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ON THE METAPHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE NATURALISM QUESTION IN FEMINISM

by Valentina Bortolami*

Abstract. *In this article, I argue that the issue of naturalism is crucial for feminist epistemology and feminist metaphilosophy. I analyze the risks and opportunities that naturalism brings for feminist philosophy. To this end, I will first outline a conception of naturalism based on Joseph Rouse's conceptualization. Then I will proceed to examine Ásta's article 'The Naturalism Question in Feminism', highlighting the relevance of two key points for the feminist methodological debate: the normativity of oppression and justificatory stories. Subsequently, I suggest that these problems may find satisfying responses in two currents of feminist epistemology – feminist standpoint empiricism and feminist new materialism (which I considered as two naturalized epistemologies) – which have recast the key concepts of naturalism, nature, and science. In conclusion, I will draw some metaphilosophical conclusions from this analysis.*

Keywords. *Naturalism; Feminism; Feminist Standpoint Theory; Feminist New Materialism; Metaphilosophy*

1. *Metaphilosophical Aspects of Feminist Epistemologies*

In this article, I offer some reflections on the metaphilosophical and epistemological aspects of the 'Naturalism Question in Feminism'. The idea developed throughout the article is that naturalism represents a particularly interesting locus for feminist epistemology and feminist metaphilosophy; that is, investigating the relationship between feminist epistemology and naturalism can offer insights valuable for feminist metaphilosophy.

I consider epistemology to be a central issue for feminism and I believe it intercepts multiple points of metaphilosophical interest.

* University of Padua

‘Feminist epistemology’¹ indicates a part of feminist theory concerned with knowledge and knowledge-related topics, such as reason, rationality, and objectivity. Feminist epistemology started from feminist criticism of science, and it is strictly connected with – and sometimes overlaps – feminist philosophy of science and feminist STS (science and technology studies). By questioning science and traditional epistemology, the aim is to understand the necessity and opportunity of founding a specifically feminist knowledge². For this reason, I consider the epistemological inquiry as being crucial for feminist philosophy: the definition of feminist philosophy raises the question of whether knowledge (in this case, philosophy) can be characterized as specifically feminist. The very definition of feminist philosophy (hence feminist epistemology) indeed poses epistemological questions: if we consider philosophy a knowledge or knowledge practice³, a problem arises when it comes to understanding if and how a knowledge (in this case philosophy) can be specifically feminist. Feminist philosophy and feminist epistemology have from their origins been questioned on why there should be a feminist philosophy or epistemology, and this question is within the competence of feminist epistemology.

The feminist epistemology debate offers interesting insights for feminist metaphilosophy. Indeed, investigating how Western

¹ This brief description does not purport defining feminist epistemology, only to give some useful coordinates to frame the problem of the article. For an overview, see, in addition to the literature cited in the notes to this article, E. Anderson, *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), ed. by E.N. Zalta, URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/feminism-epistemology/>>.

² For an overview on feminist criticism on the concepts of reason, rationality, and objectivity, as they were elaborated in traditional epistemology, see for example L.M. Antony and C.E. Witt (eds.), *A Mind of One’s Own. Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, Oxford, Westview Press, 2001.

³ By «knowledge» I mean the product of a research or knowing act; by «knowledge practice» I refer to the cognitive/knowledge process. The choice of the expression «practice» is to emphasize the material, political and social dimensions of these processes.

epistemological concepts such as reason, rationality, and objectivity⁴ have been constituted in relation with gender norms, gender assumptions, sexist bias, and patriarchy – and if and how they can be reclaimed by feminists – feminist epistemology has come to strongly affirm the political and ethical dimension of epistemology. In this sense, feminist epistemology is profoundly metaphilosophical because it represents a place for reflection on the possibility and the role of feminist philosophy itself, providing valuable indications of the relations that feminist philosophy should have with the world and with other disciplines.

Among them, a prominent position belongs to ‘science’. In the contemporary world, science is considered the authoritative knowledge *par excellence*, even though in the past – and sometimes still today – it has served sexist (racist, classist, ableist, etc.) interests⁵. The problem of the relationship between feminist theory and science becomes fundamental, not only from a theoretical point of view but also from a strategic one for feminism.

As mentioned, I consider epistemology to be a crucial issue for feminist philosophy; in turn, I interpret naturalism as a central issue for feminist epistemology. Contemporary philosophical naturalism thematizes two topics that are problematic for feminism and feminist epistemology in particular: the concepts of nature and science. The question of their normativity is crucial in deciding what relationship feminism should have with naturalism, or, in other words, to what extent a feminist should adhere to naturalism: this is what Ásta calls the ‘Naturalism Question in Feminism’. In

⁴ On objectivity, see the profile offered by Evelyn Brister in *Objectivity in Science: The Impact of Feminist Accounts in The Bloomsbury Companion to Analytic Feminism*, ed. by P. Garavaso, New York, Bloomsbury, 2018.

⁵ Sociobiology is often very problematic in this sense. For a striking example, see C. Murray, *Human Diversity: The Biology of Gender, Race, and Class*, New York, Twelve, 2020 (I thank Tommaso Guariento for bringing this recent publication to my attention). For a critical analysis of scientific research with sexist and racist implications, see the exciting work of Cordelia Fine. I recommend here her classic *Delusions of Gender. How Our Minds, Society, and Neurosexism Create Difference*, New York, WW Norton & Company, 2010.

her article⁶, she dedicates herself to the naturalism question while also naming and discussing two other problems that are, in my opinion, very important regarding metaphilosophical (and in particular methodological) issues for feminism: the question of the relationship between oppression and normativity in an entirely naturalized world and the problem posed by justificatory stories. I devote a considerable part of the present article to these issues provided by Ásta's essay, highlighting why and how I consider them particularly important for feminism.

I argue that two feminist naturalist epistemologies, *feminist standpoint empiricism*⁷ and *feminist new materialism* (which I consider naturalized currents of feminist epistemology if we consider naturalism appropriately⁸), respond to the problems examined in Ásta's

⁶ Ásta, *The Naturalism Question in Feminism*, in *The Blackwell Companion to Naturalism*, ed by K.J. Clark, Hoboken (NJ), John Wiley & Sons, 2016, pp. 49-60. The title is an obvious reference to Sandra Harding's influential book: S. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 1986. *The Science Question* is, for all intents and purposes, considered a classic of feminist epistemology. Donna J. Haraway responded to this book with the work that would later become an equally relevant and highly cited article: D.J. Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, «Feminist Studies», XIV (3), 1988, pp. 575-599.

⁷ Here, I employ the label *feminist standpoint empiricism*, first proposed by Intemann, to indicate those contributions that present hybrid traits of feminist standpoint theory and feminist empiricism, whose paths have converged since the 1990s: some fundamental theses of standpoint theory, such as that of epistemic advantage, are taken up by feminist empiricists; on the other hand, standpoint theorists increasingly have sharpened the naturalized features of their proposal. I use this label to emphasize their shared traits: «feminist empiricism and standpoint feminism are empiricist, contextualist, and normative social epistemological views» (K. Intemann, *Feminist standpoint empiricism: Rethinking the terrain in feminist philosophy of science*, «Hypatia», XXV (4), Fall 2010, p. 793). That said, it is still possible to trace differences between empiricism and standpoint theory. Whether they can be considered as a single current, or whether it is necessary to distinguish them into two currents, remains a question open to interpretation, which cannot be addressed here.

⁸ I do not reconstruct here why they can be considered naturalisms (to do so, I mainly employ Rouse's and Roth's accounts of naturalism), but in the dedicated

article. These two feminist currents also respond to the two open questions of nature and science involved in naturalism. Here, standpoint empiricism corresponds to a new and different conception of science; to the new materialism, a new and different conception of nature. As I outline in the conclusion, these two naturalisms offer philosophical content and metaphilosophical indications.

The article begins with a discussion of what naturalism is, which I have chosen to set up on Joseph Rouse's interpretation⁹. Having identified with Rouse the metaphysical and metaphilosophical issues of naturalism (section 2), I deal with the risks of naturalism in section 3, examining the problem posed by oppression in a naturalized world (section 2.1) and that posed by justificatory stories (section 2.2). In section 4 I explore the opportunities offered by naturalism and I outline how feminist standpoint empiricism and feminist new materialism address the problems individuated in section 3. I draw some considerations on the metaphilosophical aspects of this discussion in the conclusion.

2. *Metaphilosophical and Metaphysical Naturalism*

In philosophy, the term *naturalism* indicates a broad semantic field. Today, however, it has assumed a significantly different meaning than in the past. *Contemporary philosophical naturalism* constitutes a recognizable philosophical current in its own right, one that is characterized both as imprecisely defined, with vague,

sections I refer to texts in which the issue is addressed. Moreover, out of necessity I focus only on certain aspects of feminist epistemology that I consider exemplary for my problem, thus keeping out of this discussion important contributions by feminist epistemologists such as Anderson, Antony, Duran, and Longino. This is not to express a preference towards the epistemologies examined here, but to maintain a specific focus on the problem.

⁹ Although there are many relevant taxonomies regarding naturalism (e.g., those of De Caro, Papineau and Jenkins) I have chosen Rouse for relevance to the issues discussed here.

blurred boundaries¹⁰ and as extremely pervasive (contemporary philosophical naturalism is considered «the predominant metaphilosophy in the English-speaking world»¹¹).

Because the notion of naturalism is vague and elusive, here I offer a very extensive presentation of it, hoping nevertheless to bring out the problems and opportunities offered to feminism by naturalist perspectives. In ‘broad’ yet concise terms, «Naturalism in the broadest sense is the claim that philosophical reflection should be continuous with (or perhaps a part of) empirical science»¹². There are many problems posed by naturalism for feminists. For our purposes (i.e., to understand what relationship feminism should have with naturalism), two interpretative paths are particularly useful. The first path emerges from the work of Joseph Rouse, who is not only a scholar of naturalism but also a sensible interpreter of feminist epistemology. The second path is through an examination of Ásta’s essay *The Naturalism Question in Feminism*. In this section, I focus on the two main theoretical principles of naturalism, examining them in relation to Rouse’s interpretation of naturalism (while Section 3 will be devoted to Ásta’s article).

Broadly speaking, the main idea of naturalism is that everything that exists can be explained in terms of nature (i.e., supernatural entities are rejected) and that nature can be examined, researched and described through science. To put it more precisely, in philosophical terms, contemporary philosophical naturalism is based on two fundamental theoretical principles, one philosophical and one metaphilosophical.

¹⁰ The same entry for «Naturalism» in the «Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy» begins by stating that «the term ‘naturalism’ has no very precise meaning in contemporary philosophy» (D. Papineau, *Naturalism*, in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), ed. by E.N. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/naturalism/>).

¹¹ J. Rouse, *Barad’s Feminist Naturalism*, «Hypatia», XIX (1), 2004, pp. 142-161, p. 142.

¹² Id., *How Scientific Practices Matter: Reclaiming Philosophical Naturalism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 1.

The first principle is the denial of supernatural entities¹³. Rouse identifies this theoretical principle as «metaphysical naturalism». Metaphysical naturalism is centered on a philosophical thesis, which is «a thesis *within* philosophy»¹⁴, according to which *philosophy must defer to nature*. This sets the first important term in the debate on naturalism for both philosophy in general and feminist philosophy in particular. Provided that philosophy must refer to nature, how do we then define ‘nature’?¹⁵

The second theoretical principle of naturalism is the conviction that the investigation of nature (and of the human being, who is considered one of its integral parts) must be pursued through science. Science is the model for every inquiry, and although it is not the *only* way of knowing, at the very least, it is considered by naturalists to be the *main* way of knowing to arrive at affirming truths¹⁶ about the world. Any discourse about the world, including

¹³ The opposition to supernatural explanations had a great importance in the first phase of naturalism, as Rouse points out: «The first stage of naturalism, which gradually freed science from religion, was understood to be radical at that time. An autonomous natural science may leave no place in the world for God, supernatural powers, or direct revelations of knowledge. The early 20th Century attempts to replace philosophy with empirical science also adopted a radical stance. These naturalists sought to abolish armchair philosophical speculation about reason or cognition» (Id., *Naturalism and scientific practices: A concluding scientific postscript*, in *Naturalized Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by M. Mi Chienkuo and R. Chen, Leiden, Brill, 2007, pp. 61-86, p. 65). Naturalism has a deep relationship with the empirical sciences not only for philosophical reasons, but also for extraphilosophical (or *metaphilosophical*) reasons. Indeed, in the naturalist discourse scientific knowledge has been used to oppose fideism, on the one hand, and relativism, on the other hand.

¹⁴ Rouse, *How scientific practices matter*, p. 2.

¹⁵ The problem of the nature/culture dichotomy is a problem of feminism philosophy and for philosophy in general. In the Naturalism Question this problem finds a specific articulation. Here I am, of course, concerned only with the articulation it has assumed in the feminist epistemologies examined here.

¹⁶ I could speak of an *objective knowledge* about the world instead of *truth*, as referee 2 rightly suggests by stressing the weight of the word ‘truth’. Nonetheless, I believe that in both public and specialist debates the discourse often focuses on the possibility of telling the *truth*, and on recognizing who has this possibility or authority (science, in this case), rather than on the concept of objectivity (which

philosophical discourse, must take into account the results and methods of science. Philosophy cannot contradict these results and ideally should model its own discourse and methods on scientific discourse and methods. Rouse captures this aspect of naturalism, calling it *scientific* or *metaphilosophical* naturalism¹⁷, of which the fundamental prescription is that *philosophy must defer to science*¹⁸. This is a metaphilosophical thesis, that is to say, «a thesis *about* philosophy», namely «a claim about philosophy as an activity or a discipline and its relation to the disciplines of one or more of the science»¹⁹. Therefore, philosophy cannot establish any «arbitrary philosophical imposition upon the science»²⁰. On the contrary, philosophy must pursue being in close continuity with the sciences. Hence, metaphilosophical naturalism pertains more strongly than metaphysical naturalism to the concept of *science* (and to the relationship between philosophy and science) than to the concept of *nature* (and to the relationship between philosophy and nature). This sets the second fundamental term for an important question. If philosophy must stand in continuity with (or even *in the wake of*) science, the question that arises for the philosopher and particularly (as we shall see) for the feminist philosopher, is as follows: What is science, and indeed, to which science should we refer to?

By distinguishing the metaphilosophical and metaphysical aspects of naturalism, Rouse sensitively points out the issue underlying the problem of naturalism: the complex, interconnected

is extremely important for feminists). This is why I am talking here about truth rather than objectivity: it seems to me that talking about objectivity would bring the question into a much narrower and limited sphere than that which is implied when discussing the metaphilosophical thesis in philosophy and in the public debate.

¹⁷ Rouse's taxonomy changes in the various interventions examined: here are discussed the terms useful for the treatment of our problem. In Rouse's *Naturalism and scientific practices: A concluding scientific postscript*, for example, we also find the categories of «First Stage naturalism», «Radical naturalism», «Tolerant naturalism», and «Reactionary naturalism». Although the discussion about these categories is interesting, it is not relevant to the analysis that I carry out here.

¹⁸ Id., *How scientific practices matter*, p. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 3.

conceptualization of nature and science. For if one accepts the renunciation of supernatural entities – the adherence to nature – and the respect for science as naturalist cornerstones, it is still to be understood how to develop the notions of nature and science. In their reciprocal definition that the game of naturalism is played out.

Upon first glance, the first question of ‘How do we define nature?’ – should be answered by the second principle of naturalism – for which nature is what science discloses as nature, but in fact, the answer is not so simple²¹. The definitions of nature and science are tied together by reciprocal obligations. Nature is the only accepted referent for describing the world, and science is the main authority for describing nature, but we cannot decide *a priori* what science is or should be. The problem is trying to understand how to get out of this circle and, thus, how to define nature and science²².

Before proposing a response that is informed by feminist epistemologies, it is worth asking why this constellation of issues

²¹ For Rouse, this creates an obligation for naturalists, that is, «to show how and why their preferred conception of nature is indeed what scientific inquiry discloses, and to do so without conceiving of science in ways that impose arbitrary constraints upon inquiry» (ivi, pp. 4-5). The need of «conceiving of science in ways that impose arbitrary constraints upon inquiry» poses what Paul Roth calls the *demarcation problem*: «naturalism is *not* a theory of how to decide among competing or incompatible accounts of science. [...] The ghost of the demarcation problem haunts naturalized epistemology insofar as opting for a naturalized epistemology does not settle which type of naturalistic theory to prefer» (P.A. Roth, *Feminism and Naturalism: If asked for theories, just say ‘no’*, in *Feminist Interpretations of W.V. Quine*, ed. by P.M. Maffie, L.H. Nelson, A. Rosenberg and T. Ryckman, Pennsylvania, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003, pp. 269-305, p. 289).

²² According to Rouse, to be satisfactory, philosophical naturalism must coherently articulate the relationship between the naturalistic prescription towards science (metaphilosophical naturalism) and that towards nature (metaphysical naturalism). My essay is not aimed at providing a definitive answer to this question. I will propose a tentative response that I draw from feminist epistemologies and that I outline to the limited extent that I can argue them here. Rouse’s answer can be found in the notion of scientific practices. In particular, he believes that Karen Barad’s agential realism provides a kind of naturalism that satisfies both the metaphysic and metaphilosophical commitment of naturalism. See Rouse, *How Scientific Practices Matter and Barad’s Feminist Naturalism*.

around naturalism is relevant for feminists. With these two principles now identified, we can delve into why naturalism can represent both a problem and opportunity for feminists.

3. *Risks of Naturalism*

To explore the problematic aspects of naturalism for feminists, I refer to Ásta's discussion found in *The Naturalism Question in Feminism*. In her article, Ásta asks the following: «To what extent should a feminist embrace naturalist commitments?». The question concerns the relationship between feminism and naturalism, interrogating the latter for the scopes of the former, hence examining the actual effectiveness of assuming naturalist premises, methods and structures for feminists. Indeed, naturalism prescribes postures, sets limits to theorizing, and exposes people to certain risks. These risks mainly concern the normativity of nature and science (the two notions called upon by naturalism's theoretical principles). As mentioned, the role of nature and science regarding our ways of knowing the world is both problematic and strategically important for feminist thought because it is precisely on the territory of science and nature that debates around questions of gender and race often take place.

As outlined in the previous paragraph, science and nature are involved in the metaphysical and metaphilosophical prescriptions of naturalism described above. Metaphilosophical naturalism is problematic regarding feminist demands because it prescribes a certain relationship with science. As mentioned, feminist epistemology stems from the observation that much scientific research has supported openly or implicitly racist, sexist, or classist (etc.) theses²³. Therefore, fulfilling the metaphilosophical commitment can prove to be difficult or even dangerous for feminists; the naturalist posture, which provides for a close interaction with science – when there is not even a complete adherence to it – risks being counterproductive for feminists. This is one of the main concerns

²³ See note 5.

that animate Ásta's article. Metaphysical naturalism is also problematic for feminists because the appeal to nature has been used for a long time to oppress women²⁴. These two problems – the relation with science and the role of nature in justifying oppression – are connected with two points that Ásta raises in her article: the problem posed by oppression in a naturalist worldview (Par. 3.1) and the problem posed by justificatory stories (Par. 3.2).

3.1. The Problem with Naturalism about Normativity: How to Account for Oppression

Ásta addresses the issue of naturalism, which she intends as a non-normative philosophy, to understand if and how it can be useful to feminism (and other antioppressive projects). Ásta's starting point is that feminism has a practical dimension because it pursues a practical aim: the end of the oppression of women. The result of her analysis is that naturalism may be useful for feminist purposes because it allows us to reject some types of normativity, but feminists need at least some (other) kinds of normativity.

According to the author, the answer to the naturalism question in feminism («To what extent should a feminist embrace naturalist commitments?») is subordinate to the identification of the naturalistic claims contested by feminism. The two commitments that Ásta identifies are the conception of *philosophy as a descriptive discipline* and the *rejection of normativity*²⁵. To identify these, we need to start with Hume's elaboration that we cannot justify our inductive inferences. In other words, we cannot rationally justify our beliefs based on empirical investigations; what we can do is seek and offer causal explanations for why we trust our beliefs.

²⁴ On this issue, see C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature. Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*, San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1980; L. Daston, *Against Nature*, Cambridge, Massachusetts-London, Mit Press, 2018; and L. Antony, *Natures and Norms*, «Ethics», CXI (1), 2000, pp. 8-36.

²⁵ Here, I focus only on the second point, which I consider most important (the first is a consequence of the second). On 'philosophy as a descriptive discipline', I return briefly in the conclusions.

This move, which Ásta defines as a naturalistic move on «normativity with respect to inductive inferences», also marks the transition from a normative category, that is, «justification», to a descriptive one, that is, «explanation».

Naturalism about normativity with regard to X (where X is an action, attitude, or practice): there is no such thing as normativity with regard to X and no such thing as a justification for X: there aren't right and wrong practices, better and worse ones, just ones we engage in and ones we don't. Likewise, there is no justification for a particular action or attitude, just a causal explanation of it²⁶.

The causal explanation replaces the justification; thus, the normativity associated with the notions of «right» and «wrong» are lost, and with them, the traditional role of epistemology is lost as well: it is the well-known issue of epistemology as an exclusively empirical science, the epistemology 'chapter of psychology' supported by Quine. This 'naturalism about normativity' represents, according to Ásta, the fundamental problem, the critical point of naturalism for feminism. On the one hand, a certain type of rejection of normativity (in local and determined cases²⁷) can be a useful tool for feminism; on the other hand, renouncing any type of normativity defuses any critical potential of naturalism.

But even though naturalism about normativity with regard to certain phenomenon is a powerful critical tool, and it is especially useful for feminists engaged in ideology critique, its critical potential vanishes if the philosopher rejects all kinds of normativity.²⁸

²⁶ Ásta, *The Naturalism Question in Feminism*, p. 51.

²⁷ For Ásta, feminists should retain the possibility to adopt naturalistic methods inside a framework of criticism of ideology, methods such as undermining normative assertions using causal explanations. Moreover, the scholar hypothesizes that normativity can possibly be renounced in the field of aesthetics (ivi, p. 57).

²⁸ Ivi, p. 52.

Ásta is persuasive in her argument on the need to maintain some kinds of normativity. Indeed, naturalism about normativity, as she describes it, prevents the use of concepts such as «right» and «wrong», which can hamper the cause of feminism. Although this is not in and of itself a good reason to reject naturalism, according to the author, it offers a good opportunity to reflect on what the purpose of feminist theorization is and on what its methodology should be. Interestingly, instead of addressing the problem of the compatibility between naturalism and feminism by starting from the principles of naturalist philosophy, Ásta proposes rethinking the issue, here starting from the empirical evidence of oppression.

We start with the widespread lived experience of oppression and mistreatment and look for theories that can explain such experience and the suffering that accompanies it. Such theories are inherently normative since the naturalistic worldview leaves no room for harm and suffering. Only in the face of very strong arguments to the effect that our phenomenology is in radical error (which include the claim that we are not suffering after all, contrary to our immediate evidence) should we abandon our attempt to make sense of that phenomenology and seek theories that can make the situation better²⁹.

As far as I understand this passage, Ásta is claiming that the pertinent starting point for understanding the world is the existence of oppression and suffering. Even if the naturalized philosophical approach is to refuse an *a priori* normativity, the very existence of oppression – and the suffering related to it – supports that we cannot reject at least some kinds of normativity³⁰. The starting point for the reasoning (and for the theorizing) here is the

²⁹ Ivi, p. 54.

³⁰ This claim is very strong and slightly problematic. The non-normative character of a naturalistic worldview is inherently is not unanimously endorsed by naturalist philosophers. Ásta's assertion relies on her account of naturalism, which, as already mentioned, is specifically concerned with a particular notion,

existence of the experience of oppression and suffering. Oppression and suffering have an ontological and epistemological precedence to everything else and are signals that we need a normative theory or one that allows the kinds of normativity that can account for oppression and suffering. Indeed, without this kind of normativity, we would not be able to identify them, report them, and communicate them as wrong. This is why it is necessary to resort to normative theories.

I want to emphasize here that what Ásta is doing can be considered a methodological move that is *distinctly feminist*. Indeed, I believe that the methodology Ásta is operating is peculiar to feminism (and antioppressive theory in general) and that it stems from the idea that we must acknowledge pain and suffering (specifically that related to oppression in this case). Theory is needed to address and elaborate on this pain and suffering; if theory does not allow us to account for our suffering, we need a better theory.

3.2. The Problem with Naturalization and Justificatory Stories

Another important point that Ásta provides in her article concerns the *justificatory stories*. They are particularly interesting because they exemplify the problem feminists have regarding the relation with the role played by the concept of science and nature in justifying oppression (i.e., scientific research that aims to justify discriminatory statements) and highlight the type of problem posed for feminists by the rejection of normativity.

Ásta finds examples of justificatory stories in evolutionary psychology. In this discipline, it is common to appeal to certain biological differences as causal explanations of certain social phenomena. What these causal explanations do – or, rather, the function that they perform – Ásta notes, is not, however, that of simply explaining which causes have determined the given phenomenon: rather, they are used to propose justificatory stories, which are justificatory precisely because they are fully inserted in the world «without norms» of naturalism, a world in which there is

that is, the ‘Humean’ move on «normativity with respect to inductive inferences».

no oppression and suffering. The way I understand it, these stories work as follows: Let us assume that a certain phenomenon (e.g., rape) has a causal explanation (e.g., in x species, rape occurs to ensure y) – this is not a justification. However, without an ascribable norm of right and wrong to oppose these causal explanations, nature imposes itself as the norm, and the causal explanation offers itself as a justificatory story. «Rape is present in the human species as it is present in other species» becomes «rape is a natural phenomenon», and in the absence of notions such as right and wrong, it is simply justified by its being natural because nature is implicitly assumed as the norm³¹.

In a nutshell, justificatory stories contribute to – and are part of – the problem of «naturalization» (intended in the detrimental sense); that is, they contribute to attributing to the sphere of nature issues that are fully debatable socially, politically, and philosophically (thus often falling in the naturalistic fallacy). With «Naturalization» then refers to all those discourses that aim to justify oppressive, discriminatory, and unjust concepts, practices and arguments against women and other marginalized groups, bringing them back to the level of the ‘natural’, which is understood precisely as immediate, determined and immutable. Indeed, oppression has often been justified on «naturalizing» grounds, in this case meaning ‘naturalism’ in a deterrent sense. This calls into question the problem of nature for feminists.

The critique of the concept of nature is one of the topics in which feminist theory has spent most of its effort, and rightly so. The bibliography on this subject is now vast. Without claiming to be exhaustive, it can be said that the so-called ‘appeal to nature’ has been used to justify discriminatory practices, to belittle the capabilities of marginalized subjects, attributing to them inferior and subordinate characteristics and naturalizing these characteristics,

³¹ There are plenty of sexist scientific works in neuropsychology, in biology and so forth that are offered as justificatory stories in the sense individuated by Ásta. These works show how even today, scientific research can present sexist and racist arguments. For a critical review, see Fine, *Delusions of Gender*, A. Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, New York, Basic Books, 2000.

that is, placing them in the realm of what is immediately self-evident, normative and unchangeable³². Precisely against this «naturalization», a strongly critical perspective on any reference to nature is widespread among antioppressive theorists. Notwithstanding, the problem posed by the appeal to nature exists only insofar as nature is characterized as self-evident, normative and unchangeable. Another strategy that feminist theorists have followed to oppose naturalizations is to reconceptualize nature (a striking example is given by feminist new materialism).

Because science is recognized by naturalists (and often by public opinion) as the obvious authoritative interpreter of nature, the same problem encountered with an appeal to nature occurs in the case of science. Therefore, scientific research on topics such as gender differences, sex and sexuality, along with other socially controversial issues, such as race and class, that claim that in nature we can find answers, are approached with suspicion. This attitude is justified if we think of the ancillary role that science has played in the oppression (often extremely violent) of anyone who was «naturalized» as inferior to the white man (adult, upper-middle class, cisgender, heterosexual and able-bodied). A useful strategy to counter this phenomenon is to produce alternative accounts both in the natural sciences and in historical and social sciences, while advocating for the need for a move of social empiricism, that is, examining how scientific research works in reality (and not in the idealizations of positivists)³³, highlighting the evidence of the existence of sexist science.

In sum, both appeals to nature and science play a role in maintaining oppression. Therefore, the naturalism question in feminism has two horns. One horn concerns the metaphysical commitment, which involves the normative role of nature and non-normativity of naturalism: the idea that every event, fact and so forth can be

³² See Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*; Antony, *Natures and Norms*; Daston, *Against Nature*.

³³ «The only people who end up actually *believing*, and, goddess forbid, acting on the ideological doctrines of disembodied scientific objectivity [...] are non-scientists, including a few very trusting philosophers» (Haraway, *Situated knowledges*, p. 576).

explained by resorting only to the plane of the 'natural' opens up the risk of accepting that oppression is also natural and, therefore, in some way justified. The other horn concerns the metaphilosophical commitment that pertains to the relationship that (feminist) philosophy must have with science and that poses the problem that feminist philosophers and scientists must face: the cases in which scientific research aims to justify discriminatory statements, which has been well exemplified by justificatory stories.

I believe that the need to refute justificatory stories is another important point (together with the that about the normativity of oppression) that Ásta's article captures. Also, this point, like the point about oppression, is peculiar and is an important feature of feminist theorizing: feminists need to ask not only if a theory is coherent and theoretically robust, but also if and how it is twisted to be used against women (or other opponents); that is, they need to examine the political effects of theory.

4. *Opportunities of Naturalism*

Before examining how two feminist naturalisms respond to the problems individuated above (i.e., how they can ensure the normativity of oppression and reject justificatory stories), it is worth looking at why feminists should consider embracing naturalized perspectives.

The first reason for feminists' interest in naturalized approaches is strategic: naturalism can be useful to counter sexist arguments. For instance, being able to state that some scientists' claims are scientifically unfounded is certainly helpful for the anti-oppressive cause (e.g., stating that biologically, there are no human races, only one human race³⁴). Understanding how actual scientific

³⁴ Referee 2 notes that it is now established that there is only one race, «yet there is an ongoing political racist system for which biological proof is not strong enough to avoid it». My response is twofold. On the one hand, I agree that racism goes beyond this plane and cannot be defeated using mere biological explanations. It would be extremely dangerous (and very unrefined theoretically, for a feminist epistemologist) to maintain that the problem of racism can be

practice can become an antioppressive tool, what characteristics it should have, what methodologies and so forth is a goal of feminist thought (along with imagining how to pursue feminist science).

The second reason for a feminist interest in philosophical naturalism is related to feminist epistemology's genealogy and has to do with the explanatory power of the label 'naturalism'. Historically, feminist epistemology has developed from the criticism of mainstream science. These criticisms, however, came from feminist scholars who worked *within* the scientific disciplines they were criticizing. This supports the interpretation of feminist epistemology as being in continuity with scientific practice while representing a dialectical aspect of feminist epistemology, holding together negative (critical and deconstructive) tensions with affirmative (reformist or revolutionary and constructive) forces.

The third reason is theoretical and is probably the most interesting. Arising from the feminist frustration with the traditional articulations of the notions of nature and science, feminist thinkers have found an unprecedented space for reflection and theorizing that may be useful not only to feminists, but also to other subjects. In the quest for the reciprocal definition of science and nature, feminists have found a way to claim a nonreductionist naturalism³⁵.

solved simply by resorting to 'correct' scientific research. I thank Referee 2 very much for pointing out the danger of a misunderstanding in this sense. Nevertheless, I think there is some role for the scientific argument that there are no different races in the anti-racist discourse. On the other hand, the agreement on the existence of a single race is not as peaceful as one might expect. Both because of the replacement of 'race' with 'population' or 'ethnicity', and because racist and sexist research unfortunately continues to be carried out, see for example the already mentioned Charles Murray, *Human Diversity*. I thank Tommaso Guariento for our conversation on this second point.

³⁵ A characterization of this naturalism which I call, paradoxically reductively, 'nonreductionist' can be found, for example, in Luca Illetterati's discussion of non-naturalistic naturalism. See L. Illetterati, *Nature's Externality: Hegel's non-naturalistic naturalism*, in *HEGEL 250 – Too Late?*, ed. by M. Dolar, Ljubljana, Društvo za teoretsko psihoanalizo, Goethe-Institut, 2020, pp. 51-72; Id., *Nature and Technology: Towards an antinaturalistic naturalism*, «Pólemos», 1 (2), 2020, pp. 15-33.

By starting from the contradictions they found in the standard theorizations of these concepts, they have succeeded in overturning and resignifying both nature and science and, finally, naturalism itself.

4.1. What is Science? A Feminist Standpoint Empiricist Response

One goal of feminist epistemology is to understand how current scientific practice can become an antioppressive tool (what characteristics it should have, what methodologies, etc.). This goal is strongly connected with the problem of accounting for oppression, which is examined in section 3.1, in which I quoted Ásta's remark that

Only in the face of very strong arguments to the effect that our phenomenology is in radical error (which include the claim that we are not suffering after all, contrary to our immediate evidence) should we abandon our attempt to make sense of that phenomenology and seek theories that can make the situation better³⁶.

Feminist epistemologists have theorized various ways to show that our phenomenology is not in error. Among them, some have also pointed out that not only are we not in error in thinking that oppression exists, but also that our recording of this reality is actually more objective – or more truthful – than others (i.e., feminist reconstruction of reality should not be on the same level as sexist, racist or classist ones). This point is particularly relevant for those reflections more influenced by feminist standpoint theory, which I believe is very convincing exactly because of the normative role oppression plays in it³⁷.

³⁶ Ásta, *The Naturalism Question in Feminism*, p. 54.

³⁷ The role of oppression is probably also the most controversial element in standpoint theory, which, in turn, is an extremely controversial (but nonetheless successful) position, even within the feminist debate.

Feminist standpoint theory is a form of naturalized³⁸ and critical theory that aspires to restore power to the oppressed and improve their situation. Standpoint theory argues that a particular socially situated standpoint should be preferred because it is epistemologically privileged and/or epistemologically more authoritative³⁹. To better understand how it works, let us look at how Kristen Intemann enucleates two of the three theses that characterize standpoint theory:

The Situated-Knowledge Thesis: Social location systematically influences our experiences, shaping and limiting what we know, such that knowledge is achieved from a particular standpoint.

The Thesis of Epistemic Advantage: Some standpoints, specifically the standpoints of marginalized or oppressed groups, are epistemically advantaged (at least in some contexts)⁴⁰.

³⁸ Sandra Harding, a leading exponent of standpoint theory, states that it is a «logic of enquiry» born in feminist research and arrived «in philosophy as a naturalized epistemology and philosophy of science» to say that because its roots are in scientific practice, standpoint theory is already, at its core, a naturalized epistemology (S. Harding, *Standpoint theories: Productively controversial*, «Hypatia», XXIV (4), 2009, pp. 192-200, p. 193). I agree with Harding on this point, but even if one does not want to accept the point that it is from the outset that standpoint theory is a naturalized theory, there is now sufficient consensus to accept that it has become so.

³⁹ Indeed, feminist standpoint theory takes up the legacy of Marx, Lukács and Hegel. To get an overview of the trajectory of standpoint theory, see S. Harding (ed.), *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*, New York-London, Routledge, 2004.

⁴⁰ K. Intemann, *25 years of feminist empiricism and standpoint theory: Where are we now?*, «Hypatia», XXV (4), Fall 2010, pp. 778-796, p. 783. Intemann extrapolates these theses from Alison Wylie's article: A. Wylie, *Why Standpoint Matters*, in *Science and Other Cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, ed. by R. Figueroa and S. Harding, Routledge, New York, 2003, pp. 26-48. I quote Intemann's schematization because it is very clear and therefore useful for the purposes of this discussion: nevertheless, it must be noted that Wylie's article problematizes both theses, offering moreover (in my opinion) one of the deepest and finest analyses of the standpoint theory.

The third standpoint theory thesis is the «achievement thesis», which Briana Toole formalized in 2019, but is already present in Nancy Harstock's seminal essay *The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism*⁴¹:

Standpoint epistemologies are additionally committed to the claims that some epistemic advantage can be drawn from the position of powerlessness (epistemic privilege), and that knowledge accessible from a particular social location is not given, but must be struggled for (achievement)⁴².

I use the term, «feminist» rather than «female» here to indicate both the achieved character of a standpoint and that a standpoint by definition carries a liberatory potential⁴³.

I propose thinking about the need to start from the standpoint of the oppressed as an element of the naturalization of feminist epistemology. That is, if we are to assume a truly naturalized epistemology, we must acknowledge the fact that the world is also composed of relationships of power, subordination and so forth (as the social sciences can show) and the fact that historically objectivity and science have been used for oppressive purposes (as reconstructed by historical sciences). Feminist epistemologies and feminist critiques of science have greatly insisted that scientific knowledge and research are internal to the world they purport to describe; indeed, they are part of it: a naturalized approach, therefore, cannot fail to consider the connections they have to historical, political, and social issues. By emphasizing the importance of these dimensions, standpoint theory pushes in the direction of radical naturalization, if we consider, here with Paul A. Roth, science as

⁴¹ N. Harstock, *The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism*, in *Discovering Reality. Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. by S. Harding and M.B. Hintikka, Dordrecht, Springer, 1983.

⁴² B. Toole, *From standpoint epistemology to epistemic oppression*, «Hypatia» XXXIV (4), 2019, pp. 598-618, p. 600.

⁴³ Harstock, *The Feminist Standpoint*, 1983, p. 289.

«any inquiry and practice that satisfies understanding and has empirical verification»⁴⁴. That is, both standpoint theory and its hybrid form of feminist standpoint empiricism⁴⁵ insist on a social empiricism that takes into account social sciences, historical sciences and knowledge that has not (yet) been accorded the honorific title of science⁴⁶ (such as the self-understanding of members of oppressed and marginalized groups).

4.2. What is Nature? A Feminist New Materialist Response

One of the main problems for feminists has been emancipating women from the presumed normativity of nature. Denaturalization has been (and continues to be, in many circumstances) a necessary feminist practice used to counter mystifying and oppressive actions and narratives. Constructivism had this function by assigning a causal role of oppression to culture, history

⁴⁴ Roth, *Feminism and Naturalism: If asked for theories, just say 'no'*, p. 289.

⁴⁵ Here I have focused on the standpoint theory because it is the one in which the element of oppression plays a more important role, but the hybrid versions also share this focus on the social, historical and political aspects of science.

⁴⁶ Lorraine Code speaks about the «(honorific) label 'knowledge'»: «Withholding the (honorific) label 'knowledge', a priori, from the workable deliverances of such practices reaffirms the hegemony of a narrowly conceived science as the arbiter of what counts as knowledge and of its practitioners as paradigmatically worthy knowers. Such exclusions relieve scientific knowers from any need to reconsider the theoretical underpinnings of their projects or to engage seriously with knowledge-producing institutions beyond a narrowly demarcated subset, thus truncating the promise that many feminists, and other Others, have held out for a naturalistic revival» (L. Code, *What is natural about epistemology naturalized?*, «American Philosophical Quarterly», XXXIII (1), 1996, pp. 1-22, p. 5). Similar consideration on forms of knowledge 'other' than the Western scientific knowledge return, as well as in the production of postcolonial and decolonial theory, are also in Sandra Harding's latest works (in particular S. Harding, *Objectivity and Diversity*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2015). These reflections can be connected to Ian Hacking's considerations on «elevator words»: I. Hacking, *Let's not talk about objectivity*, in *Objectivity in Science. New Perspectives from Science and Technology Studies*, ed. by F. Padovani, A. Richardson, and J.Y. Tsou, Cham-Heidelberg-New York-Dordrecht-London, Springer, 2015, pp. 19-33.

and society, rather than nature. However, even constructivist explanations adopt a linear model or, to quote Samantha Frost, a «unidirectional account of agency»⁴⁷. In such explanations, culture (or history or society) shapes the individual (or nature). New materialists instead propose to think of «reciprocal agentive efforts», of «complex, recursive, multilinear» relationships⁴⁸. Thus, nature ceases to be a sealed compartment that offers itself as a norm and as support for justificatory stories.

If we dismantle the idea of a linear causal relationship and replace it with complex, multilinear and recursive models, we renounce the simplicity (and perhaps the effectiveness) of the denaturalizing criticism's rhetorical device, but we can gain in terms of complexity, removing the risk of falling into essentialism. The attempt aims to avoid giving too much weight to hyper accounts of reality, thus giving too much importance to the human species and its cultural productions.

The point is not that there are leaks in the system where social values seep in despite scientists' best efforts to maintain a vacuum-tight seal between the separate domains of nature and culture. Nor should we conclude that the quality of the results is diminished in proportion to the permeability of this barrier. *This kind of thinking mistakenly reifies culture and nature and gender and science into separate categories.* But the fact is that the world isn't naturally broken up into social and scientific realms that get made separately. There isn't one set of material practices that make science, and another disjunct set that make social relations; one kind of matter on the inside, and another on the outside. The social and the scientific are co-constituted. They are made together – but neither is just made up. Rather, they are ongoing, open-ended, entangled material practices⁴⁹.

⁴⁷ S. Frost, *The implications of the new materialisms for feminist epistemology* in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2011, pp. 69-83, p. 71.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ K. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway. Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham-London, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 168.

The point to be grasped is not only the co-constitution and permeability between nature and culture (which, here, are precisely not separable *a priori*). The point is also that this possible mutable and dynamic separability is effectively enacted by material practices.

The relationship of the cultural and the natural is a relation of «*exteriority within*». This is not a static relationality but a doing – the enactment of boundaries – that always entails *constitutive exclusions* and therefore requisite questions of accountability⁵⁰.

The «*exteriority within*» referred to in this passage can be defined as an «*intra-exteriority*»⁵¹. Culture and nature manifest themselves as distinct, separate, and mutually external entities only in the «enactment of boundaries» in their mutual relationship substantiated by «constitutive exclusions». It is precisely these exclusions (these oppositions, these negations) that effectively constitute, in a performative manner; therefore, they are not given *a priori* (but each time produced in the specific instance) a specific configuration of nature, on the one hand, and culture, on the other hand. Their appearance as separate entities – «*separate categories*»⁵² – is nothing more than a «*reification*», that mystifies their real relationship as a way to offer the illusion of the possibility of compartmentalizing the two realms, the natural, on the one hand, and the cultural, on the other hand. Such realms can instead be distinguished only by taking into account the specific mutual exclusions that determine them in that specific instance; that is, by investigating what conformation their intra-foreignity and intra-exteriority takes on from time to time. The illusion that nature and culture have existed since the beginning as separate and that, in some way, they can be compartmentalized leads to the misunderstanding that a «*good science*» can be pursued only by *maintaining*

⁵⁰ Ivi, p. 135.

⁵¹ I thank Elena Tripaldi for suggesting me this expression.

⁵² Ivi, p. 168.

this separation also in scientific practices. However, if reality is given upstream as *natureculture*, the enterprise of *maintaining* a clear separation between nature and culture turns out to be impossible, impractical, and harmful to the pursuit of knowledge, precisely because of the ideological and mystifying implicit in the idea of *maintaining* two distinct entities when they are not so distinct.

This has consequences when it comes to the possibility of offering justificatory stories – because there is no ‘natural’ plane to justify phenomena that are instead to be considered naturalcultural phenomena. Therefore, the possibility of twisting causal explanations by using them as justificatory stories collapses.

5. *Conclusion*

In concluding this essay, let me summarize the metaphilosophical insights that have come to light.

In her article, Ásta offers two examples of feminist moves that can serve as metaphilosophical indications for feminists. According to the first one, theory is needed to address oppression and to articulate the pain and suffering related to oppression. The second concerns the social and political consequences of theory: feminists need to verify if theories are twisted and used against women (or other subjects), besides whether such theories are consistent. Ásta uses these two moves to highlight the need to acknowledge oppression and the need to reject justificatory stories: I have offered some examples from feminist naturalized epistemology to show how these epistemologies can satisfy these two needs. Feminist standpoint theory and its hybrid versions maintain the normative relevance of oppression and affirm the importance of knowledge forms different from those offered by ‘hard’ science and life sciences, such as history and sociology; feminist new materialism renders the notion of nature more complex and proposes a different understanding of its normativity, intended not as rigid and static, but as something performatively enacted.

Ásta identifies two naturalist commitments that feminists cannot accept: the conception of philosophy as a descriptive discipline and the rejection of normativity. These concepts must certainly be

rejected by feminists. Indeed, feminist epistemologies stress the impossibility of a merely descriptive plane, be it in philosophy, in science, or in any other inquiry. As Ásta rightly points out, most feminists embrace that normativity is linked to oppression; in other words, they reject relativism. Standpoint theory emphasizes the role of oppression in knowledge processes, and new materialism underlines the performativity and agentivity implied in scientific practices. The need for normativity advocated by Ásta, which includes both epistemic and moral normativity, is crucial to these naturalized feminist epistemologies. Indeed, they reveal that epistemic and moral aspects are always intertwined, because knowing is always not only an epistemic act, but also an ethical, political and material one.