

FEMINISM, REALISM, AND UNIVERSALISM

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ABSTRACT

Feminists have drawn attention to, and rightly criticized, the tendency of dominant groups unthinkingly to universalize their own values and practices. In so doing, however, many feminists have appeared inclined to criticize almost any practice of generalizing, a development that has proven problematic for feminist epistemological and emancipatory projects. Such considerations invite a questioning of how, if at all, the general and the particular are, or might legitimately be, combined in any context. The argument here is that addressing this sort of question can benefit from a more explicit attention to ontology than is to be found in much of the feminist literature. Illustrations of how ontology can make a difference are developed.

KEYWORDS

Feminist epistemology, human emancipation, situated knowledge, standpoint theory, economic modelling, universalism, ontology, realism

THE PRACTICE OF A *PRIORI* UNIVERSALIZING

Feminist contributions can claim a good deal of the credit for modern social theory displaying increasing sensitivity to the dangers of overgeneralizing. Fundamental here is the recognition that values, experiences, objectives, and common-sense interpretations of dominant groups may be merely that; there is nothing especially natural or necessarily universal about them. All claims, whether made from within the academy or without, whether cautiously or boldly formulated, etc., are made from particular positions by interested parties. No person or group can reasonably profess a neutral, detached, unbiased perspective; all understandings achieved are partial (as well as fallible and likely to be transient). The practice of universalizing *a priori*, of merely asserting/assuming the widespread validity/relevance of some position is now widely recognized as, at best, a methodological mistake, and one that can carry significant political consequence.¹



As is well known, however, it has proven all too easy to slide from a position of opposing the practice of *a priori* universalizing to one of more or less opposing the endeavor of generalizing altogether. In particular, once the basis for treating a dominant stance or approach as universally legitimate has been successfully called into question it has often proven difficult to avoid concluding that all approaches or stances are as legitimate as each other.

With regards to some issues this sort of reaction is unproblematic, even facilitating. But this is not the case with all matters, and especially, I think, with respect to broader projects of illumination and human emancipation. In particular, theorists have found it difficult to defend a notion of objectivity or progress in knowledge, or to sustain any basis for an emancipatory politics, where these objectives are of central concern to many feminists. The conclusion too often drawn is that, even in regard to matters such as these, all we can safely say is that there are differences.

My limited objective here is to argue that, in addressing these latter sorts of difficulties, there are possible advantages to feminist explanatory and emancipatory projects from engaging (or engaging more fully) in the sort of explicit ontological analysis associated with modern versions (at least) of scientific realism.

In encouraging this sort of stance I do not wish to suggest that scientific realism or ontological considerations are entirely absent from feminist thought. Indeed, I think it is impossible that they could be. But I think it possible that ontological commitments are too rarely rendered explicit. And when the question of realism is raised (in whatever form) at all, the latter, it seems to me, is mostly treated in an overly guarded way in much feminist thought, as if accepting any explicitly realist perspective is necessarily problematic.

I am not alone in this perception. Caroline New (1998: 2), for example, recently records that in modern feminist thought “realism” seems “tainted,” and writes of “realism’s current resounding unpopularity among feminist theorists” (1998: 12). She also suggests that providing a reasonably “robust” defense of feminist standpoint theory’s realism is more “than its current proponents seem willing to risk” (1998: 6).

Others caution distance. Martha Nussbaum (whose argument for grounding ethical theory in the nature of human capacities is undoubtedly realist) finds the standing of realism to be sufficiently low as to caution “that it would appear strategically wise for an ethical and political view that seeks broad support not to rely on the truth of metaphysical realism” (Nussbaum 1995: 69).²

Some feel the need to include a forthright disclaimer. Donna Haraway provides a prominent example. Despite setting out a perspective that seems so clearly to embrace scientific or ontological realism,³ Haraway seemingly feels that credibility rests upon expressly denying that this is so: “The

approach I am recommending is not a version of ‘realism’, which has proved a rather poor way of engaging with the world’s active agency” (Haraway 1988: 260).

My worry is that this negative or distancing orientation can result in legitimate realist considerations being played down to an extent that may actually be debilitating for the feminist project, not least in preventing it from dealing as effectively as it might with the sorts of tensions or difficulties already noted. My aim here, then, is to caution against any blanket rejection of realist-type analysis as ultimately unnecessarily constraining of feminist thinking and advance.

I start, though, by defining some of my terms. Following this I move, in the main part of the paper, to indicate the sorts of differences that I think explicit realist/ontological analysis can make.

FEMINISM AND REALISM

There are in fact numerous interpretations or types of realism. In the broadest philosophical sense of the term relevant here, any position can be designated a *realism* that asserts the existence of some (possibly disputed) kind of entity (such as black holes, quarks, gender-relations, Loch Ness monsters, utilities, probabilities, men, women, truth, tables, chairs, etc.). I think it is clear there are very many conceivable realisms of this sort and all of us are realists of some kind or other.

In science, a realist position, i.e., *scientific realism*, asserts that the ultimate objects of enquiry exist for the most part independently of, or at least prior to, their investigation. (My primary concern here is indeed with scientific realism. But significant amongst other types of realism relevant here are *perceptual realism*, maintaining the existence of material objects in space and time independently of their perception, and *predicative realism*, maintaining the existence of universals either independently of particular material things, as in *Platonic realism*, or as their properties, as in *Aristotelian realism*. Clearly, scientific realism reduces to perceptual or predicative realism if the objects of scientific knowledge just are material objects or Platonic – or Aristotelian – forms.)

Realism so interpreted is inherently bound up with ontology, with the nature of existence or being. And indeed it is an explicit concern with ontology that I want to promote here. Not all questions traditionally of interest to scientific realists have turned on the explicit study of ontology. Indeed, until very recently discussions about realism have turned to a large extent on the epistemological question of the truth of our knowledge, rather than the ontological question of the reality of structures and things.⁴ The debate, though, has moved on in recent years, and in ways that I think has relevance for feminist concerns.⁵

Of course, scientific realism, even when recognized as first and foremost

a theory *not* of knowledge or truth, but of being, is nevertheless bound to possess epistemological implications. But it warrants emphasis that *there is nothing essential to scientific or ontological realism that supposes or requires that objects of knowledge are naturalistic or other than transient, that knowledge obtained is other than fallible, partial and itself transient, or that scientists or researchers are other than positioned, biased, interested, and practically, culturally and socially conditioned.*

I emphasize this aspect just because I suspect that it may be central to the distancing orientation to realism that I detect in much feminist thought. My concern is that there is a tendency in the feminist literature for a particular and naive form of realism to be made to stand in for all (and specifically scientific) realisms. This is a version which does treat all reality as fixed, science and knowledge as somehow value- and interest-free or neutral, as well as *necessarily* convergent on truth regarded as objective. To the extent that scientific realism is so conceived its rejection in feminist thought is explicable.⁶

My primary concern here though is not with explaining the phenomenon in question but with indicating some its consequences. My starting point remains the perception that, for whatever reasons, scientific realism, as an explicit orientation, is to a significant extent excluded from, or downplayed in, the mainstream feminist discussion, including that now occurring in economics.⁷ But my intention here, the main purpose of this paper, is to suggest that this situation, whatever its explanation, is unfortunate; a rehabilitation of explicit realist reasoning in feminist thinking not only does not necessitate a slide into absolutism but actually carries the potential to make a constructive difference, to serve to advance feminist epistemological and emancipatory projects.⁸

AN INDICATION THAT REALISM/ONTOLOGY MATTERS

In the remainder of the paper I want to give a set of schematic illustrations to help ground my claim that realist thought, and in particular explicit ontological analysis, can be beneficial to, and is probably indispensable for, any would-be revelatory and emancipatory projects. In particular, I want to indicate that such analysis is most likely essential to sustaining revelatory and emancipatory projects in the face of problems or difficulties of the sort I noted at the outset – turning on the need to oppose ungrounded *a priori* universalizing without altogether abandoning the possibility of generalist or collective endeavor.

I start with a specific issue of method confronting contemporary economics, before moving, for my second illustration, to topics more widely discussed within feminist epistemology, and, for my third, to assessing the possibility of projects of human emancipation. In the first illustration,

which lays the basis for the two illustrations that follow it, I join the “deconstructive” strand of feminist thinking by bringing ontology to bear in questioning the general relevance of certain methods of economics that have in practice been universalized in an *a priori* fashion. In the second and third illustrations I indicate how ontological analysis can help ground projects of epistemology and emancipation of the sort pursued by feminists.

Illustration 1: the formalistic modelling of social processes

Consider first the case of method in modern economics. The dominant feature here is the widespread reliance upon the practice of formalistic modelling.⁹ This approach has certainly been universalized within the economics discipline, and with little if any grounding or argument, and despite its record of failure. Feminists have also criticized it as masculinist. I think it is (albeit an approach that is also perhaps race and class, etc., specific). But what follows for the feminist critic? Is it that all other approaches, including any preferred by feminists, be given greater emphasis?¹⁰ Or should more feminists do formalistic modelling?¹¹ Perhaps both responses follow; or are they largely incompatible? Is it, say, that the scarcity of feminist modellers entails that the set of questions currently addressed is unnecessarily limited, or is it, perhaps, that formalistic methods themselves are undesirably limited in their usefulness, and possibly even debilitating of revelatory and emancipatory progress? How do we begin to decide?

Answering such questions, questions that may or may not involve a false dichotomy, requires at the very least that the revelatory potential of formalistic methods be investigated. And this, I will argue, necessitates an attention to ontology. Specifically, I want to indicate that by briefly examining both the nature of social material and the ontological presuppositions of the procedures of formalistic modelling, it can be demonstrated that the latter procedures are not at all well equipped for illuminating the social realm. This conclusion is easily established, but rarely is so precisely because of the widespread reluctance to engage in ontology. It is just this reluctance that I wish to call into question.

The particularity of formalistic modelling

But is formalistic modelling really so restricted in its usefulness? As I say, I think it is *and that it can be shown to be so*. Let me briefly sketch my argument. First consider the sort of conditions under which formalistic modelling has relevance. Basically such modelling attempts to relate one (measurable) set of events or states of affairs to others. It presupposes correlations in surface phenomena, that is strict (possibly including probabilistic) regularities of the form “whenever event (or state of affairs) x then event (or state of affairs) y .” Let me refer to situations in which such regularities occur as

closed systems. Formalistic modelling, to have general relevance, presupposes the ubiquity of such closures.

Now an observation often recorded but rarely reflected upon is that outside astronomy such event regularities, or at least those found to be of interest and significance in science in general, are mostly confined to situations of well-controlled experiments. An additional observation is that the results of controlled experiments are regularly successfully applied outside the experimental laboratory where event regularities are not in evidence.

A recognition of this situation, then, already casts doubt on the rationality of ploughing ever more resources into producing yet additional formalistic economic models. Certainly the failure of the econometrics project over the last fifty years or so is indicative that the social world is open, that event regularities in the social realm are far from ubiquitous. The usual response, of course, is to pronounce that we must try harder: to formulate ever more complex models using larger data sets, or to dig deeper in the expectation of finding the sought-after invariances at a more micro, or anyway different, level. However, the recognition that even in the natural realm significant event regularities are systematically restricted, and largely found only in situations of experimental control, encourages a suspicion that significant successes in the social realm may not be possible even in principle. It is clearly essential at this stage that the observed patterning of event regularities be explained.

But how *can* we make sense of the observed *confinement* of most event regularities to the experimental set-up? Notice first that this observation generates immediate tensions for any program that insists that such event regularities are essential to science (as the indispensable objects of scientific laws including laws of nature, or some such). For it follows that science (if thought to necessitate the elaboration of event regularities) is after all not only far from universal but, outside astronomy, mostly confined to experimental set-ups; it is actually fenced off from most of the goings-on in the world. Moreover, one is bound to conclude from this that (many) laws of nature (if event regularities are essential to them) depend upon human actions (in setting up the experimental situation), which is at least counter-intuitive. But it also follows that the further familiar observation that science is efficacious outside the experiment, where event regularities do not occur, is unintelligible.

How, then, are we to make sense of these considerations? How is it that scientists, in their experimental activities, can (frequently) codetermine a particular pattern of events that would not have come about but for their intervention? And how can we make sense of the successful application of science outside of the experimental laboratory, and specifically in conditions in which event regularities do not necessarily occur? What must the world be like for such experimental practices, results, and their successful nonexperimental application to be possible?

A structured ontology

In order to provide a satisfactory set of answers to such questions it is necessary to abandon not only the presumption, implicit in a good deal of economic modelling practice and debate, that event regularities of the sought-after sort are ubiquitous in nature, but also the equally widely held view that the scientifically significant generalizations of nature consist of event regularities. Instead, we must accept a conception of the objects of science as structured (irreducible to events) and intransitive (existing and acting independently of their being identified). That is, experimental activity and results, and the application of experimentally determined knowledge outside of experimental situations, can be made intelligible only through invoking something like an ontology of structures, powers, generative mechanisms, and their tendencies that lie behind and govern the flux of events in an essentially open world.

The fall of an autumn leaf, for example, does not conform to an empirical regularity, precisely because it is governed in complex ways by the actions of different juxtaposed and counteracting mechanisms. Not only is the path of the leaf governed by gravitational pull, but also by aerodynamic, thermal, inertial, and other mechanisms. According to this conception, then, experimental activity can be understood as an attempt to intervene in order to insulate a particular mechanism of interest by forestalling all other potentially counteracting forces. The aim is to engineer a system in which the actions of any mechanism being investigated are more readily identifiable. *Thus, experimental activity is rendered intelligible not as the production of a rare situation in which an empirical law is put into effect, but as an intervention designed to bring about those special circumstances under which a non-empirical law, a mechanism or tendency, can be empirically identified.* The law itself (now understood as a description of the workings of an underlying tendency) is always operative; if the triggering conditions hold, the mechanism is activated and in play whatever else is going on. On this understanding, for example, a leaf is subject to the gravitational tendency even as I hold it in the palm of my hand or as it “flies” over roof tops and chimneys. Through this sort of reasoning we can make sense of the successful application of experimentally established scientific knowledge outside experimental situations. The context in which a mechanism is operative is irrelevant to the law’s specification.

Conditions for closure

If, then, we are to make sense of the largely experimental confinement of event regularities, along with the wider application of experimentally determined results, it seems that we must recognize that reality is (1) *open* (event regularities are not ubiquitous – openness is required in order that closure,

the occurrence of an event regularity, is a human achievement); and (2) *structured* (constituted by underlying powers, mechanisms, and so forth as well as the actual course of events and states of affairs); with (3) some features of it being **both** (i) *separable* (allowing the experimental manipulation and insulation of some mechanisms from the effects of others) and (ii) *intrinsically stable* or “*atomistic*” (allowing the production of definite repeatable and predictable consequences once/if the mechanism is triggered).

Under these conditions it is at least feasible that human intervention can bring about a situation in which a mechanism which can act both inside and outside the experimental laboratory, is insulated under controlled experimental conditions and triggered. In these circumstances a predictable correlation between triggering conditions, and the effects of the mechanism is feasible and a modelling strategy legitimate.

The social domain

To what extent do these ontological conditions, conditions whose regular satisfaction seems essential if we are to persevere in a generalized fashion with methods of formalistic modelling, carry over to the social realm? I pose this question, of course, merely to determine whether the methods of formalistic modelling have much relevance to the social realm at all. We shall see that this is unlikely.

First of all what is meant by the social realm? I follow standard practice here and interpret it as the domain of phenomena whose existence depends at least in part on (intentional) human agency.

So understood the social world is clearly structured. For example, a condition of our speech acts, but irreducible to them, are rules of grammar and other structures of language. It is easy to see that social life in general is governed or facilitated by social rules, rules that lay down rights, obligations, prerogatives, and other possibilities and limits.

Although the fact of the social realm being structured seems a necessary condition for social event regularities of the sort pursued by econometricians to be guaranteed, it is not, as we have seen, sufficient for such an outcome: social structures including mechanisms need also to be intrinsically stable and amenable to insulation. I now want to suggest that the regular satisfaction of the latter two conditions is unlikely, and that this in large part explains the widespread failure of the econometrics project to date.

Notice, first of all, that because social structure both depends upon human agency and in turn conditions it, a switch of emphasis in social analysis is necessitated, away from those (extreme) conceptions, familiar in economics, of creation and determination, to notions of *reproduction* and *transformation*. For human intentional activity does not *create* social structure if the latter is presupposed by such activity. Instead, individual

agents draw upon social structure as a condition of acting, and through the action of individuals taken in total, social structure is *reproduced* or (in part, at least) *transformed*. Equally, though, social structure cannot be reified. For it is itself dependent upon always transformative human agency, and only at the moment of acting can aspects of social structure be interpreted as given to any individual. In short, through individuals drawing upon it in action, structure is continually reproduced or modified in form.¹²

Social positions and relations as integral to social reality

Social life, then, is not only structured but intrinsically dynamic. In emphasizing its structured nature I have so far focused upon social rules. But this is not all there is to it. Specifically, social being is also constituted in a fundamental way by both *social relations* and *positions*. These features are essential to understanding the precise manner in which human agency and structure come together.

The significance and fact of social relations and positions are easily recognized once we take note (and inquire into the conditions) of a general feature of experience: that there is a systematic disparity across individuals regarding the practices that are, and apparently can be, followed. Although most rules can be utilized by a wide group of people it by no means follows that all rules are available, or apply equally, to everyone, even within a given culture. To the contrary, any (segment of) society is highly segmented in terms of the obligations and prerogatives that are on offer. Teachers, for example, are allowed and expected to follow different practices than students, government ministers to follow different ones than lay-people, employers than employees, men than women, landlords than tenants, and so on. Rules as resources are not equally available, or do not apply equally, to each member of the population at large.

What, then, explains the differentiated ascription of obligations, prerogatives, privileges, and responsibilities? This question directs attention to the wider one of how human beings and social structure, such as rules, come together in the first place. If social structure such as rules is a different sort of thing to human beings, human agency, and even action, what is the point of contact between human agency and structure? How do they interconnect? In particular how do they come together in such a manner that different agents achieve different responsibilities and obligations and thereby call on, or are conditioned in their actions by, different social rules and so structures of power?

If it is clearly the case that teachers have different responsibilities, obligations, and prerogatives than students, and government ministers face different ones than the rest of us, then it is equally apparent that these obligations and prerogatives exist independently of the particular individuals

who happen, currently, to be teachers, students, or ministers. If I, as a university teacher, were to move on tomorrow, someone else would take over my teaching responsibilities and enjoy the same obligations and prerogatives as I currently do. Indeed, those who occupy the positions of students are different every year. In short, society is constituted in large part by a set of *positions*, each associated with numerous obligations, rights, and duties, and into which agents, as it were, slot.

Something more about this system of societal positions can be expressed if we take note of the additional observation that practices routinely followed by occupants of any type of position tend to be oriented towards some other group(s). The rights, tasks, and obligations of teachers, for example, are oriented towards their interactions with students (and vice versa), towards research-funding bodies or governing institutions, and so forth. Similarly the rights and obligations of landlords are oriented towards their interactions with tenants, and so on.

The importance of internal relations

Such considerations clearly indicate a causal role for certain forms of *relation*. Two types of relation must be distinguished: *external* and *internal*. Two objects or aspects are said to be externally related if neither is constituted by the relationship in which it stands to the other. Bread and butter, coffee and milk, barking dog and mail carrier, two passing strangers, provide examples. In contrast, two objects are said to be internally related if they are what they are by virtue of the relationship in which they stand to one another. Landlady/landlord and tenant, employer and employee, teacher and student, magnet and its field are examples that spring easily to mind. In each case it is not possible to have the one without the other; each, in part, is what it is, and does what it does, by virtue of the relation in which it stands to the other.

Now the intelligibility of rule-governed and the rule-differentiated social situation noted above requires that we recognize, first, the internal relationality of social life and, second, that the internal relationality in question is primarily not of individuals *per se* but of social positions. It is the positions that are defined in relation to others, say of teachers to students. The picture that emerges, in other words, is of a set, or network, of positions characterized by the rules and so practices associated with them, where the latter are determined in relation to other positions and their associated rules and practices. According to this conception, the basic building blocks of society are *positions*, involving, depending upon, or constituted according to, social rules and associated tasks, obligations, and prerogatives, along with the practices they govern, where such positions are both defined in relation to other positions and are immediately occupied by individuals.

Notice finally that notions of social *systems* or *collectivities* can be straightforwardly developed using the conceptions of social rules, practices,

relationships, and positions now elaborated. Specifically, the conception of social systems and collectivities that is supported in this framework is precisely of an ensemble of networked, internally related, positions with their associated rules and practices. All the familiar social systems, collectivities, and organizations – the economy, the state, international and national companies, trade unions, households, schools, and hospitals – can be recognized as depending upon, presupposing, or consisting in, internally-related position-rule systems of this form.

Formalistic modelling as a generalized tool of social science

What follows for the practices of economic modelling? We know that econometrics and other projects concerned with detecting social-event regularities of interest have so far been rather unsuccessful. We now have an explanation: the social world is a highly internally related, intrinsically dynamic process, and one that is dependent upon, if irreducible to, transformative human agency. Certainly the experimental isolation of stable separable social structures and processes seems infeasible. Nor is it surprising that event regularities of sufficient stability to facilitate a successful practice of economic modelling have not been found to occur spontaneously, that is behind the backs of human intentional actions. It can be admitted that there are numerous regularities that are *made* to happen but that are thereby of limited scientific interest. For example, in certain parts of the world Christmas is celebrated on the same day each year (although even here, in specific families say, there can be exceptions due to illnesses, the need for members of the family to be away from home on December 25, or whatever.) But regularities such as this hardly constitute the sort of result that formalistic modellers seek to uncover.

In short the social realm seems to be constituted of stuff that is largely not *separable* and *intrinsically stable*, so that the lack of successes of the formalistic modelling project in economics is quite explicable, and future successes are seemingly improbable.

It follows, I think, that feminists may have been too cautious in their criticisms of formalistic modelling. Certainly, there are grounds for supposing that those empirically-oriented feminists in economics insistent upon applying standard econometric methods in all contexts are proceeding wholly in the wrong direction.

But it may even be the case that feminists have been largely in error in identifying the primary direction of causation of the errors involved. I have in mind here the tendency of feminist economists to interpret as fundamental the disposition of male economists to portray human agents as relatively isolated, self-contained individuals. The latter is seen as a peculiarly masculinist view, counterpoised with the feminist emphasis on social relations. I think it is. But it may be indirectly and subconsciously achieved.

For I am suggesting that the primary problem with mainstream economists, which differentiates them from other social researchers, is their largely uncritical passion for formalistic modelling. And once it is realized that, to guarantee results that take the event-regularity form, it is necessary to formulate conceptions of separable, stable (intrinsically constant) entities – basically of isolated crypto-atoms – the mainstream emphasis falls into place. For the individualistic agents of mainstream constructions are just that: individual optimizing atoms set in situations where a unique optimum of sorts is feasible, guaranteeing stable predictable results. It may thus be the modelling strategy *per se* that is the chief masculinist error here, and the substantive formulations a secondary implication.¹³

In any case, ontological analysis is seen to be consequential. It follows from it that formalistic modelling is not only overly partial: it may actually be misplaced.¹⁴ Economists can pursue the same sorts of goals as the *ex posteriori* successful natural sciences; that is, be concerned to identify causes of surface phenomena. But when mainstream economists insist that we should all work more or less exclusively with procedures of formalistic modelling, they succeed not only in marginalizing without investigation all alternative approaches to doing economics (those that are not based on closed systems modelling), they also succeed in universalizing a practice that even in natural science is found to be but a special case (confined mainly to the well-controlled experimental situation), and a special case that, in the social realm, conceivably has no legitimate counterpart at all.

Illustration 2: positioned interests as essential to epistemic practice

If event regularities of the sort that are sometimes produced in the experimental sciences are so illusive in the social sciences, how is the systematic investigation of social phenomena possible? If ontology has helped us understand the *ex posteriori* failures of the formalistic modelling approach in the social sciences, as well as the intrinsic limitations of the latter as a method for illuminating the open social system, can it take us further and also help guide us towards a more fruitful alternative way of proceeding? I want now to suggest that it can, and that in doing so it necessarily joins, and contributes to, the discussion, prominent in feminist theory, concerning the situatedness of knowing.

An epistemology for an open system

If social reality is open and complexly structured, being intrinsically dynamic and highly internally related, with a shifting mix of mechanisms lying beneath the surface phenomena of direct experience, how can we begin even to detect the separate effects of (relatively) distinct (aspects of)

mechanisms or processes? This is the question I turn to address here. And it is only through ontological reflection that it is apparent that this *is* the question that needs addressing.

In motivating my answer let me quickly take note of the fact that controlled experiments do not *all* take the form of insulating single stable mechanisms in “repeated trials” with the intention of generating event regularities. That is, although event regularities of the sort required by mainstream modelling approaches are mostly produced in well-controlled experimental situations, not all experimental situations are concerned with producing event regularities of this form. An alternative project, illustrated, for example, by plant-breeding experiments, involves the use of control groups to help identify the effects of specific mechanisms of interest. Where, for example, crops are grown in the open there can be no expectation that all the causal factors affecting the yields are stable, reproducible, or even identifiable. Yet progress in understanding *can* be achieved, through ensuring that two sets of crops receive broadly similar conditions except for one factor that is systematically applied to one set but not to the other. In this case systematic differences in average yields of the two sets of crops can with reason be attributed to the factor in question.

In other words, experimental control frequently takes the form of comparing two different groups or populations with common or similar (if complex, irreversible, and unpredictable) histories and shared (if nonconstant) conditions, excepting that one group is “treated” in some definite way that the second, control, group is not.

In the plant-breeding scenario just described, of course, the aim is to experiment with some compound that is already suspected of possessing yield-increasing causal powers. Our primary concern, however, is with detecting the effects of hitherto unknown or unrecognized mechanisms. But it is easy enough to appreciate the relevance of this scenario for a situation wherein, say, the yield of a given crop was expected *a priori* to be roughly the same in all parts of the field but discovered *ex posteriori* to be systematically higher at one end. In this case an experimentalist has *not* actively treated the relevant end of the field. But it seems *prima facie* that there is an additional causal factor in operation here, even if we are as yet unaware of its identity.

The general situation I am suggesting as being relevant for social-scientific explanation in open systems, then, is one in which there are two or more comparable populations involved. Our background knowledge leads us to expect a specific relation between outcomes of these populations (frequently a relationship of similarity, but not always), but we are *ex posteriori* surprised by the relation we actually discover. Under such conditions it is *prima facie* plausible that there is at work a previously unknown yet identifiable causal mechanism, or aspects of a mechanism. Outside these conditions, however, it is difficult to see how, in an open system, projects of identifying hitherto unknown causal processes can even begin.

Contrastive explanation

The open and structured nature of social reality, then, means that we might resort to something like *contrastive explanation*, with explaining descriptive statements that take the form “this rather than that.” Contrastive explanation is concerned not with questions such as “why is the average crop yield x ?” but with “why is the average crop yield in that end of this field significantly higher than that achieved elsewhere?” Explaining the latter contrast is much less demanding than explaining the total yield. While accounting for the total yield requires an exhaustive list of all the causal factors bearing upon it, the contrastive question requires only that we identify the causes responsible for the difference. But the import of relatively systematic contrasts here lies not so much (or just) in the fact that the task delineated is less demanding, but in the fact that contrasts alert us to the situation that there is something of interest to be explained at all.¹⁵

Of course, it could have turned out that contrasts of the sort in question were nowhere to be observed. But *ex posteriori* this has not been the case; they are everywhere in evidence. Women usually get worse jobs than men, or are paid less for the same contribution; a car journey from Cambridge to London is usually quicker by night than by day; currently in the U.K. many women wear make-up whereas most men do not; currently in the U.K. schoolgirls perform better academically in single-sex schools than in mixed schools; and so on.

I am suggesting, then, that, in a highly internally related, dynamic (and so typically nonseparable, and nonrepeatable) reality, the effects of causal mechanisms can be identified through formulating interesting contrastives at the level of actual phenomena. This means identifying differences (or surprising relations) between outcomes of two groups whose causal histories suggest that the outcomes in question ought to stand in some definite anticipated or plausible relationship (often one of rough equality or similarity) that is systematically at odds with what we observe. We do not and could not explain the complete causal conditions of any social or other phenomenon. To do so would presumably mean accounting for everything back to the “big bang” and beyond. Rather we aim to identify single sets of causal mechanisms and structures. And these are indicated where the observed relationship between outcomes or features of different groups is other than was, or might have been, expected or at least imagined as a real possibility.

Notice, incidentally, that I am not (of course) presuming that any factor or set of factors most directly responsible for a surprising contrast inevitably (or even mainly) combines with all others in a mechanistic fashion. A causal factor present in one situation but not another may well combine with other factors in an organic or internally-related fashion and so affect the manner of functioning of any or all causal conditions. This is merely something to be determined in the course of the investigation. Here I am mainly focusing

on the usefulness of contrasts of interest for getting potentially successful projects of illumination initiated.

Now it may seem that I am recommending a reasonably general approach here. And indeed I am, although I am making no claims about how generalized is its relevance. Certainly I do not wish to claim other than a partial perspective. But in truth there is no getting away from generalities. Claims that everywhere there are differences, or that differences matter, or that knowledge is situated, partial and so forth, are no less general. The relevant point is that (unlike, say, formalistic modellers in economics) I am identifying an approach for which the claim of being widely applicable seems *ex posteriori* to have some grounds: there is both reason (as seen in the first illustrative example above) to suppose that the social world is not only open but intrinsically structured, and evidence that contrasts of interest abound in the social domain.

We can note, parenthetically, that the dominant approach of mainstream economics, namely formalistic modelling, is in the end a special case of that which I am defending anyway. For under certain experimental conditions stable mechanisms can be, and often are, insulated and empirically identified. These moments are significant just because (or when) the event patterns produced within the experimental conditions *contrast* in a systematic way with those that emerge “outside.” In other words, the experimental scientist is able to make an advance precisely by, and when, addressing the contrastive question: “why is this event regularity achieved under these (specific experimental) conditions but not others?” The problem that remains for mainstream economic modellers, of course, is that whilst interesting contrasts abound in the social realm, few if any seem to involve the discovery of surprising event regularities of a degree of strictness that can be regarded as satisfactory for their intended (“explanatory”/predictive/policy) purposes.

We might also note that the broader argument for reality being open and structured, sustained in the discussion of formalistic modelling above, is itself a further example of contrastive explanation. The contrast in question in this case is the generalized fact of experience that, outside astronomy, event regularities of interest in science are mostly confined to experimental situations. Explaining this contrastive phenomenon leads to the structured ontology I have elaborated. Thus it can be seen that if particular contrasts of interest lead to hypotheses about specific mechanisms, generalized contrasts of interest lead to philosophical ontologies. Given the *ex posteriori* pervasiveness of interesting contrasts, the fact of open systems is seen to be debilitating neither for science nor for philosophy.

Situated knowing

Now all this has a bearing on the situatedness of knowledge emphasized in feminist theorizing. For it follows from the emphasis upon contrastive

explanation that the sorts of issues addressed in science, and the manner of their treatment, will necessarily reflect the perspectives, understandings, and personal-social histories, in short the “situations,” of the scientist/investigator. It is hardly a novel insight that in the process of choosing a primary phenomenon for explanatory analysis (scientific and other) interests necessarily come to bear. But it is now apparent, once we recognize the contrastive nature of social scientific explanation, that the interests of the researcher necessarily determine which causal mechanism is pursued as well. For when phenomena in an open system are determined by a multiplicity of causes, *the particular one singled out for attention depends upon the contrast identified as puzzling, surprising, unusual, undesirable, or of interest in some other way. And this in turn will reflect the interests and understandings of the individual or group of researchers or interested onlookers involved.* It may be that only the interested farmer can recognize that her or his animals are behaving strangely, only the parent can perceive that all is not well with the child, and only the marginalized group can appreciate the full nature or extent/effects of certain dominant structures or processes or of inequalities, and so forth.

In this way, if amongst others, the situatedness of the investigator comes to the fore in science and explanation, in bearing upon the sorts of contrasts found surprising and warranting of explanation. It influences the direction or location of investigatory practice and so, ultimately, such discoveries or contributions to understanding as are made. In fact, I now want to suggest that insights into the situatedness of knowing achieved by reflecting on the multiple causation of phenomena serves not only to reinforce the feminist insistence on the situated nature of knowing but also to throw further light on certain related issues raised in feminist epistemology. Let me briefly indicate a few of the ways in which contrastive explanation theory and feminist epistemology join together.

Contrastive explanation and feminist epistemology

I should emphasize, first of all, that the theory of contrastive explanation does not merely support the thesis, argued by many feminists, that interested standpoints are inevitable. Certainly the latter insight is sustained. And this insight is sufficient to undermine the conventional presumption whereby, as Sandra Harding critically summarizes: “socially situated beliefs only get to count as opinions. In order to achieve the status of knowledge, beliefs are supposed to break free of – to transcend – their original ties to local, historical interests, values and agendas” (Harding 1993: 236).

The position I am defending, however, goes further in suggesting that interested standpoints (including acquired values and prejudices) are not only unavoidable but actually indispensable *aids* to the explanatory process.¹⁶ The task of detecting and identifying previously unknown causal

mechanisms seems to require the recognition of surprising or interesting contrasts, and the latter in turn presupposes people in positions of being able to detect relevant contrasts and to perceive them as surprising or otherwise of interest and to want to act on their surprise or aroused interest. The initiation of new lines of investigation requires people predisposed, literally prejudiced, to looking in certain directions.

It follows that science, or the knowledge process more generally, can benefit if undertaken by individuals who are predisposed in different ways, who are situated differently. It is thus the case, as other feminists have already argued (for example, Seiz 1995; Harding 1995; Longino 1990), that the endeavor to attract diverse voices into the scientific community or any prominent (or other) discussion can be supported on grounds not just of democracy or fairness but also of good methodological practice.

Second, contrastive explanation theory appears capable of reinforcing the claim of *standpoint theorists* that marginalized positions can facilitate significant insights. Let us recall that standpoint theories or “epistemologies” claim that *certain* positioned ways of knowing are in some sense or manner privileged. In early feminist standpoint formulations the emphasis was upon women’s ways of knowing.¹⁷ In more recent accounts, the viewpoint of any group that has been marginalized is regarded as privileged. My specific thesis here is that such claims of standpoint theory can be given a good deal of backing if we see the relative advantage of the marginalized arising (in part or whole) just in their being *better able to recognize contrasts of some significance*.

How might being marginalized, meaning being constrained from the center of some form of social life, confer a relative epistemic advantage? More specifically, why do I suppose it can facilitate the detection of contrasts that are (in a manner yet to be explicated) highly significant? The answer, I believe, lies in that dual feature of being marginal: that it denotes both an insider and outsider position. To be marginalized you are outside of the center. But equally in order to be marginalized you first have to belong. British women usually are, but the Hopi Indians are not, marginalized in many spheres of modern British society. Feminist economists, post-Keynesians, (old) institutionalists, Austrians, and Marxian economists are, but physicists and chemists are not, marginalized in modern university economics departments.

It is this duality of belonging and yet being constrained from the center, I think, that is essential to the epistemically advantaged situation of the marginalized. It facilitates an awareness of contrasts of significance. For unlike the dominant group, the marginalized are forced both to be aware of the practices, belief systems, values, and traditions of the dominant group as well as to live their own. And with this being the case there is a greater opportunity, at least, for marginalized people to be aware of contrasts between the two, contrasts that can lead ultimately to the understanding of

both sets of community structures, and the relevance of the two, and their interrelatedness (and so ultimately the functioning of the totality). It is in this way and sense in particular, that contrasts more readily available to the marginalized are likely to be especially significant in a given context.¹⁸

I cannot elaborate on this thesis here. But even from the above brief sketch we can see how this thesis, and the theory of contrastive explanation more generally, can support some of the insights of “feminist epistemology” and specifically standpoint theory, whilst avoiding many of the tensions often associated with the latter position. Specifically, *contrastive explanation theory* accommodates the principle, widely accepted by feminists, that all voices be admitted to the conversation, *and* can do so in a manner that *neither* supposes that marginalized voices necessarily provide truer accounts, *nor* necessitates that the result will be (a) a plethora of contradictory voices (b) possibly backed up by a judgmental relativism (i.e., a relativism in which any discrimination amongst contending claims is impossible or arbitrary). Let me briefly indicate why.

Consider first the idea that standpoint theory is supposed to give truer accounts. This appears to be an inference drawn by some of the theory’s critics. Thus, for example, Jane Flax’s focus of criticism is the idea of “a feminist standpoint which is truer than previous (male) ones” (Flax 1990: 56). Alison Assiter clearly understands the same implication of standpoint theory even if opposing Flax’s assessment: “I disagree with her [Flax], however, in her claim that there is no feminist standpoint that is more true than previous male ones” (Assiter 1996: 88). Unfortunately, though, Assiter grounds her assessment in the idea that feminists have a shared set of values and that this somehow necessarily leads them on the path to truth – or at least to “‘radical’ insights that can be called knowledge” (1996: 92). Why or how, or the evidence that, this occurs remains unelaborated in Assiter’s account.

It follows from the preceding discussion, however, that to dismiss standpoint theory because it is supposed to give a truer account is based on a misunderstanding of the enabling aspect of a standpoint or position. The advantage that one position may have over another is that it can facilitate the detection of different contrasts and so the pursuit of alternative lines of enquiry. In any investigation of a noted contrastive phenomenon, numerous conjectured explanations may be entertained, and the ease or difficulty with which a relevant causal mechanism is identified will depend, amongst other things, on both the context as well as the skills of the investigators involved. But this, *per se*, has nothing to do with the nature of any standpoint implicated. Specifically, the systematic advantage of the marginalized standpoint, if there is one, lies not in the truth status of the answers obtained, but in the nature of the questions that are recognized as significant and so substance of the answers arrived at.

Here my understanding seems to cohere with that of many standpoint

theorists themselves, who put the emphasis on achieving alternative lines of enquiry. Consider Sandra Harding:

the activities of those at the bottom of such social hierarchies can provide starting points for thought – for *everyone's* research and scholarship – from which humans' relations with each other and the natural world can become visible. This is because the experience and lives of marginalized peoples, as they understand them, provide particularly significant *problems to be explained* or research agendas.

(Harding 1993: 240; emphasis in the original)

The light thrown on standpoint theory by contrastive explanation theory, then, helps dispel the idea that anyone is claiming that marginalized viewpoints are or can be privileged because they are supposed somehow to be truer. I now want to suggest that contrastive explanation theory also helps counteract the opposed inference, sometimes drawn and raised in criticism of standpoint theory, that allowing numerous, previously marginalized, voices into the conversation inevitably results in a plethora of contradictory voices. The belief that the latter must follow encourages (though clearly does not justify) the often-repeated conclusion that standpoint theorists' support for a plurality of voices betrays the acceptance of a form of judgmental relativism. Consider the reasoning of Alison Assiter once more:

although Harding has a legitimate point in her claim that excluding representatives of certain groups cannot help the advancement of knowledge, the converse – that allowing representation to all, on grounds of democracy – leads back to the kind of [judgmental] relativism that Harding wishes to reject.

(Assiter 1996: 86)

From the perspective of contrastive explanation theory, however, we can see that neither a plethora of contradictory voices nor a commitment to judgmental relativism is *inevitable*. The prevalence of many different voices, even if all are considering the same phenomenon, may merely reflect a focus upon different contrasts. The investigation of different contrasts can lead to a variety of causes being pursued and perhaps uncovered. For example, suppose we focus on the U.K. productivity record in the post-World War II period. Even if all of our observers are economic historians, each may note a different contrast to the others and so pursue a different cause. For example, one of our economic historians may notice that the productivity record in question is better than the prewar U.K. record and pursue the factor responsible (perhaps the postwar expansion of demand). Another may notice that the postwar productivity performance of the U.K. is below that of many otherwise comparable industrialized countries over the same period and ponder on the causal factor responsible (perhaps Britain's relatively unique system of localized industrial bargaining). And so on.

In short, it is not too farfetched to suppose that even where a similar focus is taken, on say the conditions of work or some aspect of human daily life of a specific group of people, different observers will draw contrasts reflecting their own situations (those of women, lesbians, immigrants, older people, “unskilled” workers, etc.) and in doing so uncover different aspects of the underlying causal situation. But there is nothing in this assessment that entails that the discoveries made or causal theories formulated are *necessarily* incompatible or contradictory.

That said, it doubtless is the case that the causal explanations produced will often be in competition. But if or when this is so there need be nothing particularly problematic about this situation either, and certainly no reason to embrace a judgmental relativism. For when competing theories are produced, each must be assessed according to its relative empirical adequacy. This is a longer story I will not go into here (see Lawson 1997a: Ch. 15). But there is no reason to suppose that the problems involved are different in nature or degree than those confronting, say, a single scientist or investigator who has herself or himself formulated a set of competing hypotheses all consistent with a particular contrastive phenomenon and wishes to choose between them. Once we allow that theories can be selected according to their relative explanatory powers there is no inevitable problem in dealing with competing explanations.

Illustration 3: the possibility of human emancipation

I turn to my third and final illustration of how ontology can make a difference. Here I want to consider the feminist project of emancipation noted at the outset, and in particular the desire to empower diverse voices. Central here is the recognition by feminists that dominant values and interests need be no more than that, whereas dominant groups often presume to speak and act for, but not necessarily in the interests of, all of us. The salient fact is that in opposing the propensity of dominant groups to universalize their own perceived identity, values, interests, and customs, etc., some feminist theorists have tended to give up on the possibility of shared values and concerns altogether. Specifically, in response to the criticism of earlier feminist theorizing that it marginalized differences of race, ethnocentricity, culture, age, and so forth, there has been a tendency to suppose that there are no unifying characteristics of women or feminists at all, or indeed of any other announced grouping.

The resulting conception, in the limit, is of a world of *only* differences, of *only* unique values, interests, and experiences. Any basis for correcting ideas of shared identities, for collectively challenging the values which dominate, for progress in science, for coherent transformative projects of emancipation and so forth are undermined, and in the process any point to a feminist, or any other collective, project evaporates.¹⁹

This degeneration into an extreme form of individualism, with its associated near-impotency of collective expression or other form of action, is the experience of cultural theory, for example. Here the tendency in question has encouraged the suppression of all reference to feeling or to relatively persisting and transcultural forms of sensibility, grounding aesthetic judgments and accounting for their discriminations. This has culminated in a reluctance to engage with value questions in the field of cultural studies and a tendency, indeed, to collapse cultural criticism into cultural history and sociology.

Increasingly we are witnessing the same sort of trends in economics with the emergence of injunctions to abandon normative methodology as a hopeless project and to embrace instead methodology as history or sociology of thought (see in particular E. Roy Weintraub 1989; or various contributions to Andrea Salanti and Ernesto Screpanti 1997). The result is a deconstruction of the possibility of sustaining any form of critical engagement. The culmination of the process is the validation of anything that is or happens, an indiscriminating positivism of the actual.

There is more to reality than the course of events and states of affairs

We can see, however, that such assessments serving to destabilize the feminist emancipatory project are hardly compelling once we accept that reality is structured, that it is irreducible to experience and its direct objects. I have already argued that actualism, i.e., the thesis that reality can be reduced to the actual course of events and states of affairs, is untenable, that we must recognize in addition a realm of underlying structures, powers, mechanisms, tendencies, and so forth. At least I have done so specifically in the context of considering objects of the natural sciences and society. I now want to indicate that human subjectivity is no exception, that we can and should substitute a conception of human nature as structured in place of the actual individuality espoused in (versions of) postmodernism. Once this is achieved, contributing a fuller nonactualistic conception of the individual to that already secured for society, we have a basis for seeing clearly that, even if experiences are unique in some sense, or if each human individual has a manifest nature that is unique in some way, it in no way follows thereby that all aspects of societies or of individuals need be. There can be shared features lying at a different level. I now want to argue that the latter is indeed the case. And it is on this understanding, I also want to indicate, that the feasibility of projects of emancipatory progress mostly rests.

I have already discussed the manner in which I take society, or societies, to be so structured. Let me at this point briefly sketch something of the structure of human nature in general, as well as the distinction between human needs and wants in particular, and indicate their significance for the issues in question (for further elaboration, see Lawson 1997a, 1997b).

Human nature

I must immediately emphasize that any conception of a common human nature that is sustainable here could not be ahistorical. But equally it seems rather implausible to suppose that human beings do not possess various shared characteristics and in particular *capacities* (e.g., language capabilities – as presupposed even by the postmodernist concern with discourse), which both derive from a scientifically recognized common genetic structure and serve to differentiate us from other species. When viewed under one set of aspects, or at a high level of abstraction, then, human nature can be accepted as a common attribute, one grounded in our genetic constitution and manifest in certain species-wide needs and capacities or powers (such as language use).

Of course, even a common human nature can only ever be expressed in inherently socialized, more or less historically, geographically, and culturally specific, and very highly differentiated, forms. In other words, when human nature is viewed under a different set of aspects than the above, and specifically at a lower level of abstraction, it can be understood as an historically relatively-specific nature. Its development, at this level, has its origin at the time, place, and conditions of an individual's birth, and is subsequently influenced by the class, gender, occupational positions, and so forth, in which the individual stands, along with her or his experiences more widely. For example, we cannot just "speak" in the abstract, we have to speak a specific geohistorically located language. To the extent that numerous people throughout their lives are subject to identical or similar forms of determination an historically quite definite nature may thus be held in common.

Now to accept any of this is not to deny that, in the limit, any individual will always be subject to a unique combination of experiences and modes of determination producing a particular personality. Thus from a third and rather more specific perspective, or a yet lower level of abstraction, the nature of any given human being must be seen as a more or less unique individuality. There is no reason to doubt that a person's individuality is primarily constituted by her or his social peculiarity. Each individual is the product of her or his actions and experiences within the social relations and other modes of determination into which he or she is born and thereafter lives. An individual's actions, or things that happen to her or him, are comprehensible in terms of the individual's socially conditioned capacities, powers, liabilities, and dispositions. The agency of each individual is thus conditioned by the relationships in which he or she stands or has stood, just as these relations, as with social structure in general, are in turn dependent upon the sum total of human doings.

Ultimately, then, an individual's manifest nature and experiences may be unique. But this is quite consistent with commonality or generality lying at

a different level, an insight we can recognize only when we pass beyond an ontology of the actual and specifically of experience.

Needs

In accepting that the human subject is so structured we can also recognize a basis for common or shared real needs. And indeed it is essential to any emancipatory project that we can. The possibility of human freedom presupposes the existence of shared human objectives, i.e., real interests and motives, ultimately rooted in common needs and capabilities. If everyone's needs are merely subjective, with the possibility of being irreconcilably opposed, then projecting the goal of social emancipation is indeed likely to be question-begging from the outset. The condition of shared real interests is a presupposition of all emancipatory proposals – whether supporting (relative) change or (relative) continuity – whatever perspective is accepted. And, of course, at the very least we share in common the need to realize some or all of our capacities: to realize our potentials as human beings.

It is not difficult to see, then, that the possibility of moral theorizing can, at least in part, be based on a recognized common human nature, a recognition grounded in our biological unity as a species. However, because this common nature is always historically and socially mediated, human needs will be manifest in potentially many ways. It follows, accepting the perspective on society elaborated above, that the pursuit of social goals always takes place in a context of conflicting position-related interests. It is likely, for example, that most of us most of the time need our “own” language(s) to be spoken. Certainly, conflicts centering on the interests of class positions, age, gender, nation-states, regions, culture, and so forth, are as real and determining as anything else. Even so, different groups may cooperate allowing different, and even opposed, interests sometimes to be met. The point remains, though, that opposed, position-related interests or developed needs exist. And it may be upon our unity as a species and the more generalized features of our social and historical experience and make-up that the greater possibility of unambiguous and enduring progress rests.

Of course there will often be practical problems of identifying human needs whatever their level of generality. Things are complicated, of course, by the irreducibility both of real needs to manifest wants and of wants to the means of their satisfaction.²⁰ But if real needs are thereby rendered unobservable this *per se* renders their identification no more problematic than that of other unobservables in science (such as gravitational and magnetic fields and social relationships). Indeed, this is a situation in which contrastive explanation can once more prove fruitful (although justifying this assertion will have to wait a further occasion).

Grounding the possibility of human emancipation

At this point we can see that the conception of human nature, needs, and interests that I am defending, when coupled with the social ontology elaborated in the first illustration set out above (that is, with the conception of social reality as intrinsically dynamic, highly internally related, and constituted by positions, amongst other things) allows us simultaneously to accept the relativity of knowledge, the uniqueness of experiences, *and* the possibility of progress, including emancipatory projects. For it is now clear that there is no contradiction in recognizing each of us as a unique identity or individuality, resulting (in part) from our own unique paths through life, and *also* accepting that we can nevertheless possess similar needs or interests as well as stand in the same or similar positions and relations of domination to those of others around us, including gender relations. From this perspective there is no contradiction in recognizing both our different individualities and experiences *as well as* the possibility of common interests in transforming certain forms of social relationships. Fundamental here is the fact that human subjectivities, human experiences, and social structure cannot be reduced one to another; they are ontologically distinct, albeit highly interdependent, modes of being.

I rush to add (or re-emphasize) that, as with processes of realizing human potentials, I make no presumption that any aspects of social structure, say gender relations, are other than intrinsically dynamic or are everywhere the same. First, social structure depends upon intentional human agency for its existence. It is both condition and consequence of human practice and so is inherently dynamic, depending for its continuity on inherently transformative intentional human agency. Second, social structure is inherently geohistorical-cultural, being dependent on geohistorically rooted practices. There is no presumption that gender relations being reproduced/transformed in Cambridge in 1999 are identical to either those reproduced in Cambridge 100 years ago or those existing currently in some other parts of the U.K., Japan or wherever. It all depends. My experience is that gender relations in most places (still) serve to facilitate (localized) practices in which men can (and often do) dominate/oppress women, or appear in some way advantaged.²¹ But the extent of commonality/difference across time and space is something to be determined *ex posteriori*.

This conception also allows that, for people from quite diverse backgrounds, it is feasible both that their individualities/personalities are quite different and that when they arrive in the same location they are subject to, or forced to stand within, similar, i.e. *local*, gender (and other) relations, whether or not they are aware of this, or they learn to become locally skillful. For example, it seems that currently in parts of the U.K. any (person identified as a) woman going alone to a pub in the evening is likely to meet

with harassment by some “men” whatever the former’s previous experiences, realized capacities, acknowledged needs, expectations, self-perceptions, or understandings of the local gender relations, and so on.

By the same token, some “men” in the U.K., aware that approaching a “woman” in a dark street can cause anxiety, will purposefully cross to the other side of the road if passing or overtaking in order to minimize alarm. This can happen even if the person being overtaken does not (is sufficiently ignorant of local culture as not to) feel any alarm or anxiety, or whatever. Gender relations with a degree of space–time extension along with practices they facilitate can be *transfactually* operative irrespective of the knowledges or understandings and wishes of those affected. The existences of multiple differences in manifest identities and individual experiences is not inconsistent with this insight – any more than the unique path of each autumn leaf undermines the hypothesis that all leaves are similarly subject to the transfactual “pull” of gravity.

In short, once a structured ontology is recognized we can see that multiplicity in the course of actuality remains coherent with a degree of uniformity at the level of underlying causes or structure. The conception defended thus secures the basis for an emancipatory politics rooted in real needs and interests. In so doing it provides grounds, in particular, for feminist projects of transforming gender relations, in an awareness that the existence of multiculturalism or of differences in general, need not in any way undermine or contradict such emancipatory practice. It also preserves, without strain, the possibility of strategies of solidarity or meaningful affiliated action between groups. In short, it transcends the sorts of tensions that currently seem to pervade much of feminist epistemology and political theory.

What seems to have happened in certain strands of feminist theorizing (or in social philosophies that have been influential) is that a form of *a priori* universalizing has once more been sanctioned. By correctly emphasizing differences in experiences and manifest natures, but erroneously reducing reality to experience and its direct objects, the view encouraged is of a world of only uniqueness and differences. In this way, in place of the commonalities previously unquestioningly asserted by dominant groups in treating their own specific traits as though universal, we achieve only a world of universalized difference. And it seems that an essential condition for this erroneous result maintaining any credibility or ground is the neglect of explicit ontological enquiry.

FINAL COMMENTS

I have observed that explicit ontological analysis is conspicuously, if erroneously, down-played in much of feminist theorizing, and I have suggested that this neglect is unfortunate in that ontology matters for any would-be

projects of illumination and emancipation. I have provided some illustrations to back up this claim.

Whatever the reason for the down-playing of such realist concerns, the point bears emphasizing that realists are no more committed to absolutism than relativists are committed to irrationalism. The relevant question, rather, is: which realist and which relativist positions are sustainable in a given context? I have argued here, in effect, for an ontological realism and an epistemological relativism, which together amount to a rejection of a judgmental relativism in favor of a judgmental rationality.²² In this I have defended a particular social theory that preserves and endorses, indeed itself incorporates, the impulse behind the “deconstructive” turn in feminist theory, but which simultaneously, through its emphasis on ontology, avoids the self-subversion of *total* (including a judgmental) relativism.

The particular theory of reality defended is of a structured and open world. It is a conception that recognizes that in our everyday practices, all of us, as complexly structured, socially and culturally situated, purposeful and needy individuals, knowledgeably and capably negotiate complex, shifting, only partially grasped, and contested structures of power, rules, relations, and other, possibly relatively enduring but nevertheless transient and action-dependent, social resources at our disposal. Ontological analysis provides an insight into this reality.

Thus when Deirdre McCloskey, in the manner of others, cautions against any embracing of “material realism” on the grounds that “What is at issue here is the philosopher’s construct, Reality, a thing deeper than what is necessary for daily life” (McCloskey 1997: 14–15), the primary error lies in supposing there is little depth to “daily life,” that philosophy deals (or inevitably claims to deal) with a reality apart from that continually encountered by us all. The mistaken presumption, in effect, is that social reality, and specifically “daily life,” is reducible to the actual course of social events. This reduction of reality to experience and its immediate objects is a mistake that ontological analysis allows us to rectify.

Now I am aware, finally, that the above outline is rather schematic and hurried. I suspect many will remain rather unconvinced by some or all of the sketches provided. As it happens, I do find that the broad perspective elaborated currently constitutes as sustainable (explanatorily powerful) an account as any with which I am familiar (see Lawson 1997a). But I should re-emphasize that most of the preceding discussion is provided first and foremost with the intent of being illustrative. My primary objective here is not so much to persuade others to accept precisely the conceptions developed as to suggest that such conceptions, or explicit ontological analyses of the sort grounding them, do deserve consideration by more feminists. My chief purpose here is to contribute to removing what I take to be unnecessary obstacles to a particular set of debates, with the hope of transforming or even initiating a further strand to a particular conversation. For it may

just be (from where I am situated it seems likely) that if feminists, including feminist economists, allow realism, and in particular explicit ontological analysis, to come more fully out of the margin, the opportunities for advance opened up thereby will prove to be to everyone's advantage.

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NOTES

¹ Most obviously such a universalizing tendency serves to exclude alternative voices and practices. In resisting it feminists have been strategic in facilitating a stage, inside and outside the academy, for otherwise marginalized or excluded voices, a contribution that has both emancipatory and enlightening dimensions (see Susan Bordo 1993).

Against this background of the opening-up of social theory in a variety of areas, feminists within economics have been endeavoring to achieve similar progress in a discipline which, over the last half-century at least, has become one of the least pluralistic of all. On the constructive side has been the creation of the journal *Feminist Economics*. Here the intention to include voices previously marginalized or excluded altogether is accepted as fundamental (see especially Diana Strassmann's opening editorial). On the more critical side feminist economists have not been slow in revealing the tendency of prominent economists, mainly white, middle-class and male, to universalize their own experiences and perspectives, and, most significantly, to use the assumed, but unestablished, universal validity of their own particular methodological and other dispositions to exclude others who might wish to do things differently (see, for example, Paula England 1993; Nancy Folbre 1993; Ulla Grapard 1995; Julie Nelson 1993, 1996; Janet Seiz 1993, 1995; Diana Strassmann 1993a, 1993b; or Diana Strassmann and Livia Polanyi 1995). Others have been concerned that implicit overgeneralizing is avoided in feminist (substantive) economics itself (see, for example, M. V. Lee Badgett 1995).

² Nussbaum writes "By metaphysical realism I mean the view . . . that there is some determinate way the world is, apart from the interpretive workings of the cognitive faculties of human beings" (p. 68).

³ In a reflective and critical follow-up, or response, to her own "cyborg" paper, i.e., in her paper on "situated knowledges," Donna Haraway acknowledges that "feminists have both selectively and flexibly used and been trapped by two poles of a tempting dichotomy on the question of objectivity" (1988: 249). This dichotomy is between positions which Haraway refers to as feminist critical empiricism and radical constructionism. The empiricist wing is criticized for expecting too much in terms of knowing reality, the radical constructionist or postmodernist position for knowing too little. Haraway (1988: 252) formulates her resolution as follows:

So, I think my problem, and “our” problem, is how to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own “semiotic technologies” for making meanings, *and* a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a “real” world, one that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.

- ⁴ Of course, all methods and epistemological positions generate implicit ontological claims of some kind. Hume’s empiricism (as usually interpreted) is an example. By restricting knowledge to experience, (knowable) reality is itself in effect restricted to (atomistic) events given in experience. In consequence, any generalist claims are restricted to formulations of regularities in the succession and coexistence of these phenomena, to elaborations of Humean causal laws.

Just as empiricists in the Humean mode presuppose a (knowable) reality of atomistic events and states of affairs given in experience, so radical constructivists necessarily recognize a reality of the text (or the conversation or some such) and all its presuppositions. Even if discourse or conversation is thought only to be about discourse or conversation, the text being discussed in a particular discourse is at the level of ontology, it constitutes the referent of thought and knowledge, and the ongoing discourse-making reference is at the level of epistemic practice, the process of knowledge. There is nothing in philosophical realism that warrants that ontology is restricted to things immutable or known infallibly, etc. Certainly, any text is real and a potential object of knowledge. And this remains so even if someone voices disagreement with aspects of it, and even if the author changes her or his view as a result, or even if the reader has not fully understood the author’s intention.

- ⁵ For an introduction to some of this literature see especially Margaret Archer *et al.* (1998).

- ⁶ I am not sure any contributor would want to put things quite so starkly as this. But it is a (polar) conception to which allusions appear sometimes to be made (or are easily interpreted as being made) even in the best of feminist writing. Helen Longino’s important contributions provide a prominent example. In a statement about realism that is otherwise helpful she writes of “the idea that there is one consistent, integrated or coherent, true theoretical treatment of all natural phenomena. . . . These ideas are part of the realist tradition in the philosophy of science”. And a few lines below she adds: “Even more, the scientific inquirer, and we with her, become passive onlookers, victims of the truth. The idea of a value-free science is integral to this view of scientific inquiry . . .” (Longino 1987: 256–7; see also Longino 1990: 29).

In similar fashion Mary Tiles (employing capital letters as a distancing device, in a manner adopted in economics for example by Deirdre McCloskey 1997) writes: “we see increasing numbers of philosophers of science rallying under the banner of Realism to defend the view of science as aiming at objective Truth and as possessed of methods of theory choice which, even if they do not guarantee truth, do at least ensure objectivity by preventing the intrusion of non-scientific interests or values into theory choice” (Tiles 1987: 221).

It is easy to see how influential assessments such as these (whether or not couched in terms of *scientific* realism and even allowing for their particular contexts) might encourage the view that all scientific realisms take, or at least tend towards, the narrow absolutist perspective described. My suspicion is that it is by way of universalizing this very narrow version to cover the entire perspective of

scientific realism, that the latter, and in particular the activity of explicit ontological elaboration closely associated with it, tends to be played down if not altogether excluded from serious discussion and debate. In this way there is a real possibility that, in feminist thinking, scientific realism is itself in effect marginalized through misrepresentation.

⁷ See, for example, McCloskey's (1997) "You Shouldn't Want a Realism If You Have a Rhetoric" as a recent example of attempting to play down the role of explicitly realist considerations in economics.

⁸ Before indicating how this constructive input might be achieved, though, I must make sure that I do not myself knowingly falsely universalize here. Specifically, I should acknowledge that there are at least some feminist theorists sensitive to, and who explicitly acknowledge, the fact that there is far more to realism than the naive or absolutist conception that some may be erroneously generalizing. (See, for example, Miranda Fricker 1994; Jean Grimshaw 1986; Marnia Lazreg 1994; Martha Nussbaum 1995; Caroline New 1998; Janet Seiz 1993, 1995; Kate Soper 1991.) However, this group does seem to constitute a relatively small minority, as some of the individuals concerned themselves observe.

⁹ For an indication of how dominant is the practice of formalistic modelling in modern mainstream economics see Diana Strassmann's (1994) discussion.

¹⁰ A good preliminary discussion of alternative methods based on more qualitative approaches is provided by a set of contributions – by Günseli Berik, Joyce P. Jacobsen, Andrew A. Newman, Irene van Staveren, Simel Esim, and Jennifer C. Olmsted – collected together by Michèle Pujol (1997), for a "Special Issue" of *Feminist Economics* entitled "Expanding the Methodological Boundaries of Economics."

¹¹ A response that to some extent is already being realized. (See, for example, Esther Redmount 1995; Shelley Phipps and Peter S. Burton 1995; or Notburga Ott 1995.)

¹² In their daily activities, then, human beings draw upon social structure which, in turn, is reproduced or transformed through human action taken in total. Although human acts may sometimes be performed with the intention of (1) reproducing structure (speaking to a child with the intention of imparting knowledge of language) or (2) transforming structure (collective attempts to change some feature of the current economic or legal system), it is likely that most structural reproduction and/or transformation arises as an unintended product, whether or not desired or even recognized. Of course, if the reproduction/transformation of social structure is only rarely recognized by individuals or their reason for acting in the way they do, individuals usually have some motivation for, and conception of what they are doing in, their activity. Human acts are mostly if not always intentional under some description. Even if most speakers of English, say, are not intending, in their individual speech acts, to reproduce that language, its reproduction nevertheless is the sum result of the speech acts in which English speakers engage, just as the speech acts in which individual agents engage always have their own intended objectives.

If the reproduction/transformation of social structure is rarely an intended project, it is equally the case that the individual agents are not always aware, certainly not discursively or self-consciously so, of the structures (such as language rules) upon which they are drawing. The picture that emerges, then, is one of largely unmotivated and only partially grasped social reproduction. Individuals draw upon existing social structure as a typically unacknowledged condition for acting, and through the action of all individuals taken in total, social structure is typically unintentionally reproduced. Social structure in general is neither

created by, nor independent of, human agency, but rather is the unmotivated condition of all our motivated productions, the noncreated but drawn upon and reproduced/transformed condition for our daily economic/social activities. For an elaboration on all this see Lawson (1997a), especially Chapters 12 and 13.

- ¹³ Of course, both orientations are causal and have become historically associated in economics. The point is that as long as economists keep to their formalistic methods they are constrained from dealing with realistic substantive accounts even if so inclined. But the method and the theory are currently so intertwined that it is easy to support Michèle Pujol's conclusion:

Can neoclassical economics be cleansed of its patriarchal bias so that it can open its eyes to the methodological flaws resulting from its ingrained sexism? . . . I want to suggest that the very logic, rhetoric and symbolism of the paradigm may be inseparable from the . . . sexist assumptions I have discussed here. Neoclassical economics has a *history* of stifling feminist approaches. We cannot wait for change. We must transcend it.

(Pujol 1995: 29, 30)

See also Martha McDonald's (1995) assessment that "economic theory and methodology both have to change if they are to serve feminist purposes, and the changes are interactive" (p. 191).

- ¹⁴ Of course all reasoning is fallible, including ontological analysis of the sort presented here. On the pluralist/anti-dogmatic grounds of not wishing to foreclose any line of epistemic activity (in case it proves illuminating), therefore, I do not conclude that we need to reject all formalistic modelling out of hand. But I do think we must accept that there are compelling grounds for expecting the dismal record of generalized failure to continue (and for effecting a substantial reallocation of economics-research resources).
- ¹⁵ Contrastive explanation has been widely discussed over the last twenty years of course (see, for example, Bas Van Fraassen 1980; Alan Garfinkel 1981; David Lewis 1986; Peter Lipton 1991). However, whilst I think it is fair to say that much of this literature has been concerned with applied explanation, with considering whether known factors can be said to constitute an (adequate) explanation, I am here concerned with the role of contrastive phenomena in the process of identifying causes that are unknown or hitherto unrecognized.
- ¹⁶ Perhaps this recognition lends support to Donna Haraway's remark that "Feminist objectivity means quite simply *situated knowledges*" (Haraway 1988: 253).
- ¹⁷ These formulations, in turn, often critically built on Marx's analysis of contrasting "class" positions in a capitalist society. A major contribution of this sort is Nancy Hartsock's (1983) "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism."
- ¹⁸ This thesis does, I think, closely resonate with those of other standpoint theorists. It has close affinities, for example, with Nancy Hartsock's (1983) insistence that "A standpoint is not simply an interested position (interpreted as bias) but is interested in the sense of being engaged" (p. 218). According to Hartsock, "like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallogocentric institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy" (p. 217). It also fits closely with Patricia Hill Collins's (1991) discussion of the "outsiders within," and with Dorothy Smith's (1987, 1990) notion of "bifurcated consciousness."
- ¹⁹ All we have are different voices, interests and values, and the absence of any nonarbitrary way for distinguishing between them. Each claim is as good as any

other. There is no basis for progress, criticism, or any kind of engagement with our times. We have what we have; a situation to be described, perhaps, but not to be judged or criticized. As Susan Bordo summarizes the situation:

Assessing where we are now, it seems to me that feminism stands less in danger of the totalizing tendencies of feminists than of an increasingly paralysing anxiety over falling (from what, grace?) into ethnocentrism or “essentialism.” . . . Do we want to delegitimize *a priori* the exploration of experimental continuity and structural common ground among women? . . . If we wish to empower diverse voices, we would do better, I believe, to shift strategy from the methodological dictum that we foreswear talk of “male” and “female” realities . . . to the messier, more slippery, practical struggle to create institutions and communities that will not permit *some* groups of people to make determinations about reality for *all*.

(Bordo 1993: 465)

Or, as Kate Soper complains:

the logic which challenged certain kinds of identity thinking and deconstructed specific notions of truth, progress, humanism and the like, has pushed on to question the possibility of objectivity or of making reference in language to what itself is not the effect of discourse . . . Pushed to its uttermost, the logic of difference rules out any holistic and objective analysis of societies of a kind which allows to define them as “capitalist” or “patriarchal” or indeed totalitarian, together with the transformative projects such analyses advocate. It gives us not new identities, not a better understanding of the plural and complex nature of society, but tends rather to collapse into an out and out individualism.

(Soper 1991: 45, 46)

²⁰ Clearly, needs and rights can be formulated as goals or wants or demands, and treated as legitimate or illegitimate, only under definite historical conditions. As such they may be poorly, and even misleadingly, formulated. Specifically, real needs can be manifest in a variety of historically contingent wants, which may then be met by any of perhaps a multitude of potential satisfiers. It follows that to assume either actual satisfiers (e.g., specific commodities purchased or perhaps acts of violence) or expressed objectives (such as owning more than others) are defining of human needs is to commit an ethical fallacy – to reduce needs to wants and wants to the conditions of their being satisfied or expressed.

I am not suggesting that wants as expressed in actions bear no relation to underlying needs, of course. Indeed, although certain activities sometimes appear quite undesirable from the point of view of facilitating human development and potential, it is often easy enough to see how they are nevertheless motivated by various real needs on the part of the perpetrators – for example, to obtain respect from others, inner security or simply a release of frustration. But it is important that real needs and expressed wants are not conflated (which is just what tends to happen in modern mainstream economics of course, a mistake that is encouraged by that project’s continuing neglect of explicit ontological analysis). For a lengthier discussion of all this, see Lawson (1997a).

²¹ Consider, for example, Kate Soper’s U.K.-based experience. In arguing that “there are some concrete and universal dimensions to women’s lives . . .” she illustrates with the case of solitude:

I mean that women live in a kind of alertness to the possibility of attack and must to some degree organize their lives in order to minimize its

threat. In particular, I think, this has constraints – from which men are free – on our capacity to enjoy solitude. As a woman, one’s reaction to the sight of a male stranger approaching on a lonely road or country walk is utterly different from one’s reaction to the approach of a female stranger. In the former case there is a frisson of anxiety quite absent in the latter. This anxiety, of course, is almost always confounded by the man’s perfectly friendly behaviour, but the damage to the relations between the sexes has already been done – and done not by the individual man and woman – but by their culture. This female fear and the constraints it places on what women can do – particularly in the way of spending time on their own – has, of course, its negative consequences for men too, most of whom doubtless deplore its impact on their own capacities for spontaneous relations with women. . . . But the situation all the same is not symmetrical: resentment or regret is not as disabling as fear; and importantly it does not affect the man’s capacity to go about on his own.

(Soper 1990: 242)

²² This is a topic I explore more fully elsewhere (Lawson 1997a). It is also central to various contributions in Archer *et al.* (1998).

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