critically what they say and how it relates to us in our situation. To be 'open' to other people or a text, implies not only that they are situated in my system of thought "but that I [situate] myself in relation to them",⁶⁸ in considering their claims.

Gadamer's hermeneutics is thus concerned with the achieving of an understanding that is also self-understanding - that *demands* self understanding in that in order to understand another text/ person/ time it is necessary to understand oneself and one's situation, to realize how one's situation and prejudices mediate one's perception of the subject matter and what the subject matter has to say to/about oneself and one's situation. Purely rational self reflection (a la Descartes) is impossible however - it is only through "the dialogical encounter with what is alien

⁶⁵ Gadamer *Truth* P238

⁶⁶ Hoy p63 He points out that indeed respect for the other person entails "an obligation to think through what is said as thoroughly as possible"

⁶⁷ Gadamer *Truth* p238

⁶⁸ Gadamer *The Problem* p151

to us, makes a claim on us, and has an affinity with what we are, that we can open ourselves to risking and testing our prejudices".⁶⁹ We can only understand ourselves via distance and encounter with difference - thus inquiry into the past/ other perspectives etc is as essential in coming to understand the present/ one's own perspective, as understanding oneself is to understanding them. Knowledge is thus acquired "through dialectical (and reflexive) interplay with others."⁷⁰

This interplay of self/ others follows the course of the hermeneutical cycle of interpretation; whereby in the process of understanding, part and whole are related in a circular way such that in order to understand the whole one has to understand the parts, while in order to understand the parts one has to have comprehension of the whole, as the meaning of the part can only be discovered from the context in which it occurs (i.e. ultimately, the whole). Understanding thus involves a continual movement from whole to parts and vice versa; in a kind of circle or spiral of continual return and revision. "Moreover", says Gadamer, "this cycle is constantly expanding in that the concept of the whole is relative, and when it is placed in ever larger contexts the understanding of the individual elements is always affec-

⁶⁹ Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p129

⁷⁰ Ibid p143

ted".⁷¹ Understanding is therefore provisional and infinite in nature, recurrent and dialectical. Gadamer sees other aspects that are usually polarized, such as subject/ object, subjectivity/ objectivity as operating in this way - the two poles being moments of a mutually constituting process, not separate and opposed elements of which one can be privileged above, or reduced to, the other. (Hermeneutics also emphasizes the importance of the interplay of familiarity and strangeness, similarity and difference, in the process of understanding).⁷²

"Understanding is not a matter of acquiring eternally true knowledge about a previously given reality... it is itself a concrete happening, a form of doing and creating"⁷³ (a creating of meaning). Understanding, says Gadamer, is the process of coming into being of meaning. The text or whatever is to be understood does not possess a meaning 'in itself' that is 'given', or which can be isolated from our prejudices. Understanding is not, or is always more than, a mere repetition or recreation of someone else's meaning⁷⁴ - rather it is a creation of meaning through the constant

⁷¹ Gadamer *Truth* p167

Gadamer describes the knowledge of *taste* (note he sees it as *knowledge* not mere opinion/ 'subjective' preference) as "evaluations of the object in relation to a whole in order to see if it fits", if it is fitting (*Truth* p36). He places a lot of emphasis on the acts/ processes of *judgement* and *evaluation* - seeing things against/ in relation to, something else/ a situation etc.

⁷² See Gadamer *Truth* p262

⁷³ Hoy p92

⁷⁴ Gadamer *Truth* p338

mediation of someone/ something other and ourselves.⁷⁵ There is no *one* meaning, "one right interpretation". Interpretation is always a *mediation*. The meaning of a text, for instance is not limited to, or identical to the author's *intention*;⁷⁶ it is not purely an expressing of the author's subjectivity, but "only comes into real existence in a dialogue of the interpreter with the text" in which the situation of the *interpreter* [not only of the author as in "objectivist historicism"] is an important condition of the understanding of the text.⁷⁷ Ourselves and our previous understandings can never be eliminated from the understanding of a text (though we/ they can alter in the encounter).

This is not to say that our understanding is arbitrary or a matter of whim, or that we can just impose our own meanings on things as we feel like. There are a variety of possible meanings, but not "everything is possible".⁷⁸ Every interpreter submits her own interpretation, but these are by no means arbitrary "but may attain, or fail to attain, a definable degree of appropriateness".⁷⁹ The 'object' of interpretation "must be understood on a correlative way. It is not a single meaning-in-itself but rather a source of possibilities of meaning which can be realized by further interpreters insofar as they investigate it from differing

⁷⁵ See Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* P139

⁷⁶ Gadamer *Truth* p263

⁷⁷ See Hoy p52

⁷⁸ Gadamer *Truth* p238

⁷⁹ Gadamer *Problem* p105

perspectives".⁸⁰ Meaning is thus open and dependent on the hermeneutical situation from which an interpretation is produced. Things do not have meaning 'in themselves' but only to/ for particular situated knowers who are active in the production of this meaning, and who are in a sense part of this meaning themselves. Yet though the "sense to be understood finds its concrete... form only in interpretation" Gadamer sees this interpretive work as "wholly committed to the meaning" of the text, or whatever is being understood.⁸¹ Understanding is always tempered by the 'thing itself' that we are trying to understand.⁸² When we understand, we always seek (and hopefully gain) an understanding of what the 'things themselves' say - but what they say will differ according to the interpreters and interpretive contexts, and the questions asked by and within them.⁸³ No one interpretation can claim to be "the only objective and correct one" - it can only be more or less adequate for a particular time and purpose".⁸⁴

But if interpretation is *related* to context, it is not relative to it in the sense implied by relativism - one can still distinguish between better and worse interpretations. Understanding always proceeds in expectation of truth, and is concerned with the meaning of the subject matter

⁸⁰ Mendelson p55

⁸¹ Gadamer *Truth* p297

⁸² Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p146

⁸³ See Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p139

⁸⁴ Hoy p94

'itself': understanding is a dialogue, a knowing relation with an 'object' (though this term is not really adequate if it implies something separate) in which the meaning of the subject matter finds its form only in the act of interpretation, and the interpretation is wholly committed to the meaning of the subject matter. Though there is not One Right interpretation, no Absolute truth of the matter, this does not mean that there is not any truth. Gadamer rejects a correspondence theory of truth, but is however very concerned with truth, in particular with arguing that truth cannot be guaranteed by method.⁸⁵ Gadamer wants to "go beyond the narrow definition of truth restricted to the assertion of facts".⁸⁶ He is concerned with truth in a larger sense, one beyond that limited as is usual in philosophy, to predicative statements,⁸⁷ especially with modes of experience in which a truth is communicated which cannot be verified by scientific methods (for instance, truths manifested, transmitted and experienced in art.) Gadamer criticizes the dominant philosophical aesthetic, stemming particularly from Kant, which radically subjectivizes art, and no longer sees in aesthetic taste any knowledge.⁸⁸ Such a view falsely restricts the concept of truth to conceptual knowledge and discredits any kind of theoretical knowledge apart from (a certain conception of) natural

⁸⁵ Hence the (ironic) title of his book. (see Hoy p92)

⁸⁶ Hoy p51

⁸⁷ Hoy p36

⁸⁸ Gadamer *Truth* p36

science.⁸⁹

To Gadamer, understanding is not a matter of following a method that leads to truth, but is an *experience*; an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth, and that makes a claim on us. He speaks of truth as "revealed in the process of experience", of truths being *acknowledged*,⁹⁰ and like Heidegger, "seeks to recover the notion of *aletheia* as unconcealment".⁹¹ Gadamer says hermeneutical awareness is more a question of 'being' than explicit consciousness - that objectifying self consciousness is neither always completely possible, or desirable for understanding. Propositions are 'objective' because they objectify - they "lift a thing out of its context and make it stand alone as an object".⁹² There can be no assertion that is absolutely true, as the meaning of a proposition is not just a function of objective reference; but rather depends on its relation to other aspects of the context in which it is made and in which it is embedded.⁹³ Any account will always be inadequate to its subject matter, will always be partial and incomplete, dependent upon the entirety of the situation it arises in. The truth of a statement does not depend on the meaning of assertions abstracted from their circumstances, but can only be judged in relation to them. "There is no

⁸⁹ Ibid p39

⁹⁰ Ibid pxi

⁹¹ Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p152

⁹² Hoy p121

⁹³ Ibid p122

assertion that one can grasp only through the content it presents, if one wants to grasp it in its truth... Every assertion has presuppositions [and non-conceptualised conditions] that it does not assert"⁹⁴ but upon which it is dependent.

As I have said, though Gadamer sees truth as related to context he rejects relativism.⁹⁵ David Hoy calls his position "contextualist"⁹⁶ - interpretation is dependent upon the situation in which it occurs, and there is no transcendental or ahistorical perspective from which we can evaluate competing claims to truth; but this does not mean that all

⁹⁴Gadamer quoted in Hoy p122

⁹⁵See Gadamer *Truth* pxxi

Gadamer *The Universality* pp15,16

Gadamer uses the example of people who have learned to speak, and especially to think, in other languages to argue against relativism. He says that the existence of many different languages does not fragment or close off understanding, but rather underscores its open, infinite nature.

See David Linge (*Editor's Introduction* to the above) for a comparison of the approaches of Gadamer and Wittgenstein. Though they converge in many respects, especially their emphasis on games, linguisticity and intersubjectivity (which I haven't gone into with respect to Gadamer) Linge sees Wittgenstein's stress on the autonomy of language games - each with their own internal rules which can only be clarified from within - and his "desire to avoid a transcendental position from which the plurality of games might be reduced to the rules of one transcendental game" as leaving him "with a multitude of hermetically sealed usages and corresponding life forms" which are closed off to each other. Linge sees this as happening because Wittgenstein does not allow, as Gadamer does, for *mediation* between language games. On Wittgenstein's position *either* "one must settle for a plurality of relative games, *or* one has a metalanguage that does violence to the empirical richness of usages and life forms." This overlooks precisely what Gadamer emphasizes - the continually transformative, assimilative, mediating and *open* nature of language use. (See ppxxxv,xxxvi)

⁹⁶Hoy p69

interpretation (or all interpretive contexts) are equally appropriate or justified. There may be no *single* or *correct* interpretation but we can still distinguish between better and worse interpretations, more or less plausible arguments, assertions which are nearer and further from truth.⁹⁷ Here and now, in the circumstances we are in, we can concretely, argumentatively, dialoguically justify, validate and evaluate claims to truth, without having to rely on absolute or aperspectival standards. Our understandings, partial and perspectival as they are, depending in prejudices that we are mostly unaware of and cannot ever fully 'escape', bring to light the particularity and perspectivity of other's claims and expose and transform their prejudices; as their understandings enable us to recognize our own perspectivity and prejudices and revise our understandings in the light of theirs. Our interpretations, in a sense *because* of their perspectivity, far from inviting relativism, carry implicit criticism of other interpretations,⁹⁸ and likewise 'despite' (actually *because* of) our situatedness, we can still experience truth.

⁹⁷ See Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* pp124,125

⁹⁸ Hoy p114

DIALECTICS - MEDIATION AND PROCESS

One thing has been missing from the previous chapter's discussion of Gadamer, and that is a consideration of the implication of power in and for all understanding/ knowledge. Richard Bernstein points out that Gadamer's hermeneutics "is virtually silent on the complex issues concerning domination and power"¹ - that we do not find in his work "any systematic attention to social structure",² which, considering his dialogical conception of understanding, is

¹ Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism* p156

² Ibid p158

something he has to attend to.³ Gadamer does of course conceive of understanding in terms of *dialogue*, of it being a *communication* between knowers and other knowers/ texts/ things. Yet in as far as he does, I think we should understand this 'dialogue' in terms of 'dialectic' (as Gadamer often describes it) and not in terms of 'conversation' with its overtones of cosiness and safety, of something relaxed and friendly (and indeed sometimes 'trivial') and most especially *voluntarily*, freely and mutually entered into. (Gadamer himself uses the word conversation on occasion, but this 'conversation' is far from pleasant 'chat' but serious and consequential interaction whereby each 'partner' affects and is affected by, the other in ways that they could not foresee and perhaps would not have chosen; - it is certainly not comfortable or inconsequential and thus does not have the ring of many

³Jürgen Habermas has of course also criticized Gadamer's lack of attention to power relations, and what he sees as the possibly conservative consequences of Gadamer's rehabilitation of such concepts as prejudice, tradition and authority. I have not here the space to discuss the ramifications of the whole long Habermas - Gadamer debate: I will only say that I do not think that the differences between them are insurmountable; being often, it seems to me, a case of talking at "cross purposes" or across differing meanings of terms (e.g. Habermas condemning Gadamer's reconception/ renovation of 'prejudice', 'tradition' and 'authority' in 'objectivist' terms that Gadamer's usage and critique has already undermined/ transformed.) I do think that Habermas is right to insist that Gadamer give more attention to questions of power, but otherwise consider his objections as still too 'objectivist' in tone and inspiration to adequately come to grips with Gadamer's project. (For discussion of the Habermas - Gadamer debate see e.g. Dieter Misgeld *Critical Theory and Hermeneutics: The Debate between Habermas and Gadamer* in John O'Neil (ed) *On Critical Theory* (Seabury Press N.Y. 1976); Jack Mendelson *The Habermas - Gadamer Debate* and Richard Bernstein *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*

postmodern invocations of 'conversation', being decidedly non frivolous in tone, and most importantly, emphasizing the necessity for adequate response and possible revision in relation to the claims of the other.)

Gadamer's position often seems to be an *ethical* one. He speaks of openness, of "a readiness to recognize the other as potentially right and to let him prevail against me"⁴, of a recognition that one might be wrong and a readiness to change in response to the other, etc - which seems fine as an ethical ideal (being indeed one I would share) but which seems to run into difficulties as a *description* of understanding, as such *attitudes* seem to depend for their successful enactment/ embodiment on their being certain egalitarian/ consensual/ non-oppressive relations between people for this stance to flourish or indeed be possible. And it does seem that in societies structured by various relations of power/ dominance that it is unlikely that 'oppressors' for instance, would exhibit the necessary openness to critique and willingness to change, the necessary humility, respect and consideration for the other such a conception seemingly demands. (Hence the objections of Bernstein and Habermas - Gadamer's hermeneutics seems to require some sort of minimally ideal speech situation, which, given present social conditions patently do not exist; therefore he would have to give serious attention to questions concerning what the minimally sufficient conditions would be, and both what is hampering such a situation,

⁴Gadamer *The Problem* p108

and how it could be brought about.

But remember - (despite the way Gadamer often presents his claims in terms that *do* make them seem understandable as ethical/ normative *attitudes*) - Gadamer was very clear that he was *not* describing a *method*, a way of going about things that one could *adopt* or *choose* - his hermeneutics was specifically not normative or prescriptive but ontological - he was not describing how we *should* or *could* proceed if we wish to understand, he was describing how all understanding *actually* occurs, how it *is*.⁵ Our understanding actually occurs in a world which is not characterized by open and egalitarian relationships where we all seriously and humbly consider each other's opinion; but by relations of domination, exploitation and dependence; where such openness, mutual recognition and respect as are seemingly demanded by Gadamer are rare and fragile indeed. Of course, a 'Gadamerian' could respond that in such conditions understanding does not (often or usually) occur; and there does seem to be something to such a response in that we often

⁵Just as Nagel, Merleau-Ponty, Marxists, feminists, standpoint theorists and all insist that knowledge *is* situated, however you conceive of it (it is *still* situated and proceeds from a situation even if you ignore/ deny/ try to hide its situatedness) so Gadamer (and Merleau-Ponty) insist that it *is* dialectical, whether you conceive of it that way or not. Whether knowledge is *seen* as situated and dialectical is of consequence for reflexive and critical projects; it has implication for how knowledges are treated - how they are accepted or questioned, criticized or justified, confirmed or revised, etc and thus for their adequacy, appropriateness and validity. Knowledges that are acknowledged to be, and are treated as, situated and dialectical, have greater likelihood of adequacy owing to the greater adequacy of the reflexive and critical practices by which they are examined and refined.

would, I think, hold that white people do not understand what Black people are saying to them about racism, or that men do not understand feminist claims etc. It does seem that the world (the social, political world) is characterized by systematic and extensive absences/ gaps/ distortions of understanding. And perhaps it would seem that (at least part of) the 'solution' would be to create the conditions necessary for 'genuine' understanding to occur (as is suggested, in their own ways, by Bernstein and Habermas). But while I do think that the creation of such conditions would be a good thing, and don't think that the effort expanded in its hopeful realization would be 'wasted' even if 'ultimately' unsuccessful; I do think that understanding *can* and *does* occur in their absence; as I think, does Gadamer.

Though Gadamer's description of understanding seems like an ethical or epistemological ideal - how we *should* approach the understanding of others if we seek genuinely to understand both them and ourselves; I think Gadamer (also) thinks this is how it happens anyway - whether we are aware of it, or want it or not. Obviously if we did consciously approach understanding with a reflexive and open *intention*, this would not be a bad thing; and if we did self consciously understand the process of understanding in the way Gadamer describes this would have positive consequences for our self understanding and practice, both 'everyday' and reflective/ theoretical (as well as for our conceptions of knowledge, 'science', methodology etc) - the ramifications and political, ethical consequences of which would be far

reaching - but what Gadamer is describing is what goes on when we understand, whatever our conceptions of it, whatever our practices, however we see it.

Though we obviously do misunderstand (both innocently and wilfully) we cannot totally escape or resist understanding either. Within any situation there are practical and other motivations and constraints in operation - both in the possibilities and limits of understanding *and* misunderstanding - on what we can come to misunderstand, and what we cannot so easily: a medieval peasant would not have or need a conception of the workings of a motor car engine; a car mechanic would have to have some minimally adequate understanding to practice his trade etc, etc). In the social sphere there are things that from one's situation one just doesn't/ cannot know, or those that one just doesn't 'want' to know, or can't 'afford' to know; as conversely there are things that one is more likely to know, or less likely to ignore or understand. In line with this, a critic of Gadamer's hermeneutics might argue that those in dominant positions would most likely not (and especially not collectively) be open to, or willing to risk their understandings in encounter with, others (especially the others they exploit and oppress, whose understandings most threaten theirs and whose response they most fear).

If we picture their 'communication' in terms of (a certain understanding of) 'conversation' - in terms of them choosing to sit down together and talk, *choosing* (and succeeding) to be honest and respectful and consider each other's viewpoint carefully, then this is unlikely indeed.

But understanding, to Gadamer, is not a matter of choice - it is not a practice or method or attitude that we can or have to *adopt*; but our basic mode of being in the world - the product of (inevitable) relationships and interactions with other people/ things. This process is, I think, best described as 'dialectical' rather than 'dialogical', in as far as the latter term holds connotations of 'conversation', or of relationships consciously or voluntarily entered into. (Gadamer emphasizes that even cases of 'extreme' domination are *dialectical* relationships (of the kind described by Hegel in his Master/ Slave analogy)⁶ even though I would not (myself) describe them as exactly dialogical.) And we are in dialectical (mutually affecting, mutually dependent, mutually constituting) relationships whether we like it, or choose to be, or are conscious of it, or not.

Gadamer, (for all his use of visual metaphors) stressed the difference between 'seeing' and 'hearing' and gave hermeneutical primacy to the latter. He argued that though we can to an extent choose to "look away" from something, to 'shut our eyes'; we can't "hear away" or shut our ears quite as easily or in quite the same way - "he who is addressed must hear whether he wants to or not".⁷ "Hearing implies already belonging together in such a manner that one is claimed by what is being said".⁸ Provided one is in a relationship that connects speaker and hearer, what is said

⁶Gadamer *Truth* p323

⁷Ibid p420

⁸Hoy p66

has a way of "capturing the listener against his will"⁹ - it is not merely, or only a matter of choosing to listen or not to listen. "Hearing", does not, of course necessarily mean that the hearer *likes* what she hears, or that it makes any sense to her, or that she finds it plausible or reasonable, or even worth considering; merely that it asserts its difference against hers - Gadamer speaks, for instance, of being "pulled up short" by something that asserts its difference against us; that either does not yield meaning, or whose meaning is not compatible with our own.¹⁰ Obviously, in hierarchical relationships things are so organized that those situated in relatively powerful positions don't as often 'hear' the claims of others, and do so only from protected locations to some extent fortified against breach or transformation - nevertheless even they cannot *entirely* escape hearing the claims of others, and indeed are the ones most likely to be 'claimed' by them due to the nature of their relationship and the nature of the other's claims regarding them.

Gadamer's hermeneutics, remember, does not depend on *agreement*, some sort of ideal or amicable consensus, some sort of reconciliation of perspectives. Even in cases of non-hierarchical relationships, of encounters not conditioned by power differentials, Gadamer emphasizes *difference* and *tension*. Gadamer, in fact, sees *every* new claim, *every* new experience, as a *challenge* to what is accepted and

⁹ Ibid p66

¹⁰ See Gadamer *Truth* p257

expected, whether these be within heirarchical/ oppressive situations or not. "Every experience is a confrontation" says Gadamer¹¹ because it sets something new and different against our old beliefs/ expectations/ prejudices and sets up tensions and questions as to how this is to be dealt with, responded to. One would imagine that in the oppressive relationships referred to above, the way a claim made by those relatively subjugated or marginalized would be responded to would be in terms of rejection or suppression; but this is quite in keeping with Gadamer's position, and something he sees as likely even *not* within such relationships. Gadamer sees response to the 'new' or 'different' or challenging as occurring in a way analogous to that outlined by Thomas Kuhn in his description of paradigm shifts. Not every "new recognition is accepted without resistance. Rather it is set aside as long as possible by the prevailing 'paradigm'"¹² until our prevailing world view/ prejudices can no longer 'take the strain' and have to change to accomodate the challenge.

Gadamer, (like Merleau-Ponty) emphasizes the *temporal* nature of understanding - that it occurs in and through time and is an open, ongoing but not necessarily steady or linear process - it is episodic and allows of degrees and means and differences of pace. The "propositional' picture of knowledge, of knowledge as consisting of, as transmitted by, 'facts' makes response to a claim seem an instantaneous,

¹¹ Gadamer *The Problem* p108

¹² Ibid p109

once and for all, all or nothing sort of affair: we are presented with a statement like $A=C$ which is supported/justified by the argument $A=B, B=C$ therefore $A=C$ which we are all supposedly equally able to see the truth/ rationality of and able to agree/ disagree with at once, in entirety and for good - we hear what they say, say yey or nay to it and that's it - whereas in 'real life' it seems to me that knowledge/ understanding hardly ever proceeds that way; but is much slower and accumulative, tentative, discontinuous and changing. On first encountering some new claim/ phenomenon we may very well find ourselves unable to understand it, because we are not 'in a position', or haven't had the experience to be able to evaluate it, or see 'the sense' of it, or what it 'has to say to us'; and only later in the light of further experience/ understanding does it take on meaning for us. Or, we might think that we *do* understand something, only to realize later when further/ differently informed/ experienced that we had not, or had only inadequately understood it; and have to rethink our previous understanding in recognition of this. The new claim/ experience might be so strange or threatening to our self-understandings that we find ourselves unable to deal with it, and reject or suppress it, only for it to lie 'dormant' until 'reactivated' by some later claim or experience. Or, instead it might niggle away unsatisfactorily and uncomfortably until we find some satisfactory way of accommodating (to) it. And all these responses are themselves open to challenge and revision and re-examination; some to be confirmed and refined, others to be transformed or

rejected in mediation/ encounter with further things/ people/ experience etc.

Feminist writers often refer to this encounter with/ response to the different claims of others in terms of 'dialogue'. Though this does capture the to and fro nature of the process, it does, as I have said with regard to Gadamer, seem to be perhaps too 'neutral' or 'consensual' a term, too reminiscent of 'conversation'. The process as I envision and experience it, at least as regards the challenging and critical claims of others differently located to me (especially those to whom I am related oppressively/ exploitatively) is much more uncomfortable, much more tense and conflictual - more like an argument where you go away angry and hurt and threatened, and defensive of your own point of view, but can't forget theirs or what they said, which keeps bothering you and going round in your head as you try out possible responses/ retorts/ explanations/ 'solutions' - none of which actually 'do', but in the process of which your self understandings have gradually altered and adjusted, so at the next 'encounter' it has changed in relation/ interaction with theirs, so that you understand them differently, which further mediates/ alters your own position and so on - a slow and perhaps halting but dialectical process which 'proceeds'/ develops without necessarily reaching closure or final stability - there is no necessary promise of agreement (though it is not precluded).

So, in contrast to some who argue for 'dialogue' I would not presume (or necessarily aim for) consensus; or a

truth that we could both/ all share; but more for continual critique and revision, refining of understanding in relation to an exploration of contexts and the perspectives of others. I would echo Jennifer Ring's emphasis on the importance of *conflicts* of perspective and experience, of *frustrations* of understanding *for* understanding;¹³ the necessity for confrontation and challenge for understanding to take place.¹⁴ If the world/ other people were "completely pliant", if they "offered no resistance"¹⁵ then we and our knowledge could not develop in relation/ interaction with 'it'/ them. Dialectics focuses on the tensions between knowers and the world; the tensions *within* processes and relationships; the interplay between moments of these processes like those between materiality and consciousness, subject and object, subjectivity and objectivity.¹⁶ It is concerned with *challenge* to boundaries (which are always

¹³ Ring pp21,25

¹⁴ Ibid p146

Ring acknowledges Alison Jaggar's and Sandra Harding's use of dialectic but sees them as working to minimize conflict, to overcome it, rather than utilize it fully, (See pp27-30. She would probably not have read Harding's latest work at the time of writing). Ring emphasizes that encounters with 'others' are not 'safe' and always involve 'risk', as Gadamer also stresses. She says she is not talking about 'benign conversation between acknowledged equals' or liberal consensus theory, but "about focusing upon and acknowledging" conflict, the resistances each knower puts up when confronted with the opinions of the other, even if the dispute is relatively mild. (p207) (Haraway (*Situated Knowledges* p598) describes a feminist conception of objectivity as being about "taking risks")

¹⁵ Ring p157

¹⁶ Ibid p21

provisional and not fixed) which result in *change*; in interaction which is always in process and motion and never gains completion or finality.¹⁷ "Dialectical Knowledge... calls for a challenge to the stability of all the subject regards as secure... [it] calls for the subject's own experience undergoing challenge".¹⁸ "Only through the acknowledgement of difference" can understanding of both the self and other progress - only through recognition of/ interaction with other people can one come to know oneself.¹⁹ (This last is a point emphasized by Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Bernstein and (all) other dialectical thinkers).

Ring describes the existence of a tension between an objective world and our subjective experience of it, and the need for an epistemology that can adequately respond to this, seeing neither subjectivity or objectivity as static or isolable but as interpenetrative and mutually defining.²⁰ She says the "terms *subjectivity* and *objectivity* have meaning in dialectical thought, and at the same time are not ultimately separable from one another. They are more properly regarded as moments, aspects of the same phenomenon, each of which is descriptive and meaningful, but only in relation to the other. Objectivity is not an entity: it

¹⁷ Ibid pp21,23

¹⁸ Ibid p146

¹⁹ Ibid see p126

²⁰ Ibid pp81,109

describes a relation between people and the world."²¹ 'The world' is not understood as static and passive²² but active,²³ something that *confronts* and resists us, even as we shape it. Knowledge of this 'objective' world is dependent on our subjectivity, is a product of our interaction with/ within this world, is a mediation of the world and ourselves.

Dialectics thus does not neglect the importance of subjectivity, and is therefore critical of traditional conceptions of objectivity, while not relinquishing objectivity completely.²⁴ "The promise of dialectics for feminist theory" says Ring "is that it makes possible an epistemology that neither accepts or relinquishes the objective world, never settles for or neglects a subjectivist perspective",²⁵ but sees subjectivity and objectivity as continually interacting and mutually constituting. Ring also emphasizes that this interaction occurs in *time*, that it is developing, changing, incomplete, never permanent.²⁶ Yet there can still be truth, even if it is momentary²⁷ and never final.²⁸ Not

²¹ Ibid p123

²² Ibid p151

²³ Haraway too, argues for "the world's active agency" in the knowing relation (see *Situated Knowledges* p593)

²⁴ Ibid p151

²⁵ Ibid p186

²⁶ See her description of the process of our understanding of a book we are reading pp188-190

²⁷ Though momentary it is open to further and repeated affirmation/ recognition.

²⁸ Ibid p190

simply anything "will be appropriate or true"²⁹ - there are certain minimal limits to the meanings that can be attributed to something that stem from 'objective' and material constraints to interpretation relating to both the phenomenon/ person/ text that is to be known and the knower herself - her location, her experiences, her history etc; within a particular interpretive context.

I, likewise, think we have to concentrate on the dialectical concepts of *process* and *mediation*, and see knowledge and experience, like power, as relationships that both *construct* and *constrain*. Both knowledge and experience are *processes*, not end states, whereby knowers and the world are mediated to and by each other. In emphasizing that knowledge is a *relation*, we have to restore to 'visibility' the knower in all her finitude and situatedness, her subjectivity and experience; and not just concentrate on 'what is known' in isolation from the context of its creation (or reception). Furthermore, we cannot see knowledge as a 'reproduction' or 'mirroring' as some put it, of some 'object' as it is 'in itself', outside of relation,³⁰ unconditioned by the knower or knowing context (if by 'mirroring' it is assumed an exact replica of what 'is' is produced, unmediated by the mirror itself and the conditions it mirrors in) but should rather see it as a product of interaction, of a relation between a particular knower and a

²⁹ Ibid p196

³⁰ For outside of relation it would have no properties, would not 'be like' anything - it is only *in relation* that these are manifest.

particular 'object' or 'subject matter' within particular circumstances. As Gadamer says knowledge/ understanding is not *reconstruction* (of a previously given meaning) but *mediation*.³¹ (Note that if it is not *reconstruction* it is neither a pure *construction*, but constrained by what it is understanding/ knowledge of (and to)).³²

Subjectivity and objectivity should thus not be seen as separable or opposed elements, as in dualist traditions, but as aspects/ moments of a mutually constituting and mutually dependent process - knowledge - in which neither is privileged or denied or reduced to the other. Knowledge is subjective in that phenomena, things, people are subjectively encountered, perceived, experienced and understood by limited, situated and perspectival knowers (but within 'objective' constraints) and 'objective' in that it is *of* and *about* a *to some extent* 'independently' existing material 'world' (independent enough to resist and surprise us, to assert its difference and strangeness, to confront our constructions of it, robustly); - knowledge gaining its

³¹ See Linge pxvi

³² Sean Sayers uses the analogy of a lens (similar to Haraway's visual technologies) - which mediates, transforms even 'distorts' an image but nevertheless *transmits* it: it does not *create* it absolutely, it is still an image *of* the object. Lenses both transform and transmit, 'distort' and reveal - they are not barriers between us and a world as it really is, but means by/ through which we interact/ relate, and through/ by which our knowledge proceeds. (*Reality and Reason* pp132,133)

'objectivity'³³ through being the product of a constraining relationship with an 'objective' world, yet being subjectively shaped and constrained by being known 'subjectively' by/ via particular situated knowers. So the objectivity of knowledge is subjectively constrained and mediated; its subjectivity correspondingly objectively constrained and mediated - each being dependent on, yet also constitutive of, the other.

Within this subjective/ objective dialectic, the notion of *situation* is crucial: one's situation being the 'objective' location or 'grounding' of one's subjective experience (and therefore, knowledge) - that which supports and shapes it and within and against (a conception of) which it is understood and reunderstood as one's understanding/ experience of one's location alters. As Lisa Alcoff says, one's 'subjectivity' is constituted by one's position.³⁴ She describes Teresa de Lauretis as seeing subjectivity as constructed through one's (situated) experience, "through a continuous process, an ongoing constant renewal based on interaction with the world."³⁵ Experience, to de Lauretis is "the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social

³³ 'Objectivity' here in a more descriptive sense; 'objectivity' in the more normative, epistemological sense residing in 'seeing', relating to knowledges as objectively shaped and constrained via their situated production, and thus critically examining them in relation to that situation and other's differently situated/ related knowledges.

³⁴ Alcoff p424

³⁵ See Alcoff p424, de Lauretis *Alice Doesn't* p159

reality"³⁶ "Through this process [of experience] one places oneself or is placed in social reality, and so perceives and comprehends as subjective (referring to, even originating in, oneself) those relations - material, economic and interpersonal - which are in fact social and, in a larger perspective, historical. The process is continuous, its achievement unending and daily renewed. For each person, therefore, subjectivity is an ongoing construction, not a fixed point of departure or arrival from which one then interacts with the world. On the contrary, it is the effect of that interaction".³⁷ This action is fluid, in constant motion and is open to alteration by "self-analyzing practice"³⁸ (de Lauretis sees feminist theory as "that political, theoretical, self-analyzing process by which the relations of the subject in social reality can be rearticulated from the historical experience of women".)³⁹

Such feminist theory demands reflexive and critical examination of one's experience in relation both to one's understanding of one's situation; and the claims and experiences of others, which lead us not only to see our experience as not given or natural or necessary but shaped and constrained by one's situation; but also to gain a better idea of how we are situated in relation to others and how that mediates our experience/ understanding; and so

³⁶ de Lauretis *Alice Doesn't* p183

³⁷ Ibid p159

³⁸ Alcoff p425

³⁹ de Lauretis *Alice Doesn't* p186

to rethink, revise our experience in that light. On such a conception, a knower's inevitable situatedness is not necessarily a negative factor to be overcome - indeed in Gadamerian terms it constitutes our "initial directedness" our "openness", our whole ability to experience and know the world - but neither is the understanding gained from that situation beyond critical examination and transformation: however relatively 'objective' and 'determinate' the location, the knowledge produced in it is not 'fixed' or static - instead it is 'open' to constant change and revision in interaction with others and the 'itself' changing 'world'. Through attention to our situation and situatedness we can examine and refine both our understanding of our 'subjectivity', and that of our 'objectivity', our location in a world that supports and resists us as we act and understand (within) it; and against, in relation to, which we can critically test our understanding. Such a situated and dialectical understanding would both be more attentive to, respectful of, the significance of lived experience; and more 'objective' than traditional dualist/ objectivist conceptions, in that it would acknowledge and utilize critically both the limits and possibilities stemming from knowers situations and examine these as well as/ in relation to, their claims.

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