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THEORIZING ONTOLOGY

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This essay is a response to "Representing Reality: The Critical Realism Project" by Sandra Harding, which appears in this issue of Feminist Economics.

ABSTRACT

Sandra Harding identifies a set of questions to which, she suggests, she and I would provide contrasting answers. In this short note I wonder if our differences are quite as sharp as Harding supposes.

KEYWORDS
Ontology, culture, epistemological relativism, partiality as a resource, open discussion

As I read through Sandra Harding's latest essay I find so much with which I agree that I wonder if there really are the differences between us that Harding suggests. I suspect a large part of why some are perceived is precisely the factor that Harding emphasizes most, namely different (philosophical-) cultural frameworks. Clearly aspects of our philosophical orientations are quite different. And where we do address similar issues, we tend to come to our conclusions via different routes. This is only to be expected. But where features of conceptual frameworks are very different, misunderstandings can obviously easily occur, perhaps with differences more likely overstated than commonalities. With this in mind I concentrate here mostly on attempting further to clarify, rather than defend, my position, focusing specifically on the issues that Harding raises.

Harding indicates the nature of her more recent response in the abstract to her paper. This reads as a set of questions:

Is there only one basic structure of reality? Can anyone produce culture-free representations of reality? Is the partiality of our representations only a problem or inconvenience rather than also an epistemic resource? Should we think of the goal of sciences as the production

of accurate representations of reality or of effective interaction with it? This essay focuses on differences in how Tony Lawson and I would respond to such questions.

<div align="right">(Sandra Harding 2003: 151)</div>

Harding implies that we differ in our answers to all four of these questions. In fact I think our answers to most, if not all four, are rather similar, but, as I say, difficulties in appreciating this likely follow from our uses of different conceptual frameworks, including contrasting terminologies.[1] The difficulties in question relate especially to the way we address the first question regarding the structure of reality. Certainly, the task of indicating my own answers to the remaining three questions seems more straightforward. With this in mind, let me start by giving relatively brief, reasonably categorical responses to the latter three questions, before turning to some complications with the first.

Harding's second question is: *Can anyone produce culture-free representations of reality?* Like Harding my answer to this is a categorical No! I do accept the relativity of knowledge. I do not for a moment suppose that social ontology or anything else could be represented or produced in other than a manner that is conditioned by our socio-cultural (or biological or physical) determinations. This is precisely what lies behind my acceptance of an epistemological relativism. This is a concept that Harding has found non-intuitive or perhaps unhelpful. But within the realist project (and perhaps more widely) it expresses the idea that our categories, frameworks of thinking, modes of analysis, ways of seeing things, habits of thought, dispositions of every kind, motivating concerns, interests, values, and so forth, are affected by our life paths and socio-cultural situations, and thereby make a difference in how we can and do "see" or know or approach things, and indeed they bear on what we seek to know. I take "culture" to be merely one of the relevant influences in knowledge (unless, of course, we define culture so broadly that it includes everything that can make a difference).

Actually I go somewhat further than this. I also think it useful to emphasize that numerous conditioning factors and devices are species-specific. I take the view that plants and animals know things, too. For example, the human being watching a flying insect, and the sonar-guided (or echolocating) bat that swoops to catch it, both know the insect in their own ways. It is just that their ways of knowing are different. And so it is across human cultures, or even for a given human being over time. So I agree with Harding. I do not wish to suggest at all that anything can be known or represented in a neutral, culture-free manner. We are all to an extent products of our cultures and much else, and beyond early infancy it is mostly, if not only, through socialized or culturally molded capacities that we can come to know anything.

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Let me turn to Harding's third question, namely *is the partiality of our representations only a problem or inconvenience rather than also an epistemic resource?* In posing this question, Harding supposes that I view ''partiality and fallibility as only a necessary evil, not as a scientific and epistemological resource'' (Harding 2003: 153). But this is not so. Of course, my position is primarily ontological. But I do draw epistemological implications. And the explanatory position on which I have most concentrated turns fundamentally on recognizing partiality and fallibility as fundamental resources; both are viewed explicitly as conditions of advancing knowledge. I can only be brief here, but a central component of my position is that recognized errors lead to surprised, concerned, or interested orientations in us all, and that these orientations provide vital impulses to particular explanatory endeavors. Similarly the natures of our errors provide insights essential to future explanatory successes (Tony Lawson 1999: 36–44). Because we are each situated uniquely, the partialities involved, errors made, and concerns prioritized will be highly variable, with the explanatory significance of particular errors, surprises, or queries typically apparent to some but not to all. I have thus argued explicitly ''that interested standpoints (including acquired values and prejudices) are not only unavoidable but actually indispensable *aids* to the explanatory process'' (Lawson 1999: 40).

This argument is set out (albeit still somewhat briefly) in my earlier *Feminist Economics* article (Lawson 1999), where I explicitly attempt to connect my own position with that taken by Harding on these issues (for few have contributed more than Harding to defending the orientation in question). In that earlier essay, I not only emphasize that scientists too are (of course) situated in specific ways but also address the specific question of how being marginalized might confer a relative epistemic advantage (Lawson 1999: 41). I conclude (among other things) ''that science, or the knowledge process more generally, can benefit if undertaken by individuals who are predisposed in different ways, who are situated differently''[2] (Lawson 1999: 41).

In any case let me take this opportunity to state categorically my position on such matters. When I refer to individuals being *situated differently*, I refer to differences according to culture, class, gender, race, age, and everything else. And I argue explicitly that making the most of our differences is not only necessary but methodologically advantageous, as well as morally desirable and democratic. I stress that the assessment that differences, partiality, and fallibility are epistemological resources is an *essential* component of the explanatory position I defend (see Lawson 1997, 1999).

The fourth question Sandra Harding has posed is *should we think of the goal of sciences as the production of accurate representations of reality or of effective interaction with it?* Harding writes:

> On the interventionist conception, the measure of the adequacy of a
> claim is the effectiveness of the interventions it directs to achieve all
> and only the effects intended, replacing the representationist measure
> of a semantic match between knowledge claims and features of the
> world.
>
> (Harding 2003: 156–7)

I am not actually sure I use the category or idea of representations much, if
at all. I explicitly reject correspondence theories of truth, though not the
idea that our theories can *express* or capture reality (see Lawson 1997: Ch.
17). In any case, I agree that we frequently gauge the *adequacy* of specific
theoretical claims by way of our checking our ability to employ them to
intervene successfully in the world. It is my view that science employs not
only a perceptual but also a causal criterion for ascribing reality to a posited
object. That is, in science we assess the reality of an entity whose existence is
in doubt by investigating whether our conception of it allows us to effect
intended changes in other phenomena we can more directly experience or
measure (see, for example, Lawson 1997: 57–8). According to the account
I defend, this, in large part, is the rationale for experimental work in
science. For I argue that a significant feature of much successful
experimental work is the insulation (from countervailing forces) of a
mechanism posited in scientific theorizing, thereby facilitating the
production of an event regularity (correlating the triggering of the
mechanism and its unimpeded effects) that otherwise would not have
come about. Further, the argument for a structured ontology receives its
support by making sense of the observation that event regularities are
largely restricted to the conditions of laboratory interventions (see Lawson
1997, 1999, 2003). That is, the philosophical ontology I defend is justified
by its explanatory power with respect to certain *generalized* effects of
experimental interventions. I do therefore recognize the interventionist
conception as a fundamental component of scientific and philosophical
(and indeed all) reasoning.

So I return to Sandra Harding's first question, namely, *is there only one basic
structure of reality?* In order both to answer it in an unambiguous way and to
compare my position with Harding's, I need to clarify my terminology and
conceptual framework.

Specifically, I want first to emphasize a distinction that I find
indispensable, between an object of knowledge and knowledge of that
object. I do not suggest a total or dualistic separation. But I do maintain
non-identification, at least typically. This is not to deny that we usually can
know an object of enquiry only via a conceptual framework. But without
maintaining a distinction between knowledge and what it is about, it is
difficult to make sense of the fact that our knowledge of a given thing is

often criticized and/or revised, etc., and nor can we easily make sense of the phenomenon that objects of knowledge mostly change independently of us.

In previous writings I have (like others contributing to the critical realist project) referred to the object of knowledge as being in the *intransitive domain* and knowledge of the object as being part of the relevant individual's *transitive domain* (see, e.g., Lawson 1997: 25–8). Many items in the latter may be termed social constructions. Examples include theories, hypotheses, conceptual frameworks, guesses, data, anomalies, etc. As I say, we can only know objects of reality in which we are interested (that is, intransitive objects) through our conceptual frameworks. But however difficult it may be in practice to distinguish knowledge from what it is about, I resist the reduction of one to the other. I maintain the non-identity of knowledge and its object.[3]

Notice that neither the transitive nor the intransitive domains are fixed or static. And epistemological categories or aspects may feature in either domain, for they are relative, in a sense, to the knowing agent. For example, as I read Harding's piece, it is a feature of the intransitive domain for me, meaning that it has an existence whether or not I choose to read and reply to it; it is a potential object of my knowledge, something that in fact I have been seeking to understand. In contrast, my thoughts about Harding's paper are in my transitive domain, meaning that they are features that I myself in some part construct in the process of seeking understanding. But to any reader, including perhaps Harding, these thoughts of mine when written down will be objects of their intransitive domain.

Now although I believe most authors implicitly recognize and maintain the distinction in question, it is often possible to determine whether certain references are to items in an author's transitive or intransitive domains only by examining the references made in context. For example, a term like ''history'' can refer both to a sequence of events or occurrences over time (in the intransitive domain) or to a (specific) account of those events (in the transitive domain). Or the term *explanation* can refer either to a cause of a particular phenomenon (in the intransitive dimension), or an account of a cause of some phenomenon (in the transitive dimension). Use of the categories such as (scientific) law or abstraction has the same intransitive–transitive ambiguity. And so does the category of social (or any other) ontology. It may refer to (features of) social being or to a specific account of (features of) social being.

A second matter on which I want also to clarify my meaning concerns the use of singular and plural nouns. It is a common enough realist adage that there is ''one reality (or world) but many theories of it.'' This is fine so long as the proposer of the adage is not interpreted as suggesting that the one reality is everywhere the same, simple, homogeneous, unchanging, experienced everywhere or by everyone in the same way, and so on.

Indeed the ''many different theories of it'' are themselves part of this one reality. In using this adage, realists simply mean by reality ''everything there is.'' Some contributors may accept this framework but still prefer to talk of many realities. The danger I find with the latter usage is that it is easily construed as implying that we live in literally entirely different worlds, so that any two of us can never be observing, or otherwise concerned with, the same things. Some theorists do seem to suggest they are taking such a position, but it is not my own.[4]

Once reality is referred to as a singular term I have found it easy to fall into the practice of referring to it as possessing a nature and structure also in the singular. But in this practice I in no way wish to imply a lack of variety or stasis or homogeneity. Indeed I do not want to prejudge the issue at all. But even if a social theorist were to convince me that there is little more to social existence than differences or particularities, I would still refer to this assessment as one about *the* nature or structure of social reality. Although this is a terminological convention, it may have caused confusion.

With the categories so understood, I would give an affirmative answer to the question of whether there is, or whether I would use the expression, one basic structure of reality. I do not believe that I use the qualifier ''one basic'' as Harding suggests, but my use of the definite article ''the'' or the adjective ''broad'' may seem to be equivalent. I can accept that there is such a structure in the same way I suggest there is but one reality.

With these considerations in mind, let me consider passages in which Harding critically addresses relevant assessments I make on related issues. Harding writes, for example:

> Sometimes something close to this retrospective realism seems to be what Lawson is arguing – that his ontology is only a hypothesis based in his assumptions about human species-being and social reality, which he regards as supported by empirical evidence, and subject to revision whenever the balance of such evidence should shift. Yet he takes his account to provide ''a theory of *the* nature and structure of reality'' (Lawson 2003: 00, my [i.e. Harding's] emphasis), as if there could be no other reasonable such theory.
>
> (Harding 2003: 153–4)

It is the second of the two sentences of this extract that I want to question. (I basically concur with the first.) In it Harding emphasizes my use of the definite article in a given passage. Specifically, Harding suggests that I take my account to provide '' 'a theory of *the* nature and structure of reality' [...] as if there could be no other reasonable such theory.'' But note that my use of the definite article is to qualify *not* the term ''theory'' but the expression ''nature and structure of reality.'' I am not at all meaning to suggest that ''there could be no other reasonable such theory.'' One reality, many theories. Or, one nature and structure of reality and many theories of it.

That is, one nature and structure understood generically as covering all the variety and multitude of different aspects and components. As I say above, in referring to the nature and structure of reality, I am nowhere suggesting, or expecting to find, a homogeneous, simple, unchanging, undifferentiated, everywhere identically perceived, entity. I merely employ a (not uncommon) terminological device to express the generic or total.

In a slightly earlier passage Harding writes:

> Lawson's Critical Realist project ... proposes that there is one and only one reasonable comprehensive ontology that can make intelligible any and all various patterns of social experience, and thus that ontological research must consist in identifying it [...] Second and relatedly, his project appears to assume that this ontology can in principle and should aim to be represented in a culture-free way, since it must have universal validity.
>
> (Harding 2003: 152–3)

According to Harding I seek an ''ontology that can make intelligible any and all various patterns of social experience'' (ibid.: 152–3). Now I acknowledge that I do begin with the goal of examining whether this is at all feasible, at least for a particular domain. But an ontology that seeks to account for patterns must be in the transitive domain; that is, the term ''ontology'' as employed in this sentence can mean only an ontological *theory*, a theory *about* social being. Thus, as with any form of theorizing at all, I recognize the possibility of a plethora of theories being produced, see this as desirable, and acknowledge that none can be produced or represented in a ''cultural-free way.''

Does it not make a difference, though, that I seek to determine whether a highly general theory is possible, that I am exploring the feasibility of theorizing at a level of abstraction such that all features of experience (in a given domain) can be interpreted as particular instances? Harding seems to suppose so. Indeed she appears to suggest that the very idea of seeking highly general insights presupposes a belief in the possibility of cultural-free assessments. But Harding's insight that *all* claims are culturally conditioned itself seems sufficient to undermine such a suggestion. Objects of knowledge and knowledge of objects are typically very different types of things. And it seems to me that whatever we take as our object of knowledge, there is every reason to anticipate the possibility of a number of competing culturally conditioned accounts of it.[5] And this, I repeat, is desirable.

So I am not sure that Harding and I really are very far apart, except perhaps in our terminological and conceptual frameworks, and with Harding seemingly less optimistic than I am about the possibilities for philosophical ontology. On the four questions raised, specifically, we do seem to hold similar sorts of positions, even if diverging in the details of our

reasoning.[6] If, however, I am wrong in so concluding, I hope I have helped clarify my own position on relevant issues, so that it is easier for Harding (or whomever) to determine where our differences really lie.[7]

Finally, if emphasizing agreement is tedious, I am afraid I am going to draw to a close by being more boring still. For Harding concludes by urging a continuing and open discussion on seeking ways ''to avoid those forms of separatism and fractures in the social fabric that make it impossible to live together democratically'' (Harding 2003: 157). Whatever our situated differences of frameworks, terminology and understandings, Harding's objective and motivation here are mine as well.

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NOTES

[1] No doubt these difficulties are reinforced by the fact that, traditionally, many scientific realists have indeed appeared to support answers of the sort that Harding imputes to me (see Tony Lawson 1999).

[2] I thus joined with other feminists (I referenced, for example, Helen Longino 1990; Janet Seiz 1995; Sandra Harding 1995) in stressing 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'' (Lawson 1999: 41).

[3] And in doing so I also resist the idea that the truth content of any knowledge claim (as opposed to our assessment of that content) is a social construction. The truth content, rather, depends on the way the world is.

[4] This use of singular nouns to express generic ''objects'' that encompass variety, are ever-changing and complex, and so on, is not uncommon. And it can apply to structures as much as to entities. Social theorists often use the category of *social structure* as well as social structures. The latter refer to individual aspects of social life such as specific social relations, rules, institutions, positions, features of culture, and so on. But the sum total as an object of study is typically referred to as social structure. It is a generic term. Harding herself often distinguishes culture and cultures in this way. We can (and many do) also talk of social life, social practice, social being, and so on. None of these terms are intended to suggest other than multiple (and possibly highly varied) forms of existence.

[5] Certainly competing highly general accounts are in evidence. I might note in this regard that Alfred North Whitehead (1978) appears to be as concerned as am I to determine the degree of generality that is to be found at the ontological or metaphysical level (see Whitehead 1978 [1929], especially pp. 3–13). But, significantly, Whitehead's resulting, highly general, conception nevertheless contrasts with my own in many ways (see Lawson 2003).

[6] I agree with Harding too on numerous points of detail she raises, for example that the task of developing ontological theories cannot usefully proceed apart from (among other things) the findings of the various sciences (and their implicit ontologies). I am not yet convinced, however, that apparent conflicts in implicit scientific ontologies render the sort of project I am supporting unsustainable.

[7] I can certainly imagine various points where various readers might want to part company with my position. One is my contention that there is only one reality. I know some do suppose otherwise. I have not defended this position here. A second is my urging an ontological turn in social theorizing and defense of a specific ontological framework. My earlier contributions to *Feminist Economics* have been concerned precisely with this. And a third is the distinction I draw between the object of knowledge and our knowledge of that object. This is a complex issue about which I have been able to give only the briefest account of my position.

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