MAKING STRANGE WHAT HAD APPEARED FAMILIAR

In every life there are experiences, painful and at first disorienting, which by their very intensity throw a sudden floodlight on the ways we have been living, the forces that control our lives, the hypocrisies that have allowed us to collaborate with those forces, the harsh but liberating facts we have been enjoined from recognizing. Some people allow such illuminations only the brevity of a flash of sheet-lightning, that throws a whole landscape into sharp relief, after which the darkness of denial closes in again. For others, these clarifications provide a motive and impulse toward a more enduring lucidity, a search for greater honesty, and for the recognition of larger issues of which our personal suffering is a symptom, a specific example.

—Adrienne Rich,
On Lies, Secrets, and Silence

"Thinking from the perspective of women's lives makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry." Seeing as strange what had appeared familiar is the beginning of any inquiry, I think. I do not question my drinking water until it smells of chlorine. I do not ask why I was given the correct amount of change; I do not ask why I am treated with respect. In philosophical inquiry, I do not ask "What is a cat?" but "What is Being?" Similarly, in the political realm, one does not question a social order which works well. Here the question arises, "Works well for whom?" Well, for those who aren't troubled by it, those who do not question it, those for whom it does not seem strange.

In "The Feminist Standpoint," Nancy Hartsock argues that just as the proletarians of Marxist theory have a "privileged vantage point" on the nature of the ruling class, so too do "women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy." Like Marx's theory, Hartsock's rests on the insight provided by Hegel's Master-Slave dialectic: "that socially mediated interaction with nature in the process of production shapes both human beings and theories of knowledge." Among the distinctive processes of production which shape women and our theories of knowledge, according to Hartsock, are our activities "as contributors to subsistence and as mothers." On Hartsock's view, the epistemological chasm which appears between women and men is one that is carved out by the systematic division of labor along sexual lines in society. Hartsock goes on to detail the ways in which women's labor—contribution to

"Making Strange What Had Appeared Familiar" by Terri Elliott,
subsistence as well as the reproduction/production of human beings—shapes our view of the world. The nature of this shaping is captured nicely by the passage Hartsock quotes from Marilyn French's *The Women's Room*:

> Washing the toilet used by three males, and the floor and walls around it, is, Mira thought, coming face to face with necessity. And that is why women were saner than men, did not come up with the mad, absurd schemes men developed; they were in touch with necessity, they had to wash the toilet bowl and the floor.6

Although I think Hartsock is effective in developing a useful “epistemological tool” and a specifically feminist historical materialism,7 I find myself initially dissatisfied with her account of epistemic privilege. Some women (I am among them) might object: I think I have a “privileged vantage point on male supremacy”—that is, I see as strange that which I have been “enjoined from recognizing”—but I do not relate to the world in the capacities that Hartsock outlines as distinctively female. I have not given birth to or cared for children, and my daily life is not characterized by “contribution to subsistence.” I am a philosopher. From whence springs my understanding of “patriarchal institutions and ideologies as perverse inversions of more human social relations”8 Hartsock has anticipated people like me. She writes:

> Whether or not all of us [contribute to subsistence and childraising], women as a sex are institutionally responsible for producing both goods and human beings and all women are forced to become the kinds of people who can do both.9

Okay: I was not raised to be a philosopher, and I must admit that I will probably run downstairs to put another load of laundry in the washer before I finish this page. Nevertheless, although Hartsock’s analysis may go some way toward explaining the possibility of this epistemic privilege in the specific case of women, it does not capture what I think characterizes the experience of making strange. The character of this experience is common to all marginalized people, and an historical materialist account of the distinctive process of production of any one oppressed class leaves us without any insight into what lies at the core of such experiences.

I hope to give an account of epistemic privilege by developing a discourse that characterizes the experience of making strange for all marginalized people, which, at the same time, does not presuppose any essentialist body of theory about human nature. What is it about being oppressed that gives oppressed classes a privileged point of view from which to see the strangeness of the social relations in which they find themselves? The historical materialist argues that it is “socially mediated interaction with nature in the process of production” which helps to shape human ways of knowing. Oppressed classes have ample opportunity to interact with nature in the process of production while the oppressive class
reaps the benefits. And so the oppressed class comes to have "a correct vision of class society" which is not available to the oppressive class. But the details of this account differ greatly for different classes. Hartsock focuses on the ways of knowing afforded by activities that happen to be institutionally required of women. Different activities foster different ways of knowing. Consider the difference between the activities of a poor black man working in a mine and an upper-class white woman working in her child's nursery. Is there a way of thinking about the epistemic privilege of different marginalized people which discloses the common core of this privilege?

The intuitions which animate theories of epistemic privilege are, I think, simple and compelling ones. They are grounded on some simple facts. Consider the following examples:

Person A approaches a building and enters it unproblematically. As she approaches she sees something perfectly familiar which, if asked, she might call The Entrance. Person X approaches the same building and sees a great stack of stairs and the glaring lack of a ramp for his wheelchair.

Person B arrives at the first meeting of yet another literature class in a familiar building where he is accustomed to taking notes on The Professor's interpretation of various well-known books of The Corpus. Person Y finds herself in a room full of white people listening to one white person tell them what he thinks all these dead white people were trying to say when they wrote these books.

Person C attends an interesting colloquium in the philosophy of religion in which he hears theorizing about the creative powers of That-than-which-nothing-greater-can-be-thought. Person Z hears a whirring buzz of all-too-familiar words: 'He' and 'Him' and 'His nature' and 'His freedom' and 'His power.'

The perspectives of the lives of persons X, Y and Z make strange what had appeared familiar in each case. Persons A, B and C do not see what X, Y and Z do. We might say X, Y and Z are epistemically privileged. We might say, alternatively, that A, B and C have the privilege of ignorance. We'll come back to this. First we'll ask: why the difference? What do X, Y and Z have that A, B and C do not? Do they gain these insights as a result of their experiences? Are these insights unattainable for A, B and C?

Consider person Z. Does she hear this strangeness because she is a woman? We can well imagine another woman, W, leaving the room untroubled, peacefully thinking about the paper as compared with other texts she's read in the philosophy of religion. Does Z hear this because she is a woman who has been discriminated against? We can imagine that W is even more constrained by the patriarchy than Z is. Is it because Z is a woman who has been reading and
thinking about sexism and feminism more now than ever before in her life? Is it because Z is a woman who has been reading, etc.? Perhaps Z is a man.

In Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Sandra Harding describes a standpoint in contrast to a perspective:

Only through [struggles by and on behalf of oppressed, exploited, and dominated groups] can we begin to see beneath the appearances created by an unjust social order to the reality of how this social order is in fact constructed and maintained. This need for struggle emphasizes the fact that a feminist standpoint is not something that anyone can have simply by claiming it. It is an achievement. A standpoint differs in this respect from a perspective, which anyone can have simply by 'opening one's eyes.'

Research is to be done, she tells us, from the perspective of women's lives, and the theory is called 'feminist standpoint theory', not 'women's standpoint theory'. Presumably the strange new questions which arise when research is done from this perspective can be posed by anyone who has struggled on behalf of women. As she writes in a more direct answer to the question “Could Z be a man?”:

As female feminists know, political struggle is a precondition for knowledge: men will discover what patriarchal power is really about as they candidly criticize their male colleagues' sexism to those colleagues.

Apparently, according to Harding, a perspective is a birthright but a standpoint must be earned. The standpoint is, presumably, the place from which one does this thinking from new perspectives. On her account, it seems that a feminist activist man has more epistemic authority with respect to thinking from the perspective of women's lives than a complacent woman does. As she reminds us, “... feminists are made not born.”

We have heard entirely too much from men about women and gender, from whites about people of color and race, from heterosexuals about lesbians and gays and sexual preference, and from economically overprivileged people about workers and the poor.

Isn't there a great danger lurking behind this perspective/standpoint distinction? Didn't the Christian missionaries who destroyed the cultures and lives of African peoples take themselves to be struggling on behalf of the lost souls of that continent? Isn't there something the best intentioned male feminist (white antiracist, rich anticlassist) can never know the way a woman (person of color, poor person) in a sexist (racist, classist) social order does? After all, person X in the wheelchair scenario above doesn't see the stairs and the absence of a ramp because he's spent the morning lobbying for accessibility to public buildings; he sees this strangeness because he can't get in the building! Similarly, we can imagine that person Y has never opened her mouth against racism and perhaps that person Z
finds herself too busy reading the History of Philosophy to write letters to her congressperson.

According to Hartsock, a standpoint is "not simply an interested position (interpreted as bias) but is interested in the sense of being engaged." This engagement consists in "socially mediated interaction with nature in the process of production." Because one must be engaged with the world in order to be interested in the relevant way:

A standpoint . . . carries with it the contention that there are some perspectives on society from which, however well-intentioned one may be, the real relations of humans with each other and with the natural world are not visible.

How might we understand this engagement and its relevance for epistemic privilege? I propose to turn away from Marxist standpoint theory and towards phenomenology: I will borrow a distinction from Heidegger's metaphysics to try to shed light on the common experience of making strange of those engaged with the world in a great variety of ways.

In Being and Time, Heidegger explicates the being that we are, Dasein, as Being-in-the-World insofar as this being is concerned—engaged. Dasein comes to know the world only through engagement. Our engagement with the world reveals things to us: they are revealed as having certain ontological characters.

When I am working on a project and things are going smoothly, the things I am using are ready-to-hand for me. These things have the being of equipment. Suppose I am riding my bike on the river trail. I am pedaling hard, the world is flying past, the wind is roaring in my ears. I feel the immediate connection between the power of my pedaling and the fact of my body cutting through the air parallel to the river. Suddenly the chain breaks. This connection is broken: my legs power a futile spinning now. I slow to a stop. What is this thing here? A bicycle. A heavy metal object with parts: wheels, handlebar, chipped paint, some rust. I get black grease on my hand lifting the limp chain. This bike no longer has the being of equipment for me. Things are not going smoothly. I am no longer biking, engaged with the world. I am face-to-face with a heavy metal object in the midst of the world—an object which I must push home. The bike is merely present-at-hand for me now.

When we concern ourselves with something, the entities which are most closely ready-to-hand may be met as something unusable, not properly adapted for the use we have decided upon. The tool turns out to be damaged, or the material unsuitable. In each of these cases equipment is here, ready-to-hand. We discover its unusability, however, not by looking at it and establishing its properties, but rather by the circumspection of the dealings in which we use it. When its unusability is thus discovered, equipment becomes conspicuous. This conspicuousness presents the ready-to-hand equipment as in a certain un-readiness-to-hand. But this implies that what
cannot be used just lies there; it shows itself as an equipmental Thing which looks so and so, and which, in its readiness-to-hand as looking that way, has constantly been present-at-hand too. Pure presence-at-hand announces itself in such equipment.\textsuperscript{20}

One interesting feature of this account is the way in which the ontological status of an object is relative to the viewer. The question of whether a certain thing has the being of readiness-to-hand or presence-to-hand raises the question: whose hand? Something might be ready-to-hand for one person—it might be a part of her or his Umwelt—while it is merely present-at-hand for another—it is just sitting there among other objects in the midst of the world. Imagine I walk into my friend's studio and, pointing, say, "What is that thing?" "That's not a thing!" she responds, "That's my lathe." Just so might the same aspect of the social order be usable for one person and unusable for another.\textsuperscript{21}

Now we can return to our examples and see how this distinction is relevant. Person X encounters the stairs as merely present-at-hand, as an obstruction. Unlike Person A for whom the stairs are unproblematic—ready-to-hand—X sees all the nasty details of the things: the texture of the stone, the height, the depth, the chipped edges. Similarly, Y, in the literature class, sees white skin and hears a white point of view where those for whom the social order works well encounter only authors, readers and works. In the philosophy colloquium Z hears words—mere pronouns: they are jutting out from the page as she reads along with the speaker. The argument is ready-to-hand for those to whom it does not seem strange: they are engaged with the train of thought. They are unhindered. A, B and C are unhindered. They have the privilege of ignorance. They have the privilege of being shielded from the gory details.

The epistemic privilege that oppressed people have is not a generic one, and it's ironic that we would call it privilege. X does not have access to knowledge that A would want: X does not want to see the stairs that others don't notice. What the oppressed class sees that the privileged class does not are manifestations of their oppression. Aspects of the social order are conspicuous for oppressed people because they are unusable for them. They discover this unusability as a result of their engagement with the world. This is a sense in which a standpoint is earned rather than had "simply by 'opening one's eyes'."\textsuperscript{22} "We discover its unusability, however, not by looking at it and establishing its properties, but rather by the circumspection of the dealings in which we use it."\textsuperscript{23}

This is a framework from which we can understand why it is much less likely that a man will notice the relentless use of sexist language. He is addressed by the pronoun "he"; he is included in the collective called "man". These words have the being of equipment for him. They are problematic for a woman, though. The passage may not be entirely unusable for her, but it needs oiling: she must work to include herself in the discourse.
At this point, one might object that I’ve forgotten the woman (W) who leaves the philosophy of religion paper untroubled. She leaves thinking about the issues argued in the paper. She was apparently engaged with the paper: despite the (alleged) sexist language, the paper was ready-to-hand for her. How can we account for W in this (pseudo-)Heideggerian framework?

One crucial aspect of Dasein’s engagement with the world, for Heidegger, is Dasein’s construction of the world. By “world”, as in “Being-in-the-world”, he does not mean to refer to some planet with objects arranged on its surface. My world is mine insofar as I construct it, and I have no world other than my own. My world is the world of my concern: it is populated by the spaces in which I move and the objects with which I concern myself. Furthermore, I am not alone. As Wittgenstein might put it, I am part of a way of life—I use a language. This language, which I learn from others, structures how my world appears to me.

Recall Harding: “Thinking from the perspective of women’s lives makes strange what had appeared familiar, which is the beginning of any scientific inquiry.” What are we making strange? What had appeared familiar. Appeared familiar? This suggests the question: “To whom?” Well, it appeared familiar to me before my perspective made it strange (i.e., present-at-hand). What was made strange is what I had been “enjoined from recognizing.” For example, I have been taught that “he” is the appropriate pronoun to use when the gender of a singular antecedent is unspecified. “He” is the neutral third person pronoun in my language. This is taught to me as a Rule of Grammar. (Who am I to question a Rule of Grammar?) I am enjoined from recognizing that “he” is the masculine pronoun—that I am not included in the collective called “man”—that the Rules of Grammar are not carved in stone and handed down from the top of a mountain but that they betray facts about those who follow them and the social structure of the world in which the language is spoken.

As Hartsock puts the point: “The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false.” The vision of the ruling class is mine as well. It is not as if I were accustomed to reading philosophy populated with ‘she’s and ‘Woman’s and so was suddenly shocked by the language in the philosophy of religion paper. No: I’d been reading Philosophy all along. In grade school, I learned to say, proudly, “One small step for man, one giant step for mankind” (as well as “Our Father Who art in Heaven...”). When I was younger I thought the only problem was that, by some fluke, I didn’t have a penis. (But I knew there was a problem) I had to learn the words “womankind” and “feminist” as well as “oppression” and “patriarchy”. This is a sense in which a standpoint is earned rather than had “simply by ‘opening one’s eyes’. As Hartsock writes: a standpoint is “achieved rather than obvious, a mediated rather than a mediate un-
derstanding." This is a clue to understanding W’s reaction to the philosophy of religion paper.

Now we might tamper with the over-simple framework of equipmentality. Remember the bike. In the initial example, I am riding unproblematically and suddenly, the chain breaks. This does not parallel my experience at the philosophy colloquium. It’s not the case that a patriarch from Mars suddenly lands in the room and starts messing up my egalitarian utopia. Perhaps what happens is something more like this: I’ve inherited an old one-speed Schwinn from my father: it has one bent rim, the tires are low on air, and the seat’s too high for me. But it’s my first bike. I balance precariously, I struggle up hills, I think to myself, “So this is biking, huh? Maybe roller skating would be more fun.” Then a friend of the family visits with a beautiful new ten-speed that’s just my size. She lets me try it, and I’m amazed at how fast I can go—so effortlessly. “Look, ma, no hands!” Now I look at the old Schwinn again. I see the rust. I kick the back tire. “Stupid pile of junk,” I think.

Just so, I read the History of Philosophy, thinking, “So this is philosophy, huh?” Then I stumble into a feminist philosophy class.

What I hope to have developed here is a discourse for understanding the nature of the epistemic privilege “enjoyed” by oppressed people. Oppressed people discover the unusability of aspects of the social order which appear to them as merely present-at-hand. They (we) see the ways in which society is in need of repair, that is, we see manifestations of the oppression. For the most part, the experiences that “throw a sudden floodlight on the ways we have been living, the forces that control our lives, the hypocrisies that have allowed us to collaborate with those forces, the harsh but liberating facts we have been enjoined from recognizing” are experiences which parallel the second bicycle story rather than the first. This is because our worlds—our languages—are structured by the forces that “have material interests in deception.” The floodlight is still sudden, in many cases, but the signs which occasion the experience are more subtle, and the status quo is such that, in many cases, we might have gone on indefinitely without coming to see the broken places. Nothing guarantees that I’ll ever have the opportunity to ride anything but a broken old Schwinn. What makes it likely that I’ll get to try a better bike? One answer to this question is a vector that can lead us out of a potentially devastating objection.

One might object: but every aspect of the present social order is broken for somebody, and everybody sees something in the present social order as merely present-at-hand. Doesn’t this discourse just pull the rug out from under the feminist (antaracist, anticlassist, antiheterosexist, . . . ) who wants to claim that there is in fact something wrong with the social order? Surely we can’t revise the social order for every little complaint.
No, but we can, and must, respond to repeated complaints which reveal a pattern of oppression. This is where Hartsock’s analysis might help. Women, for example, develop a shared vocabulary and a shared understanding of the world as a result of the similar ways in which we are engaged with the world. Beyond that, because the standpoint is a “mediated rather than a mediate understanding,” we must rely on networks of others who see the world as we do in certain crucial respects. In “The Possibility of Feminist Theory,” Marilyn Frye discusses the importance of consciousness raising for pattern recognition: “As long as each woman thinks that her experience alone is thus discrepant, she tends to trust the received wisdom and distrust her own senses and judgment.”

We need to communicate, Frye argues, in order to start making meanings that make sense of our experience(s) of the world. We need each other to say, “No, you’re not bad at biking. Look at that thing: the rim is bent! Here—try my ten-speed. You’ll see what I mean.”

Terri Elliott

University of Iowa

NOTES

7. As opposed to a specifically proletarian historical materialism, a specifically black historical materialism, a specifically oriental historical materialism, and so on. Harding, in Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?, cites works from other liberatory social movements in which standpoint theory arguments are used: p. 119 n. 15.
14. It seems Harding would want to back away from this sharp distinction between a perspective and a standpoint, though she doesn’t do so explicitly. In ch. 10 she writes of
the view from the perspective of lesbians' lives: the standpoint from which one takes in this view she calls 'the lesbian standpoint', not, as we might expect, 'the lesbianist standpoint'. The "logic" of her distinction would seem to lead us to talk of such a standpoint. However, we are not accustomed to hearing of nonlesbians struggling on behalf of lesbians. We don't hear heterosexuals claiming "I can imagine what it's like to be a lesbian" the way we hear whites claiming empathy with blacks or men with women. Our culture is still far too homophobic for Harding explicitly to acknowledge the "or on behalf of" part of her prescription for a standpoint. If she were consistent on this point, we might have seen the strangeness of her distinction sooner.

17. I do mean "borrow" here. I do not wish to align myself with Heidegger generally or to take up his full account of the being of Dasein as a general backdrop for this analysis.
19. "we shall call those entities which we encounter in concern 'equipment'. In our dealings we come across equipment for writing, sewing, working, transportation, measurement.” Op. cit., p. 97.
21. Heidegger writes of being ready-to-hand and being present-at-hand as over against the being that we are: Dasein. There is another way we might take up his ontological categories when thinking about oppression generally. (This is not relevant to the epistemological point.) Oppression objectifies the oppressed. In particular, sexism objectifies women. We hear this with respect to pornography (as distinct from erotica), for example. In twentieth-century American patriarchy, women become wives, secretaries, nurses, prostitutes, that-which-gets-dinner-on-the-table-and-puts-the-kids-to-bed. Women become merely ready-to-hand for men; that is, we are perceived as having the being of equipment rather than the being of Dasein. Feminists, though, appear on the scene as problematic, throwing a wrench in the works... feminists are merely present-at-hand for patriarchs. This signals feminists as unusable; this signals the break-down of the patriarchy.

24. Harding, p. 150.