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The Truth of the Matter

Feminist standpoint theory (FST) has a troubled history which has limited its use and development as a core feminist epistemological project. This paper revisits debates from its past, and re-examines an apparent central problem –that of the realism identifiable in FST. Looking closely at the criticism levelled against one particular standpoint theorist – Nancy Hartsock - the criticism is shown to be not only unfounded, as has previously been argued, but also unnecessary. The accusations of supposedly realist contradictions in Hartsock’s work are shown to be easily resolvable by engagement with critical realism (CR). It is argued that CR not only accommodates Hartsock’s conception of realism, and so dissolving any contention, but CR is also shown to compliment and shore up FST’s central claim; that situated knowledge carries with it an epistemic privilege. The paper identifies that another contemporary conception of realism is being developed – New Materialism (NM) – which, it could be argued, would also be a suitable ontology with which to develop FST. The argument is made as to why NM could present problems for FST as a fundamentally political project, and the paper concludes by arguing that CR offers a more fruitful future collaboration for FST.

Impediments and Reductive Realism

In the Symposium on Standpoint edition of *Hypatia* published in 2009, Joseph Rouse makes a number of interesting observations regarding the history of standpoint theories, a history which he considers to be “an indispensable resource for feminist epistemology” (Rouse 2009, 201). It is a history however which feminist standpoint theories (FST’s) have been consistently critiqued for, even hindered by, a history which has been used to undermine and limit FST’s development.

The thesis argued for here is that it is this history, when read in the light of recent philosophical developments, which may in fact hold the key to a promising future. As Rouse highlights; “Recognition that standpoint theories are naturalistic has been impeded by *narrow and reductive* conceptions of nature and naturalism prominent within philosophy” (201, emphasis added).

The objective here is to expand on Rouse’s observation, to identify and argue how such narrow conceptions have been an impediment. It is also to argue that recent developments within philosophical realist thinking, of the sort often broadly referred to as critical realism, offers a more sophisticated conception of realism; one which can address this imposition and ultimately help drive this valuable theory of feminist epistemology even further forward. In addition, the argument that critical realism can do this philosophical realist groundwork for FST in a contemporary context also requires the development of another angle of the argument. This is namely to outline why another possible contemporary conception of realism known as new materialism, which could be constituted as another contender, is not equipped to do the necessary work that FST requires. To this extent, and before expanding on Rouse’s observations, a brief definitional outline of both critical realism and new materialism follows.

Contemporary Conceptions of Realism: A Note on Critical Realism & New Materialism

Critical realism is a contemporary philosophy of science founded in the early work of Roy Bhaskar (1975). Finding the conceptions of reality of both positivism and postmodernism wanting, Bhaskar sought to develop a philosophy of science which took ontology, or the study of the nature of being, as the fundamental starting point of scientific enquiry. Put

differently, Bhaskar's and other critical realists' position can be crudely summarised as a belief that in order to be able to come to adequately understand our social world, we must prioritise ontological enquiry; we must firstly understand what exists and how it comes to exist before progressing with associated enquiries, epistemological or otherwise, or indeed plans for future courses of action. In this way, the critical realist project appears to resonate with Gillian Howie's suggestion that:

“...the work of philosophy should be concerned with the intelligibility of the world. This is not because everything can be explained, grasped, or even communicated, but because if, as feminists, we wish to change the world, then we need to know *what* we are dealing with.”

(Howie 2010, 9 - emphasis added)

By theorising a highly interrelated, constantly evolving stratified reality, constituted as different domains <1> in which all social phenomena exist, Bhaskar developed a social ontology, or theory of social reality, which involved the insights of both positivism and social constructionism, but which importantly, particularly for the purposes of this paper, also accommodate the naturalistic - *not as* a deterministic base, but as a crucial contributing conditioning factor to social reality. By beginning research from a critical realist stance is to importantly start an enquiry with the belief that the sort of social ontology outlined above predicates and so guides the research. It is to take the position that social reality is indeed highly internally related, in flux, and to make the objective of research one of discovering and explaining causal mechanisms. In this respect, critical realism breaks loose from the popular objective of science as an exercise in prediction and control, with the social ontology outlined

above instead emphasising the role of enquiry as identifying and explaining the aforementioned causal mechanisms.

Bhaskar's initial work has been extensively developed by (and with) other leading theorists <2> since its initial inception, and the benefits that the critical realist project can bring to numerous disciplines have been explored, with economics and international relations featuring heavily. This paper seeks to make a contribution to the expanding body of work which demonstrates how feminist theory, in this case FST, can also benefit substantially from working with a critical realist position.

New materialism is another contemporary philosophy of science, this time originating from the 1990's. Key contributing theorists have included, but are not limited to: Rosi Braidotti, Karen Barad, Elizabeth Grosz, Susan Hekman, Stacy Alaimo and Iris van der Tuin. Briefly stated, a central objective of new materialism is to confront and shake up problematic dualisms which dominate thinking, of which the nature/culture and human/non-human distinctions are core examples. Another central goal is to address one of the core problematic fall-outs of postmodernism and its focus on social constructionism: the loss of the real and the material which has ensued from the rejection of positivist materiality.

To achieve these two core objectives a new materialism is conceived of, a new sort of ontology. Specifically *not* an ontology with any modernist and positivist influence, but a new one which focuses on letting matter back in, as it were, but under certain conditions. Such conditions state that materiality is indeterministic and *not* conditioning. Inseparability is emphasised with a strong sense of the anti-categorical making an appearance. To complement this, the materialising process is described as intra-action *not* inter-action, so following suit.

The overall result is an ontology which moves away from the very possibility of dualism, eschewing ideas of ‘stuck matter’, and accommodating constant emergence and flux.

With these two brief definitional outlines of these contemporary conceptions of realism now in hand, the following step is to draw out how and why these conceptions are of interest with regards to FST, a task I turn to next.

A Decade of Ontological Dialogues

The 1990’s was a decade of significant debate regarding FST, with some of this debate pivoting around discussions regarding materialism, realism and ontology. These realist centred exchanges tended to focus either on the problematic inclusion of materiality within FST, or conversely, on the potential problems arising from a shortage of explicit ontological theorising within feminist theory. Two of these published exchanges are introduced here.

The Hekman Exchange

The first of these dialogues took place in the journal *Signs* <3> in 1997, and the exchange was instigated by the publication of Susan Hekman’s paper “Truth & Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited”. In her paper Hekman takes a number of central standpoint theorists to task on what she considers to be their problematic, and in some cases, conflated and contradictory realist positions. Broadly summarized<4>, Hekman argues that if standpoint theorists seek to make claims about how feminist standpoint(s) as a method of social enquiry can access a more ‘truthful’ account of social relations, (thus affording them an epistemic privilege), then this ties them into a realist position; that there *is* a knowable and

material reality about which truthful claims can be made. For Hekman, arguing from a postmodernist position, this claim that the ‘truth’ of socially constructed relations can be better accessed from a marginalised or oppressed standpoint, is underpinned by contradiction; social construction and realism cannot co-exist, the two are oppositional, so attempts to combine them result in contradiction.

Hekman’s central argumentative framework, of approaching a critique of FST via its ‘truth and method’ claims, was widely disputed by the standpoint theorists she engages with in her paper. Her approach was deemed to both decontextualize *and* depoliticize standpoint; it tried to hold it to account for something for which it was not intended, a claim which Hekman seeks to nullify in her final reply <5>. Whilst Hekman is careful to use her framework to acknowledge the positive contributions of FST - “Standpoint theory constituted a challenge to the masculinist definition of truth and method embodied in modern Western science and epistemology. It established an alternative vision of truth and, with it, hope for a less repressive society” (Hekman 1997a, 356) - she also deploys it to frame her central critique; “But the theoretical tensions implicit in the theory soon came to the forefront. The contradiction between social constructionist and absolutist conceptions of truth that characterizes Marx’s theory were translated into feminist standpoint” (356). It is the identification of this apparent contradiction within FST, and how this plays out, which is Hekman’s focus in her paper. She goes about this by systematically analysing standpoint theorist’s contributions for evidence of their supposedly conflated and implicit realist positions, framing these as theoretical weaknesses. Having presented these as contradictions, Hekman then outlines what she sees as a way forward for ‘recasting the feminist standpoint theory’, a way to eradicate the presented contradictions. She does this by arguing for an alignment with the postmodernist paradigm, a shift she identifies as already being in action

within some feminist standpoint thinking. More specifically, she proposes the use of Weber's 'ideal type' as an epistemological method for feminist theory, emphasising its appropriateness because "his approach presupposes that social analysis is always undertaken by situated, engaged agents who live in a *discursively constituted world*." (Hekman 1997a, 359, emphasis added).

Hekman's paper provoked strong responses from four of FST's central theorists with whom she engages: Sandra Harding, Nancy Hartsock, Patricia Hill-Collins & Dorothy Smith, with some being more sympathetic to her claims than others<6>. Whilst the objective here is not to run through this rich older material in great detail, it is however of interest to draw out *the* central issue raised throughout the exchange. This is an issue which Hekman agitates *via* her chosen 'truth and method' line of enquiry; it is the issue of philosophical realism and materialism. Hekman's choice of her particular angle of critique serves her well to introduce her own anti-realist/anti-materialist agenda, and to 'shake up' standpoint on these grounds.

Returning to Rouse's observation, the objective here, in turn, is to shake up Hekman's argument. It is to argue that Hekman's anti-materialist position, from which she frames her critique, draws on and constitutes a 'narrow and reductive conception of nature'. When revealed as such, it becomes apparent that Hekman's critique not only framed an unnecessary oppositional contradiction, but her suggestions unfortunately impeded standpoint theories, *not* furthered them as she intended. Following on from this, a second contention arises; that almost twenty years on, the currently evolving project of new materialism in which Hekman and others are involved<7>, can in fact be seen as efforts to try to move beyond the narrow conception of nature and the material which has been prevalent in postmodernist thinking; new materialism is attempting to steer a new course. As progressive as this sounds, these

developments are in turn raising concerns. Some feminist theorists question some of the founding gestures and grounds on which the ‘newness’ of new materialism is founded, of whether the antimaterialism of postmodernism was ever as widely accepted as it is claimed (Ahmed 2008), a claim which clearly underpins Hekman’s 1997 argument. Ahmed goes as far as to suggest that “This caricature of poststructuralism as matter-phobic involves a rather mournful lament: a call for a return to the facts of the matter that new materialism (rather ironically perhaps) shares with critical realism. We are witnessing, perhaps an attachment to this lament” (Ahmed 2008, 34). Whilst Ahmed is not explicit about her reasons for identifying this shared feature as an irony, the implicit suggestion could be that these two positions on realism are not obvious companions. Indeed, whilst this ‘return to the facts’, to borrow Ahmed’s phraseology, may have the appearance of a shared agenda of sorts, for some critical realist feminists there is still too much identifiable reticence regarding the inclusion of any sort of naturalistic anchor, and the ‘glorification of indeterminacy’ leaves narrow conceptions regarding determinacy and reductionism dangerously intact (Gunnarsson 2013). These issues of similarities and compatibility are expanded on later on in the argument.

Narrow Conceptions and Presupposition: Creating Contradiction

So what support is there for the claim that Hekman’s antimaterialism focuses on a ‘narrow and reductive conception of nature’, one which in turn leads to the creation and identification of unnecessary contradictions levelled at feminist standpoint theorists? Support can be located in the central claim which underpins Hekman’s argument, that FST is problematic for three key reasons: i) its development from Marxism (specifically the Marxist theory of Historical Materialism), ii) its being at odds with difference, and iii) its opposition to postmodernism and poststructuralism. Hekman directly links the first and last points together,

stating that; “The Marxist roots of the theory seem to contradict what many define as the antimaterialism of postmodernism” (Hekman 1997a, 342). By presenting this in the terms of a contradiction, this implies that whatever the conception of materialism or realism is which is deemed to lie at the roots of Marxist theory (and from which FST draws), is seen by postmodernists to be of the most problematic kind; the widely held conception of the material and naturalistic as reductive and deterministic.

For Hekman, it is this conceptual genealogy from Marx which is responsible for the realist residues that she seeks to identify and oust via her ‘truth and method’ line of argument.

Whilst she uses this critical approach with all the theorists she addresses, it is the criticism directed at Hartsock, and her formulation of standpoint as a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism^{<8>} which is of most interest here. Hekman argues that Hartsock appears to utilise a conflated conception of reality. She argues that “Two potentially contradictory definitions of reality structure this discussion” (Hekman 1997a, 343), identifying these as “a social constructionist argument” whilst the other, although unnamed, is referred to by the note “that it exposes “real” relations among humans” (343). Hekman goes on to add that:

“Throughout her work Hartsock *struggles with the relationship between* these two definitions of reality. It constitutes a kind of fault line that runs through her articulation of the feminist standpoint. Although her formulation changes over the years, she continues to maintain both *that reality is socially and materially constructed.*”

(343, emphasis added)

The question to be asked in light of Rouse's observations, however, is whether Hartsock *is* in fact struggling with a relationship between these two definitions. Is Hartsock's work burdened by two contradictory conceptions of reality, or does this contradiction only come into play due to the narrow conceptions used by Hekman? Perhaps what Hartsock is doing is actually implicitly assuming a reality which *does* consist of both the material and the social; she is not struggling with any difficult relationship at all, because the two are not opposed. Read in this light, the tables of fault-lines turn. Hartsock's supposed conflation actually appears to expose a weakness in Hekman's 'separated thesis' idea. Hekman's reading of Hartsock's account actually points towards the former's '*narrow and reductive* conception of nature', a conception which places impediments on Hartsock's account.

Delving a bit further into Hartsock's original formulation of FST, it is clear that for Hartsock, FST's uniqueness lies in *how* it gives access to reality; in how this unique epistemic position reveals how reality *is both* "real" *and* socially constructed. The value of FST is that it reveals precisely this vantage point, and in doing so it exposes how the material *is used* socially:

"The concept of a standpoint structures epistemology in a particular way. Rather than a simple dualism, it posits a duality of levels of reality, of which the deeper level or essence both includes and explains the "surface" or appearance, and indicates the logic by means of which the appearance inverts and distorts the deeper reality...*the concept of a standpoint depends on the assumption that epistemology grows in a complex and contradictory way from material life.*"

(Hartsock 1983, 285 - emphasis added)

Hartsock is underscoring that FST *depends* on the material *not being deterministic*. This is what FST *exposes*; that the material is not *entirely* fixed or reductive; but that fixity is overegged for dubious purposes, that the material is manipulated and controlled. The strength of FST is that it carries out an *exposé* on claims that the material is deterministic; it shines a light on these false premises, exposing how the social is constructed *on and through* control of the material. The brilliance of standpoint is that it *exposes how* the material has been commandeered, manipulated and *claimed* via social constructions to *supposedly be* deterministic. What this points towards is that the material is not the problem here; it's the social *use, and often abuse*, of the material that's problematic. Narrow conceptions of the material as reductive unfortunately lead to the loss of this crucial connection; it prevents examination and analysis of the manipulation of the material for social ends. By shining the torch of critical enquiry away from understanding this link, the use of the material as manipulated bedrock for social construction goes un-critiqued.

Re-conception Eradicating Contradiction: Realism is at Issue, not FST

The concept of materialism and ontology in Hekman's critique is one she is arguably limiting to, and consequently rejecting, as positivist. It is a materialist reality understood as rigid, conceived of as regular and controllable. It is a fixed sort of materialism, constituted of deterministic matter, which is knowable, observable and measurable. Materialism in this positivist conception is problematic in a number of ways. The strong emphasis on reality as matter focuses on rigidity; it leads the way for issues of inflexibility and omission of reality as process<9>. Materialism is perceived to fail to accommodate any process of contingency, or any responsiveness to social transformation. Determinism is emphasised. It is these identified failures of positivist materialism (amongst others including the identification of the

power nexus positivism both supports and is supported by), which has resulted in the strong contrasting formulations of social constructionism; social constructionism characterised by its call for the abandonment of materialism and the assumption of the position that there is no knowable reality, that all is socially constructed.

The contradiction framed by Hekman and directed at Hartsock is underpinned by these two opposing conceptions; of the '*narrow and reductive* conceptions of nature and naturalism prominent within philosophy' identified by Rouse, and the extreme counter position of social constructionism which vehemently rejects materialism and argues for the discursive – thus Hekman's support for Weber's 'discursively constituted world'. That the latter conception poses problems is a position now being acknowledged, and to give Hekman contemporary credit, her more recent work (2008, 2014) now insists that there is a need to engage with the material:

“We have learned much about the social construction of “woman” and “reality”. But the loss of the material is too high a price to pay for that gain. What we need now is not a return to a modernist conception of reality as an objective given, but rather an understanding of reality informed by all we have learned in the linguistic turn.”

(Hekman 2008, 88)

For Hekman, the identified need for an alternative conception of reality is being met by the new materialism philosophy of science being developed. But as Ahmed noted, new materialism appears to share similarities with another conception of realism, critical realism.

It is this conception of realism which featured in the second dialogue of the late 1990's, published just two years after the Hekman exchange, and to which the focus now turns.

The Lawson Exchange

The second ontological debate was instigated by the publication of Lawson's paper "Feminism, Realism & Universalism" (1999) in the journal *Feminist Economics*¹⁰, and which approached FST from a very different angle. This time the exchange motivated replies from feminists including Drucilla Barker, Sandra Harding, Julie Nelson, and Fabienne Peter.

Promoting an Ontological Turn

Broadly summarized, Lawson's objective is to argue against the universalism of narrow and naïve conceptions of realism (which consequently lead to a blanket rejection of realism – as per Hekman) and to instead argue for how increased explicit ontological enquiry (grounded in a wider and more sophisticated conception of realism) may be beneficial for feminist science and theorising. He approaches this by firstly acknowledging the central and defining role feminists have played in identifying otherwise hidden *a priori* universalizing tendencies within epistemology, paying particular attention to how universal epistemic claims have come under scrutiny following feminist endeavour, and how this shake up has advanced scientific methods. Following on from this observation, Lawson argues that a similar critique should also be applied to realism; just as feminists have correctly (much to their credit) identified and rejected universalized epistemologies, so too would feminists benefit from rejecting any universalized naïve ontologies and naïve conceptions of realism. It is the

universalizing of positivist conceptions of realism which have led to the strong (op)position of postmodernism, to the antimaterialism which Hekman argues for.

Having acknowledged feminists' creditable record of ousting universalizing tendencies (whilst also warning against the pitfalls from universalizing narrow naïve forms of realism), Lawson then sets about outlining an alternative realist position which feminists may find fruitful, taking care to highlight both mutuality and complementarity. Writing from a critical realist position, Lawson advocates the use of explicit ontological analysis, of increased scientific realism, arguing how bringing this sort of realist-type analysis into the foreground could be beneficial for feminism. Keenly aware of feminists' warranted aversion to essentialism and its dangerous outcomes, Lawson seeks to avoid any confusion between the conception of realism he advocates and that of naïve realism; which is arguably grounded in positivistic thinking and of the sort Hekman vehemently opposes. Explicitly differentiating between the two and distancing his position from that associated with the damaging 'fixed and deterministic' essentialism of positivism, he underscores that:

"...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."

(Lawson 1999, 28)

This is a crucial move for Lawson, the significance of which he recognises. His attempt to win support for the rejection of the universalism of realism, and his hopeful encouragement

of an ontological turn within feminist theorising rides on driving home this distinction; and he goes at length to lay out the details of the social ontology he is advancing. He is aware that he must carve out a new conception of realism and materialism which is identifiably different from that of the materialism produced by the positivism of modernity; a concept of materialism which gave rise to the counter position referred to by Hekman as the ‘antimaterialism of postmodernism’.

But Lawson must do more than present a convincing and fear allaying alternative conception of realism and a credible social ontology; he has to motivate its use. He has to present a convincing argument of why the effort of ontological analysis is worth it, of how it can bring about significant beneficial changes to the science undertaken. He attempts this by using three examples to illustrate the difference the realist ontology he advocates can have; on methods of investigation<11>, on epistemic practice, and on what he views as the emancipatory objective of feminism<12>.

Contrastive Explanation & Standpoint Theories

Whilst the first and third of these illustrations are important for exploring how critical realism can benefit the wider feminist project, it is the second of these which is of the most interest here. It is in this example that Lawson turns his attention to arguing how FST and critical realism share common ground, how they appear to be self-reinforcing and mutually beneficial. Lawson’s argument is that the social ontology he advances, one in which “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” (Lawson 1999, 36) requires epistemic practice which complements the

investigation of such an ontology; ‘an epistemology for an open system’. He outlines an epistemic theory he refers to as contrastive explanation as one such technique, one which seeks to investigate how outcomes sometimes diverge in conditions where we had reason to expect them to be the same, noting that “the contrastive question requires only that we identify the causes responsible for the difference” (38).

For Lawson, the mutually beneficial and illuminating link to be made between contrastive explanation and FST comes into play via the selection of contrasts agents choose to investigate as surprising or significant; it is the multiplicity and situatedness of epistemic agents that is key – “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” (40), adding later that “interested standpoints (including acquired values and prejudices) are not only unavoidable but actually indispensable *aids* to the explanatory process”(40). This is why investigators must be situated; in order to be able to even *recognise* that a contrast exists; “The initiation of new lines of investigation requires people predisposed, literally prejudiced, to looking in certain directions” (41).

Broadly speaking then, Lawson’s argument is that, reciprocally, the ontology supports the epistemology (and likewise); critical realism reinforces and shores up the claims of FST. His argument is that the conception of social ontology he advances, along with his theory of how that ontology is best investigated (contrast explanation), reinforces why situated knowledge is so crucial.

However, Lawson pushes things a little further by arguing that, when worked in tandem, contrastive explanation can in fact help resolve some of the criticism levelled against FST,

specifically of the ‘truth’ kind raised by Hekman. This is clearly of interest here. By extending his argument that it is only *through situated knowledge* that an investigator can come to recognise contrasts of interest and importance, Lawson argues that it is this recognition of contrasts, of recognising lines of enquiry and questions to ask, which actually constitutes epistemic advantage to situated knowers - not the truth given in answers. Lawson argues 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...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.”

(42)

Lawson is not alone of course in stressing the need to differentiate between truth and knowledge, of the relationship between the two, and of the importance of acknowledging that our knowledge of the truth is always fallible. Such distinctions are also addressed by Hartsock in her reply to Hekman, in which she outlines how her conception of truth draws from Marxist theory – whom Lawson also references in his differentiation<13>. For Hartsock, the Marxist project, which “changes the criteria for what counts as knowledge” shakes up truth- knowledge claims, whilst also, in Hartsock’s view, painting Marx as an anti-Enlightenment figure, a position which Hekman later casts her doubts over. Indeed, for

Hartsock, framing the Marxist project in terms of truth is not welcomed; “The search for truth is not at all the way to understand Marx’s project. The point, most fundamentally, is to understand power relations.” (Hartsock 1997, 370)

Hartsock’s defence of the degree to which Marx contributed to a shakeup of Enlightenment epistemology becomes all the more important in light of Hekman’s concluding words in her response to her critics. It is here that Hekman declares her overall objective in writing her ‘truth and method’ paper, and why she considers standpoint, in effect, to be a postmodernist trailblazer:

“My purpose in writing the article was to trace the way in which feminist standpoint theory, a theory which emerged out of the Enlightenment tradition, deconstructed (if you will) that tradition. Women speaking their truth had the effect of transforming truth, knowledge, and power as the Enlightenment defined them. I identify this transformation as the emergence of a new paradigm.”

(Hekman 1997, 402)

Perhaps however, this transformation of truth and reconceptualization of what constitutes knowledge, which Hekman identifies in the work of feminist epistemologists, is evidence of a different paradigm to that of the postmodernist one she advances.

Lawson & Hekman: Advancing Different Paradigms for FST

One Through Critique; One Through Complementarity

Lawson's argument regarding that which constitutes the basis of advantage or epistemic privilege for a marginal perspective (and the critical realist ontology which underpins it), has implications for Hekman's earlier criticism. Not only does Lawson reframe the issue of what the epistemic advantages involved are (identification of investigative opportunities), but his argument can also shore up claims of *why* a marginalized position provides a more fruitful account, thereby supporting claims of the epistemic privilege of such positions. All of this takes the heat out of the truth problem of Hekman's argument. There is no issue raised by FST's claims of "how knowledge can be situated yet "true" (342), because what situated knowledge does is raise the recognition of a potentially advantageous or fruitful line of enquiry – of a contrast. There are not competing truths, but a multiplicity of contrasts, and so resulting research projects.

When Lawson's explanatory account that focuses on questioning and contrasts is read in conjunction with Hartsock's claims that the language of truth is not the best way to interpret Marx, *along with* her claim that Marx's shakeup of that which constitutes knowledge safely places his project as contributing to the deconstruction of Enlightenment thinking, Hekman's argument, and to some extent the purpose for writing her paper, becomes baseless.

In addition, the critical realist ontology supporting Lawson's argument also presents problems for other criticism levied by Hekman. Returning to the point outlined earlier, Hekman takes specific issue with what she terms as a realist 'fault line' running through Hartsock's work, one that repeatedly maintains "*that reality is socially and materially constructed*" – with Hekman arguing that this amounts to an untenable conflation and contradiction. Critical realism contests Hekman's position – it advances a conception of realism which *does* argue that reality is social and material – thus voiding Hekman's criticism

and challenging her construction of contradiction. To bolster this argument, and to again return to a point raised earlier, Hartsock's position that standpoint epistemology "posits a duality of levels of reality, of which the deeper level or essence both includes and explains the "surface" or appearance" (Hartsock 1983, 285) resonates strongly with critical realism; of a stratified ontology in which the empirical (or observable) is but one domain of reality.

Updating the Dialogues

To recap, the two ontological dialogues outlined above took place over fifteen years ago. Whilst this does not detract from some of the criticism and concerns raised, some updating is required. Elements of this have been touched upon previously, particularly regarding Hekman's association with new materialism. Updating her previously vehement rejection of materialist tendencies and demands for adherence to the postmodernist paradigm, Hekman's newer work focuses on reintroducing the material, whilst also accommodating for the way it is mediated through social construction. She writes:

"We have learned much from the linguistic turn. Language *does* construct our reality. What we are discovering now, however, is that this is not the end of the story. Language interacts with other elements in this construction; there is more to the process than we originally thought. What we need is not a theory that ignores language as modernism did, but rather a more complex theory that incorporates language, materiality, and technology into the equation."

(Hekman 2008, 93)

With this recognition that the postmodernist position she previously advocated was problematic, Hekman makes moves towards the need for a complex theory which *does* accommodate *that reality is socially and materially constructed*, the position she originally critiqued Hartsock for, *but* which she critiqued whilst clearly assuming a positivistic realist position. It appears that by identifying that a more complex theory is required *and* what it needs to do, along with her outlined objective for writing the original paper (to identify the emergence of a new paradigm), that critical realism can do the work required, as indeed it could have in the late 1990's.

Critical Realism and New Materialism: Similarities and Differences

The common ground between new materialism and critical realism has not gone unnoticed elsewhere, although they have not necessarily been drawn together and compared for their suitability to work alongside FST. Addressing similarities in broader terms, and referring to critical realists as critical materialists, Coole and Frost argue that:

“...the new critical materialisms are congruent with new materialist ontologies inasmuch as they understand materiality in a relational, emergent sense as contingent materialization – a process within which more or less enduring structures and assemblages sediment and congeal, sometimes as a result of their internal inertia but also as a manifestation of the powerful interests invested therein.”

(Coole & Frost 2010, 29)

Whilst such identified similarities appear encouraging, there are also a large number of crucial differences between the two projects. One of these is the new materialist posthumanist project, which directly contrasts with the critical realist conception of humanism (for which Lawson is critiqued in the exchange by Barker & Peter – a critique he defends by underscoring that “my humanist commitments are rather minimalist”<14>). New materialism rejects humanism for its Enlightenment thinking, and for the way in establishes a dualism of human/non-human, which in turn supports that of the nature/culture dualism. However, humanism is defended by Gunnarsson who argues that:

“Although I sympathise with the posthumanist project of emphasising the continuities between the non-human and the human, if we are to better understand the *political* it is crucial that we do not avoid the question of what is specific about human nature.”

(Gunnarsson 2013, 18)

A second difference is the use of transcendental reasoning within critical realism, which for new materialism, strongly grounded in postmodernist thinking, is again problematic for its associations with Enlightenment thinking. The abstraction which ‘transcendental’ summons up is also amongst the critique directed at Lawson by Nelson in the earlier exchange. Such abstraction may also be responsible for conclusions such as Sprague’s, who argues that:

“..the choice between critical realism and standpoint theory has to do with how we understand the knower. Are we looking at knowers as abstract individuals sharing the same culture that shapes their paradigms, as critical realism implies? Or are

we seeing knowers as people who are located in specific positions in the social relations.”

(Sprague 2005, 51)

The former is clearly not the position defended by Lawson, who, in effect, argues quite the opposite; that critical realism understands knowers *as* socially positioned and situated knowers, *not* abstract individuals. Indeed, the contrastive explanation method outlined by Lawson *depends* on knowers being situated in order to identify contrasts of interest. Clearly critical realists have a lot of work to do in driving home this fundamental point, amongst others. This should then start to indicate that a choice need not be made, that there is complementarity between the two theories.

Some work is already taking place, and it is the possibility of a synthesis, given shape in the original Lawson exchange, that has been picked up again recently by Satsangi (2013), who argues for a collaboration between feminist epistemologies and critical realism. Satsangi concludes that despite some of the issues raised in the original exchange, there are no clearly identifiable showstoppers; compatibility and complementarity are evident. This is a point which Lawson returns to in his response, acknowledging that he failed in his initial paper to fully convey the mutuality and *non*-competitive nature of critical realism and FST:

“I certainly never wished to suggest or imply that a project like critical realism is in competition with the typically more overtly epistemologically oriented or substantive projects that many feminists pursue.”

(Lawson 2003, 123-4)

Adding later:

“I was wanting to indicate and acknowledge that much feminist theorizing is well advanced along the road already. This is precisely an area where an ontologically oriented project like critical realism can be especially enriched by past and ongoing feminist philosophical achievements.”

(130-131)

A Way Forward and an Unnecessary Dilemma

The two exchanges outlined here, and the suggestions for FST that they advance, both seek to engage with feminist epistemology using ontology, albeit from differing angles. The proposed developments outlined, and whether these are framed as solutions to identified problems *or* as a way of enhancing and complementing existing theoretical developments, are the direct result of the conception of realism and materialism each exchange instigator actively advances. In short, whether FST is seen as problematic for its realist tendencies, or can instead be complementary to and complemented by a realist position, frames the discussions. These are exchanges concerning the ontology of feminist epistemology.

The developments which have taken place in the years after the published exchanges, including new materialism, have safely put ontological debate firmly into the centre of discussions. Indeed, there has arguably been a closing of the gap of disagreement that these two original exchanges highlight. The move within strong positions of postmodernism to start to rethink (and include) materialism has contributed a lot to this progress. This is admirable ground to give; particularly in light of postmodernist findings of the extent, and control of,

the social construction of reality. Caution is understandable and best acknowledged. Hekman states as much, vocalising that “For those of us trained in postmodernism, the journey is a scary one. We have been so convinced that the world, and especially the social world, is a linguistic construction that discussions of the “real” seem like heresy” (Hekman 2008, 116).

Whilst the need to rework materialism and the cost of the exclusion of matter has been acknowledged, there is arguably also a need to revisit some of the earlier subjects of antimaterialist critique, to see if this critique impeded projects, and to assess how those projects can best be salvaged and repositioned. This is of course an objective of this paper and also Rouse’s point; one of *reconsidering* FST, and of how FST has been unnecessarily closed down by narrow naturalistic conceptions. Rouse rightly highlights that:

“Standpoint theories remind us why a *naturalistic* conception of knowing is so important. Knowledge claims and their justification are part of the world we seek to understand. They arise in specific circumstances and have real consequences. They are not merely representations in an idealized logical space, but events within a causal nexus. It matters politically as well as epistemically which concepts are intelligible.”

(Rouse 2009, 201)

It is this point about the importance of having a conception of naturalism which accommodates both *the situation* of knowledge (what knowledge is situated *in* and what the knowledge is *about*), *as well* as the importance of knowledge *as* political, which underscores the need for a realist conception that *includes* human nature.

To reiterate Gunnarsson's earlier point; "if we are to better understand the *political* it is crucial that we do not avoid the question of what is specific about human nature". This is arguably why, to retain the political core of standpoint, its brilliant capture of power and knowledge brought together, that critical realism should be the 'strategic realism'^{<15>} of choice for FST, as it provides an ontological partner which FST would both contribute *towards* and benefit *from*.

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NOTES

1. Bhaskar's social ontology includes three domains of social reality resulting in a stratified depth ontology: the empirical, the real and the actual. One of the outcomes of developing this depth ontology is the avoidance of ontological flatness or monovalence.

2. I refer here to the work of Margaret Archer, Tony Lawson & Andrew Collier et al. (See Archer, M., Bhaskar, R., Collier, A., Lawson, T. & Norrie, A. 1998. *Critical Realism: Essential Readings*, London, Routledge for further details).
3. The entire exchange is also helpfully collated in *Provoking Feminisms* (Allen & Howard 2000) & *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual & Political Controversies* (Harding 2004).
4. For a more detailed account of how Hekman sets up this contrast, the reader may wish to specifically refer to Hekman 1997a, 349.
5. See *Signs* 1997 22 (2), 399-402.
6. Harding acknowledges in her response to Hekman that “at least this standpoint theorist [Harding] thinks that feminist standpoint projects and the modernist discourses they used turned out to be on a collision course” (Harding 1997, 383).
7. For specific examples, amongst others, see Coole & Frost (2010), Alaimo & Hekman (2008).
8. Hartsock (1983).
9. See Nelson (2003), Ahmed (2008).
10. Feminism, Realism & Universalism also appeared later as a chapter in *Reorienting Economics* (2003).
11. Lawson argues how ontological presupposition (knowledge of the known) determines the tools or methods used for investigation and the limitations this may have on scientific endeavour - engaging with the use of mathematical modelling in economics as his example.
12. In the third example he argues how realist ontology can help with emancipatory projects by locating common ground based on human need. Lawson argues it can do so by accommodating both commonality and individual difference, thus avoiding issues of universalism or fragmentation within emancipatory projects. This final illustrative example

draws extensive criticism from both Barker and Peter for its reliance on a “humanist conception of human agency to provide a center and source of meaning and value” (Barker 2003, 106), a conception problematic for being steeped in Enlightenment and modernity thinking. For both these authors, the use of the humanist conception is the weakest element of Lawson’s contribution and causes the most concern; a fear which Lawson attempts to allay by emphasizing the minimalism of his position, but whilst maintaining that “I do believe we humans hold things in common as a species” (Lawson 2003, 126).

13. See Lawson (1997, 238-246).

14. See Lawson’s reply to Barker, Lawson, (2003, 126).

15. Here I refer to Harding’s 1999 reply to Lawson entitled “The case for Strategic Realism: A Response to Lawson”.

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