

Donna J. Haraway

Situated knowledge

Haraway criticizes a well-established understanding of “objectivity” in the sciences at large. According to her, many scholars and scientists continue to presuppose that the onlooker has no influence on what is looked at, asserting the possibility of knowing the world objectively from a point of view that would be completely transparent to itself. She argues that such a point of view is *disembodied*, and that the validity of such a posture is in contradiction with the evidence: in order for any knowledge to take place, agency is a necessary condition.

She therefore looks after the specific agency that is at work, but unspoken-of, in the dominant objectivity theory. It is a case of “hiding in plain sight”: the social group that has been the leading force in the field of sciences since the Enlightenment is characterized by two traits: whiteness and masculinity, two traits that have been constructed by this group *through the exclusion* of women and people of colour from the cenacle of the authorized few.

She then explores how this social gaze, in its posture of domination, has pretended to see *through* and *without* bodies. She calls it “a conquering gaze from nowhere” (p.188), reminding us of the all-seeing eye of God (capable of seeing “through flesh” to discover what lies in the hearts of humans, so as to apply its moral judgement onto them). She makes also connections with science’s and science-fiction’s clichés pertaining to an hypothetical capacity of disembodiment of the mind, and shows how the qualities attributed to that gaze are also attributed to its tools (“the visualizing technologies are without apparent limit” p.188, “technological mediations are [...] celebrated and presented as utterly transparent” p.189).

By “insisting metaphorically on the particularity and embodiment of all vision”, Haraway pleads instead for a “usable, but not an innocent, doctrine of objectivity” (p.189). This shows how she doesn’t reject objectivity *per se*, but aims at criticizing one theory of objectivity and replace it with another, which would take into account how vision is never innocent. In other words, one must let go of the illusion that the world is at our mind’s (and tool’s) disposal, and make place for the experience acquired in the field of anthropology and social sciences. This reminds us of the temple of Delphi: if you want to know the world, *know yourself*.

Haraway terms her theory feminist objectivity (in reference to the feminist movement, born out of the acknowledgement that women live identical experiences of being dominated because they were born with a *female body* and identified socially *as women* by the dominant group, men), or situated knowledge. Any knowledge produced has objectivity, but the value of this objectivity necessarily changes depending on the subject **and** the object of this knowledge, making knowledge a question not of “discovery”, but of “conversation” (p.198).

Logic of discovery vs. logic of conversation

When Haraway says she “learned in part walking with my dogs and wondering how the world looks without a fovea and very few retinal cells for colour vision” (p.190), she presents us with a vision of the world that takes a step back from the anthropocentrism Western sciences have been known to give in. More specifically, she presents us with a vision that lacks the capacity to determine what/who people *are* based on the colour of their skin, which reminds us of the specificity of the social gaze (white + male) that has been dominant hitherto.

This also reminds us of Plato’s comparison between dogs and philosophers, coined in order to illustrate what he called the *philosophical instinct* (i.e. to be able to differentiate what we know from what we don’t know). But Haraway goes one step further, asserting dogs’ specific knowing potential, one that cannot be so easily subsumed by humans’.

Situated knowledges, she argues, “require that the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave to the master that closes off the dialectic of his unique agency and authorship of ‘objective’ knowledge” (p.198). Instead of transparency, bodies with their opacities and particularities; instead of the from-nowhere illusion of realism, an embodied constructivism.

“Accounts of a ‘real’ world do not, then, depend on a logic of ‘discovery’, but on a power-charged social relation of ‘conversation’. The world neither speaks itself nor disappears in favour of a master decoder.” (p.198) The logic of discovery consisted in a knowing agent unveiling the truth of the world (cf. Plato’s *a-letheia*), the latter being passive in this process (“waiting only to be read”, p.198). But this passivity is an illusion, because the world does not “stop” while we try to understand it; moreover this illusion is dangerous, because while we would assume our objects-of-knowledge’s passivity, we would assert all the more strongly our agency as dominant, which would produce biases.

The logic of conversation starts with “picturing” (p.198) our objects-of-knowledge **as agents**. Knowledge becomes therefore a dynamic relationship between agents: the two sides are involved in the process. In order to produce a kind of objective knowledge that is usable, one must therefore be attentive to the knowers as well as to the process: what do these agents want to produce knowledge for? what are their interests in knowing each other, and how does this give shape to their knowledge? what are their specific knowing potentials and tools? what social relations are they a part of, which might influence their vision?