Indigenous Knowledge and Feminist Standpoint Epistemology: A Prolegomenon

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Much recent work on Indigenous knowledge (IK) has focused on the possibility of its integration with so-called 'Western science', particularly in the Arctic. In this short essay I aim to lay some conceptual foundations for how one might approach that on-going project. To set at least one parameter for what follows, I think it does no favor to anyone in this discussion to articulate the value of IK by denigrating the merits and achievements of what we commonly refer to as science. Nor vice versa. Instead, I will try to articulate a way in which the contributions of both IK and science might stand alongside each other, each with a valid claim to the title of genuine knowledge.

More precisely, what I wish to critically examine is the widespread assumption that the primary contribution that IK can make to our ever-expanding knowledge of the world is that it offers a particularly efficient way of expanding that knowledge. It is often assumed that the merits of IK lie in how it allows for the efficient accumulation of more data for science. Given the familiarity of Indigenous Peoples to their local environment, after all, it is easily assumed that IK simply facilitates the data gathering process, of data in principle available to all. And while there is certainly some truth to this, I suggest it is a mistake to think that the merits of IK lay solely in how it can add to our database of knowledge. Drawing upon the resources of feminist standpoint epistemology, developed by Sandra Harding and others, I will argue that IK has much more to offer. In short, theories of standpoint epistemology, as I develop them here, suggest that IK potentially offers the means to gather that data as well as a host of other insights and knowledge not accessible to science as traditionally practiced. Recognizing this potential will be an important element in integrating IK and scientific knowledge, I suggest, without forcing one to be assimilated to the other. Each can stand as a legitimate source of knowledge. As a slogan, one might claim my project is to argue for integration without assimilation.

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Standpoint epistemology, as I explain, argues that marginalized and oppressed peoples have a distinctive vantage point from which to understand both the social and natural world. Their position as marginalized provides unique experiences not available to those in the dominant power-holding majority. These experiences allow for questions not traditionally investigated by the majority, as well as a perspective on the presuppositions and assumptions of the majority, particularly those in the dominant Western-science tradition. That possibility opens up, we might say, ways of knowing from IK that both count as knowledge in their own right, and which do more than merely serve as a more efficient way of knowing facts that are otherwise knowable in principle by science.

I. The Myth of Neutrality

I begin with a picture of what traditional Western philosophical theories of knowledge have hoped for— a picture of what is both possible and desirable for potential knowledge of the world. I'll call that picture the Myth of Neutrality, for as I hope to explain by reference to feminist standpoint epistemology, that picture is just that, a myth.

The Myth of Neutrality is that the ideal epistemic position— one that is desirable and a fortiori possible, is the a-historic, pre-suppositionaless investigation— one free of perspective, as well as linguistic and cultural baggage. For only that, says the Myth, makes it possible to achieve true objectivity and thereby knowledge of the way the world is in itself.

If that is the standard for knowledge, it is no wonder that the integration project many seek would be a non-starter. For in contrast to this vision of what knowledge should look like, we find IK looking very different. On the one hand, science is alleged to be neutral in that it relies on principles of testing, validity, confirmation. It subjects its research and theories to possibly falsifying experimentation. And crucially, its objectivity involves its being neutral — in its values and its theories and hypotheses. IK on the other hand, is often characterized as having little or none of these features. It isn't experiment based; doesn't proceed via value-neutral hypotheses, isn't subject to peer reviews, is historic, local, anecdotal and thus not rigorous and neutral in the way allegedly needed for objectivity. Given all of that, it is no wonder the integration of each is troubling, if not impossible.

Now one way to proceed would seek to cast IK in the model of Western-science, arguing that somehow it does meet the standards for knowledge articulated as essential by the Western-

model. But that, as I said, would be to force IK to look like Western-science and this kind of assimilation would do grave injustice to the nature of IK itself.

In contrast, we see how the Myth of Neutrality is only a myth by recognizing that in point of fact all knowledge is mediated by concepts, language, perspective, and perhaps even culture—even our vaunted Western-science. Historically, that that picture is indeed a myth can perhaps be seen first and foremost in Immanuel Kant's Critique of Pure Reason. Put crudely, Kant argues that merely physically encountering the world is not sufficient for knowledge of it, as if there could be direct, unmediated knowledge. Instead, all knowledge must be mediated by concepts, or to put it metaphorically, that all knowledge is constructed. In more modern parlance we might say that knowledge, including knowledge of the physical world, is structured and organized by language, by the concepts we bring to experience.

A better picture of knowledge, one that gives up the Myth of Neutrality, holds that science and IK both are historical, perspectival, etc. That doesn't weaken their claims to knowledge. But it does suggest a more accurate picture of how the distinct knowledge-seeking enterprises can be connected, for their methods do have something in common. But we should not overstate the similarities. While both are historic and encased in their own perspectives and languages, they are still different knowledge enterprises. They are different in method and scope.

II. The Integration Project

I take the following to be a working understanding of IK, where:

"Indigenous Knowledge is held in stories, songs, place names, values, and languages and is passed down inter-generationally from Elders to children and youth...Indigenous Knowledge is 1) based on millennia of observations, 2) temporal and place-based, 3) living, 4) kinship-based, and 5) wholistic —with an added "w" to emphasize that it wholly encompasses all things, covering all areas of human life such as medicine, culture, and spirituality, as well as extensive knowledge of ecology."

As for the integration project, a prominent strategy, one I have suggested is flawed and problematic, maintains that the merits and value of IK is that it merely facilitates the accumulation of data helpful to the modern scientific project. Whether for environmental or ecological knowledge, for knowledge about the impact of global climate change on local terrain, on the waxing and waning of species populations, the cyclical changes a region goes through over the generations,

it is alleged that such knowledge simply adds to the database useful for the modern scientist seeking to understand the nature, extent and causes of such changes and variability. And, crucially on this prominent strategy, it does so in a more efficient manner than we'd be able to discover such truth via traditional science, though given enough time, science could eventually discover all that IK offers.

For instance, in a paper prepared for the World Bank, one author writes:

"…indigenous knowledge is an important natural resource that can facilitate the development process in cost-effective, participatory, and sustainable ways…"

Or, consider this:

"As scientists and philosophers working at the frontiers of knowledge increasingly find, the world view and technologies of many ancient cultures have a great deal to offer…and the future will likely increasingly benefit by the critical assessment, and where appropriate application, of such efficacious means of managing our embattled environment."

And, finally:

"Why should one believe that this old-style intuitive approach to knowing is relevant to assessing environmental circumstances?…Scientists continually warn of the need to accumulate "base-line" data, data against which future changes can be compared. Traditional knowledge-based systems already possess such data sets, often of sufficient length to cover several population "cycles" where periodicity may be measured in 70- or 80-year spans."

Now there is obviously something important about such potential contributions. What I want to question, however, is whether this is all that IK can provide. In short, a corollary of the Myth explored above is that the merit of IK lays in that it provides a more efficient path to the gathering of that knowledge, where that knowledge is there for the taking by anyone, but most helpfully assisted by what Indigenous Peoples know about their own lands. Just as a local tour guide can tell you the best, easiest, quickest way to get to that glacier you saw on Instagram, IK is valuable, it is thought, in that it can offer its ancient knowledge more efficiently, though like the tourist, if you just took enough time, the scientist could very well encounter it themselves.

Again, while there is something to this claim, given the familiarity of Indigenous Peoples to their historic lands, I suggest it is a gross misunderstanding of the importance of IK to reduce it solely to that function. For in addition to the data

that IK can offer to the scientist, I think there is something deeper to be found. And this, I believe, is where feminist standpoint epistemology, and Sandra Harding's writings are so valuable. In her essay, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is "Strong Objectivity?" she writes, echoing themes mentioned above, namely that all knowledge is mediated by language and perspective:

"Thus the standpoint claims that all knowledge attempts are socially situated and that some of these objective social locations are better than others as starting points for knowledge projects challenge some of the most fundamental assumptions of the scientific world view and the Western thought that takes science as its model of how to produce knowledge."

III. Beyond Mere Assimilation

Above, I discussed what I called the Myth of Neutrality, which I believe is what Harding is driving at here, namely, the illusion that it is both desirable and even possible to have knowledge that is not socially situated. Further, if one thinks that such knowledge must not be historically situated, one will see the historically and culturally situated projects of IK as falling short.

Instead, though, following the long line of thinkers from Kant onwards, we must recognize all knowledge pursuits as socially situated. Science and IK are alike in that respect. The important difference lies in how those socially-situated perspectives differ, and how IK's particular one can offer something beyond mere efficiency to the scientific project.

Harding makes this point when she notes that:

"Thinking from marginal lives leads one to question the adequacy of the conceptual frameworks that the natural and social sciences have designed to explain (for themselves) themselves and the world around them. This is the sense in which marginal lives ground knowledge for standpoint approaches".

From the perspective of feminist epistemology, IK permits critical examination of unexamined assumptions in science's ongoing projects. Just as one's accent is invisible to oneself, so too one's cultural / sociological / evaluative framework can be invisible. One can try to step outside oneself, with more or less success, but it is best done by someone with a different perspective. That outside perspective offers the possibility of a kind of self-reflection perhaps not otherwise possible. That, it seems, would be a significant contribution, something beyond just the efficiency that IK can offer.

Now if it is indeed true that standpoint epistemology, and by extension IK, is capable of questioning assumptions and biases of majority-driven science, we should ask after which assumptions. Here at least two paths present themselves. On the first, IK may be able to question the values inherent in science and which drive the traditional scientific enterprise and its application. Assumptions, for instance, about the value of nature, how it should be treated, and whether the Earth is simply there for the taking and use by humans. IK has much to critique here. However, it does a disservice to the potential of IK to see it as able only to critique the values of science. A deeper critique and questioning would find IK questioning some of the deeper assumptions of the scientific project— such as, to draw upon Kuhn's famous work on paradigms and 'normal science'— of its key theories, instruments, and metaphysical assumptions. Included here is the very conception of what research programs are 'good', worth pursuing, important, vs those that are flaky, silly, and waste of resources.

To give one example of a paradigm of what counts as an important issue, to the exclusion of others, Hilary Charlesworth has wondered why there is "a whole series of treaties obsessed with straddling stocks, when the use of breast milk substitutes, which is a major health issue for women in Africa, remains subject to voluntary W.H.O. codes?" Even deeper questions, ones that draw upon those 'metaphysical assumptions' might question the so-called atomism that traditional Western-science endorses, as opposed to a more robust holism or relationalism that embeds humans more fully in their communities and environments.

Here in the Arctic, Tim Ingold has explored the nature of experience and knowledge of the Sami People, which provides a starting point for recognizing the very different lived experiences there as well as a foundation of knowledge that looks very different from the image of Western-knowledge as detached and theoretical.

"In particular, I believe that such a focus might enable us to move beyond the sterile opposition between the naturalistic view of the landscape as a neutral, external backdrop to human activities, and the culturalistic view that every landscape is a particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space. I argue that we should adopt, in place of both these views, what I call a 'dwelling perspective', according to which the landscape is constituted as an enduring record of— and testimony to— the lives and works of past generations who have dwelt within it, and in so doing, have left there something of themselves."

What is telling in Ingold's account is that the Sami people's primary

experience of the world is not a detached theoretical perspective, akin to the Myth of Neutrality discussed above, where one stands back from our interactions with the world and others and postulates a theory that captures those experiences. Rather, it is an immersion in that world, of being alongside nature and others in conversation, in shared activities, of hunting, of gathering, of dancing, of celebrating. It is those activities in which we are immersed where things become present for us and where we find our relations to them. We know the world through our relational interactions, our activities, in that world. And here we encounter the world in a fundamental way, a way that makes folly of the idea that somehow nature and culture are distinct. No wonder then that the knowledge that emerges from such interactions of course looks very different from the postulated Western-scientist as knower.

IV. Conclusion

In closing, we might wonder whether the standpoint epistemology I have introduced, as a way of making the case for the potential power of IK, is capable of delivering anything that could be of genuine use to the project of amplifying and extending our knowledge of the world. One might question whether any claim of knowledge embedded in a perspective, a framework of any kind, with all the threats of subjectivity and bias that might accompany it, is truly capable of objectivity, of knowledge.

Here I think the best response is given by the philosopher Thomas Nagel. The crucial question is what exactly we hope for when we speak of objectivity. What do we mean by 'objectivity' in the first place?

"We can add to our knowledge of the world by accumulating information at a given level—by extensive observation from one standpoint. But we can raise our understanding to a new level only if we examine that relation between the world and ourselves which is responsible for our prior understanding, and form a new conception that includes a more detached understanding of ourselves, of the world, and of the interaction between them."

I submit that IK offers exactly that very potential for a "more detached understanding" of the picture of ourselves and the world that has been embedded in our familiar scientific frameworks. In so doing, IK can stand alongside Western-science as a genuine mode of knowledge, one that can enlighten and expand our understanding of our world.

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