

# Not Innocent: Relationships Between Knowers and Knowledge

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Jusqu'ici, les débats portant sur la question de la connaissance en sciences infirmières ont surtout cherché à déterminer quels types de connaissances pouvaient s'avérer les plus pertinents ou utiles à la pratique de la discipline. Nos méthodes devraient-elles d'abord et avant tout être de nature empirique? Quelle place faut-il accorder au travail interprétatif? Quelles catégories de connaissances faudrait-il privilégier? Voilà des questions auxquelles il peut sembler impossible de répondre dans l'absolu. Or, en modifiant les prémisses de la discussion, c'est-à-dire en considérant plutôt les liens qui unissent l'objet de la connaissance et le sujet qui connaît, il devient possible de réfléchir au rapport que nous entretenons à ce que nous croyons savoir et connaître. En mettant ainsi en lumière la position du sujet de la connaissance, une telle approche permet alors de voir que les questions portant sur la pertinence des connaissances en sciences infirmières sont également des questions d'ordre éthique et politique, de valeurs et de pouvoir.

Discussions about nursing knowledge have tended to focus on determining what kinds of knowledge are the most appropriate or most useful kinds for nursing. Should our methods be primarily empirical? What is the place of interpretive work? What kind of knowledge should have ascendancy in nursing? Framed in this way, these questions seem unanswerable. However, if we shift the terms of the discussion from appropriate kinds of knowledge and consider instead the relationship between knowledge and knowers, we can reflect on how we, as knowers, are related to what we think we know. Considering the relationship between knowers and knowledge foregrounds the situation of the knower, and questions about appropriate nursing knowledge can be seen to also always be questions of ethics and politics, value and power.

*To know a situation, one needs to sense what lurks in it.*

— James Hillman, *Puer Papers*

It seems fair to say that nursing, as a discipline, has been preoccupied with both the possibilities and the impossibilities of entertaining multiple, frequently conflicting, viewpoints in discussion. On the surface, this sometimes seems a question of simply deciding or choosing ways of thinking that appear most useful or most appropriate for nursing practice, or most congruent with a practice particularly defined. What lurks here, though, is the possibility that such choices may be without certain grounds beyond our own particular perspectives, that these decisions will make sense only within our own interpretive frames. Or worse,

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what lurks here is a fear that our differing views may be incommensurable such that a particular view can gain prominence only through a kind of violent suppression of other ways of thinking. Such a dismal prospect seems quite possible as long as our discussions remain focused on appropriate *kinds* of knowledge for nursing — that is, as long as we champion one or another of the various knowledges available as the most useful kind of knowledge to inform nursing practice.

Yet there are other questions that we could consider and that might perhaps change the tenor of the conversation. Rather than argue or debate appropriate kinds of knowledge for nursing, particularly as different modes of nursing will call on different knowledges, it may be useful to consider how we understand ourselves as knowers to be related to what we think we know. Directing attention to the *relationship* between knowers and knowledge raises different questions, questions that invite us to reflect not on what kind of knowledge is appropriate knowledge for nursing, but rather on *how* it is we position ourselves *as knowers* in relation to the different kinds of knowledge available to us in and for our practice.

It seems reasonable to suggest that, as knowers, we each read and evaluate the viewpoints of others through our own biases, beliefs, and assumptions, and, further, that it is unlikely it could be or should be otherwise. What could be otherwise, however, is the degree of awareness with which we do this. It seems important to understand something here that is also really quite obvious — that is, that we each hold the version of the world that we do, what it is, and how we can know it because we tend to think it is true, or at least truer than other versions of the world. Our beliefs provide for us what we consider to be a better account of what is and what happens, and we feel justified in these beliefs, in part at least because our experience tends to confirm them. When we do not understand another's position, or when we misunderstand it, usually this is not wilful but rather reflects the extent to which we are situated as knowers. Rather than disembodied and detached, our social identity and location necessarily affect our understanding of the world, and we find ourselves always already invested in what we think we know. As Harding (1992/1999) suggests, "what we do enables and limits the kinds of things we can know about ourselves and our world" (p. 458). In these terms, challenges to our beliefs are not experienced as simply challenges to ideas we may or may not hold, but often feel like challenges to ourselves.

It is important to consider this point for two reasons: first, because we should never take our disagreements lightly or engage in discussion

without care, and second, because it points to what this paper is about — how we are related to what we think we know. If we understand ourselves as somehow separate from what we know, with knowledge viewed as “out there” in an external, independently existing reality, then our disagreements still matter but not in quite the same way they do if we understand knowledge as something intimately connected with us, something in which we are implicated. As knowers we figure differently in each discussion. It seems that if knowledge is considered to be something out there, separate from us, then what we have to show is how our way of knowing what is out there more accurately reflects an independently existing world than someone else’s way of knowing. We are concerned with questions of what the world really is and with developing ways of knowing that bring us closer and closer to what really is. In knowledge-seeking activities we believe we simply uncover or discover what is already there, and hence there are ways in which we can think about what we are doing as a kind of neutral activity, without implications beyond the activity itself. However, if we speak of knowledge in light of an understanding of knowers, and hence all knowledge as situated, then we can understand our differences not as disagreements about what the world really is apart from the ways we can know it, but as struggles over *how* to see (Haraway, 1988), *how* to interpret the world, and then we raise questions about what influences and shapes our understanding.

In terms of the relationship between knowers and knowledge, I hold a position of understanding knowers as situated, which for me means that all claims to know something are partial, contingent, temporal, located and locatable. Accepting all knowers, and hence all knowledge, as situated involves recognizing that “all our interactions with reality are mediated by conceptual frameworks or discourses, which themselves are historically and socially situated” (Lennon & Whitford, 1994, p. 4). This is not a kind of radical relativism but rather a view that insists that all knowledge comes from somewhere and the somewhere from whence it comes is epistemologically relevant. Inasmuch as we are in it, there is no way to step outside ourselves or our situations and map knowledge claims against an independently existing reality; there is no possibility of transcendence, no access to reality “as it really is” prior to our theorizing about it. As Kuhn has observed, there is no “theory-independent way to reconstruct phrases like ‘really there’” (cited in Caputo, 1987, p. 221). Rather than mirroring, more or less accurately, an external reality, what is known always returns to “reflect the subject who produced it” (Lennon & Whitford, p. 2).

Understanding knowers as situated interrupts our desire to say what the world *really* is by instead raising questions about how it is that *this* world exists for us, how it is that it is available to us as it is. Here, knowers and their situations become epistemologically significant. As knowers we make decisions, more or less consciously, about which ways of thinking about the world — which of the versions we have available to us — are better. And though it is not always clear how such decisions are made, it does seem clear that we do decide, and so it seems reasonable to suggest that there are ways in which knowledge is always already linked to concerns about ethics and politics. When we make judgements about knowledge claims and about appropriate ways to know something, we are concerned not only with epistemological questions but also with questions of value and power.

### Reading Susan Gortner

That we will not and do not all hold the same views about the relationship between knowers and knowledge, that our understandings will differ, is a given. What is not given, however, is how to understand how these differences matter and, in a sense, what to do with the difference. To explore this problem of difference, I want to look at Susan Gortner's (1993/1999) position in her article "Nursing's syntax revisited: A critique of philosophies said to influence nursing theories." I choose to use this particular article as a point of departure in the discussion because Gortner's articulation of her position is both clear and reasonable. She is concerned with the development of knowledge in nursing and with what kinds of knowledge will be considered legitimate nursing knowledge. She locates herself as a scientific realist and describes the ascendancy in nursing of some phenomenological social philosophies as a threat to this position. She is particularly concerned with the need to retain in nursing the capacity to develop theories that have explanatory power. And so she uses these two requirements, scientific realism and explanatory power, to evaluate the perspectives of empiricism, hermeneutics, feminism, and critical social theory. That she has done this, and done this so clearly, is useful, I think, because it is what we tend to do — that is, we read other positions through our own.

Reading Gortner (1993/1999) as someone who has a somewhat different position — that is, a different understanding of the perspectives she evaluates — is a dislocating experience. It is a matter not of simply agreeing or disagreeing with the substance of her argument, but of seeing my position rendered through her eyes such that it is changed but still recognizable, seeing that, from her position and with her



beliefs, this is what my position looks like. What I would like to do here is talk back to Gortner, to try to get at how we differ and what it is that makes the difference between us. I will suggest that it is how we understand the relationship between knowers and knowledge that is central to our difference. Gortner's position of scientific realism supports a belief in a real world that exists independently of the mind; scientific knowledge refers to and more or less accurately reflects this real world. And even though her positioning acknowledges contemporary critiques of science, such as the value-ladenness of theory, she does not appear to have allowed these critiques to make a difference to what seems to be an underlying belief in the separation between the knower and what is known — that is, knowledge is still held to be referential, about something outside and separate from the knower. It is this underlying belief that makes her account of hermeneutics, for example, seem unfamiliar to me.

I want to look at how this difference plays itself out in the approaches to knowledge that Gortner (1993/1999) describes, but first I want to address a question that often arises in these discussions, and that is the question of the nature of the reality about which we are speaking. Sometimes when one suggests that there is no reality that exists independently of the mind, the suggestion is interpreted to mean that there is no common knowable reality, or even that there is no world outside the mind, that there is nothing — which to all of us is, I think, obviously untrue. Sometimes the suggestion may be made to simply undermine ways of understanding the world that are not grounded in a robust realism, to show how wrong other ways of thinking are, and since I am not grounded in this kind of robust realism I rather wanted to try to put that particular suggestion out of play, or at least lay it to rest for a while.

When I suggest that reality does not exist independently of the mind, I am not saying there is nothing. Rather, I believe quite firmly in a world, a real world, of which we are part. What is a question for me, though, is not so much what this world really is, which I think may be a question that scientific realism tries to answer, but rather how it is that this world exists for us, how it is that it is available to us. Gadamer (1990) suggests that we choose, in rather complicated ways, how we will come to terms with the world and ourselves, and these will, even before we say we know anything in particular, contain assumptions about features of the world that will shape in advance what we think we can know and how we think we can know it. We do not apprehend a world that is given or simply there, but rather the world arrives always already interpreted. Approaching the world in order to know it, to

know it as something, requires presuppositions, what Caputo (1987) describes as “a preparatory grasp of what is to be understood” (p. 52). Such forestructures of understanding “belong to the very possibility of knowing” (Caputo, p. 71). This implies a world that is not given but interpreted, construed, from a situated standpoint, a world that can “appear” to us only if we know how to “take it,” how to construe it or make it meaningful (Caputo). Our attempts to understand lead us not to the world but rather back to ourselves, albeit “in a deeper, less innocent way” (Caputo, p. 97). In these terms, what the world is, is what it is taken to be, and it is in this way that I would say there is no reality available to us that exists independently of the mind. What the world really is, independent of the ways in which we theorize it, is precisely what it is not possible for us to know.

The reasons why I suggest that Gortner (1993/1999) holds a view quite different to this, one that separates knowers from the knowledge they produce, stem not so much from her account of empiricism but rather from her account of hermeneutics as having to do with purely subjective experience and with her suggestion that knowledge-seeking activities need not always be thought of as inherently ethical and political endeavours. At the same time, I would suggest that within her account of empiricism are the seeds of another way of thinking, understandings that if followed through would perhaps change how she perceives the relationship between knowers and knowledge and hence her understanding of hermeneutics and the relationship between power and knowledge. It seems in some respects a matter of taking up the implications of the critique of traditional modernist science to which she refers and allowing these to make a difference. I would like to try to allow the implications of the critique of science already contained in this article to make a difference in Gortner’s account of empiricism, hermeneutics, and political approaches to knowledge, and to consider how focusing on this difference makes a difference.

### **A Different Story About Empiricism**

Gortner (1993/1999) quite clearly differentiates her contemporary empiricist position from the naïve assumptions of logical positivism. There are three, related points that Gortner includes in her description of empiricism that I would like to focus on here: the impossibility of separating fact from theory, the theory-ladenness of observation and experience, and the nondifferentiation of the context of discovery from the context of justification. I want to suggest that if you accept these as characteristics of empirical inquiry, and Gortner apparently does, then

what you are also accepting is the interpretive character of perception and therefore of all knowledge. That is, accepting these involves recognizing that all of our interactions with the world are mediated by conceptual frameworks, theories, and discourses — ways of ordering the world that are themselves connected to specific social and historical contexts. Our capacity to see and know is both shaped and limited by the resources for understanding we have available to us and by our inability to step outside our situation to check these against an independently existing reality. Since our perspectives are partial and situated, access to reality “as it really is,” and prior to our theorizing about it, is not possible.

This is to suggest not that there is no possibility of knowledge that we call scientific or empirical but rather that there is no possibility of what Harding (1991) calls “disinterested knowledge” (p. 109), knowledge that is severed from our pre-existing theoretical commitments, our values, beliefs, and assumptions. My understanding of the critique of empirical science draws primarily on feminist philosophers of science (Campbell, 1994; Gorham, 1995; Harding, 1991; Longino, 1996; Okruhlik, 1994), most of whom seem to be committed to empiricism but to an empiricism that tells a different story about itself. It is probably no accident that feminism has provided many of the strongest critiques of traditional science, since one of the rocks this science has foundered upon is difference, most obviously but not only the difference between men and women as knowers. In this view, men and women are seen to occupy different social locations, to have different experiences and hence to “know” differently (Lennon & Whitford, 1994). In some respects it was the insertion of the female body into discursive spaces that assumed the universality of male embodiment through the presumption of a disembodied subject, that began to complicate and destabilize these discourses. The supposedly universal was interrupted by the particular such that what was thought to be universal could be seen not only as misleading but, more interestingly, as open to interpretation. Mills (1988) suggests that many epistemological critiques originate with a questioning of the privileging of a supposedly universal but actually quite limited viewpoint. And though this viewpoint often turns out to be not only quite particular and very locatable, it is the very essence of a universalizing discourse to ignore or deny its particularity and to conceal actual difference in power and privilege, experience and situation (Strickland, 1994).

I would like to emphasize, as does Longino (1996), that interested or biased science cannot simply be dismissed as “bad” science — that is, science that does not adhere rigorously enough to its own methods

— but rather should be considered science as usual. Longino suggests that we should not be surprised when scientific inquiry displays “the deep metaphysical and normative commitments of the culture in which it flourishes” (p. 256). Background assumptions, values, and beliefs facilitate the creation of a link between theory and data, a link that Longino describes as an “interpretive achievement that involves the collapsing of theoretical and observational moments” (p. 254). The assumptions through which we make or imply substantive claims about that which we theorize are not often subject to rigorous scrutiny, and so these assumptions are also often the vehicle for social or contextual values. Background assumptions may have to do with beliefs about the nature of the reality with which we are concerned, the extent to which and methods by which it is available to us, or about the relative importance of various features of this reality or what will count as plausible evidence of what we are investigating. Since the methods of empirical science, in themselves, are not seen as adequate to screen out these contextual values and assumptions, Longino suggests that it is “not necessarily in the nature of science to be value-free” (p. 256). Rather, since there is no way “to eliminate assumptions from evidential reasoning generally, and hence, no way to rule out value-laden assumptions, there is no formal reason for arguing that an inference mediated by contextual or social values is thereby bad science” (p. 255). Rather, it is simply science as usual. The difficulty she suggests arises because the idea of value-free science is still with us in part because of what the realist tradition suggests that science is supposed to do — that is, “to discover fixed relations of some sort, and that the application of observation, experiment and reason leads ineluctably to unifiable, if not unified, knowledge of an independent reality” (p. 257).

Longino’s (1996) critique has to do, in part, with how the relationship between the context of discovery and the context of justification is conceptualized. Many authors, including Gortner (1993/1999), have conceded that discovery and justificatory procedures cannot be clearly differentiated. This means that if biases and assumptions are acknowledged, as they are, to operate in the context of discovery — that is, in the identification and definition of research problems, the development of hypotheses worthy of testing, and so on — then there is no reason to believe that empirical methods, no matter how rigorously applied, will be sufficient to remove these biases in the context of justification. Campbell (1994) suggests that it is sometimes assumed that norms of empiricism such as the standard of predictive success, the standard of observation independence, and explanatory power are sufficient to remove bias, that they are about the “logic” of justification, and as



norms of logic are therefore inherently apolitical. This view, Campbell suggests, is profoundly mistaken, and he instead argues that the very “logic of confirmation...depends on the context of discovery” (pp. 95–96). That is, whether or not there is evidence that confirms or disconfirms a given hypothesis is not determined independently of the context of discovery where social and political values, beliefs, and assumptions are acknowledged to operate. Predictive success is always assessed or measured in the context of the auxiliary hypotheses and background assumptions that shape the context of discovery. Observation itself also relies on the various assumptions made in the context of discovery, and the norm of explanatory power is always a comparative norm, measured against the presence or absence of other relevant theories that are part of the context of discovery. As Campbell suggests, there is no “sense to the idea of a ‘pure’ empiricism with respect to hypothesis testing against the evidence — that is, there is no methodology of testing which is apolitical in its application” (p. 97). The norms of empirical testing, the justificatory procedures, require for their satisfactory completion productive supplementation by the assumptions, values, and theoretical commitments that are at play in the context of discovery. And even prior to actual justificatory procedures, it must be kept in mind that the context of discovery “determines what gets put to the empirical test in the first place” (p. 94).

This understanding of the contiguous association between the contexts of discovery and justification highlights the way in which our pre-existing theoretical commitments and assumptions can shape the very content of what we call science. The suggestion is made that there is nothing in the actual processes or practice of empirical science that in itself is capable of rendering knowledge that is, in any sense, value-free. This critique attains more specificity in discussions of the theory-ladenness of observation and in the under-determination thesis.

The theory-ladenness of observation points to the interpretive character of perception. Caputo (1987), following Kuhn, observes that neither facts nor evidence are given but rather what is considered to be a fact or to be evidence “is guided beforehand by a theory, by a certain conception of the way things are” (p. 215). Facts become meaningful observations only in the context of a framework of understanding without which they “can appear to be of no significance whatever” (Caputo, p. 215). And appeals to the evidence, too, depend on one’s perspective for “what is important evidence in one view is not important in another” (Caputo, p. 218). This is not only a matter of what we see something as but also, and more interestingly, what we are able to see,

the ways in which our theoretical and background assumptions guide or shape our observations.

Background assumptions are often not something about which we are aware and should not necessarily be thought of as belonging to, or as held by, an individual. Perekeh has suggested that in order to understand how background assumptions work, it may be useful to think of society not as simply a collection of individuals but as a system of positions: "To be a member of a society is to occupy a prestructured social space and to find oneself already related to others in a certain manner.... Since (one's) social experiences are structured, (one's) form of thought, the categories in terms of which (one) perceives and interprets the world, are also structured" (cited in Mills, 1988, p. 245). Our circumstances and situatedness as knowers affects the nature of our experiences, what we take as fact, what we consider to be normal or natural, and this changes over time and across society. This is to suggest not that observation should be thought invalid but rather that what we are able to see, what will count for us as valid observation, may depend on where and how we are positioned. Accepting that all observation is theory-laden, that perception is interpretive, may mean giving up the belief that what we think we know corresponds or refers in any direct sense to a real-world structure (Gorham, 1995).

The under-determination thesis is related to this idea that observation reflects our pre-existing theoretical assumptions and commitments. This thesis, according to Okruhlik (1994), involves the claim that data "cannot pick out a single theory that uniquely accounts for them," the suggestion being that if the data "aren't completely determining our theory choices, then something else must be doing the job" (p. 202). Since any number of theories could potentially be generated and coherently account for the same body of evidence, our commitment to a particular theory must be explainable with reference to something other than the evidence or data itself. This something else is thought to be the pre-existing theoretical commitments, the biases and beliefs, and the background assumptions that shape our interpretation of the relevance and significance of the data, and hence influence our preference for one theory over another.

Some have challenged this thesis, suggesting there is an "unfortunate tendency...to overestimate under-determination" (Okruhlik, 1994, p. 202). Under-determination, critics suggest, would only "be a problem if we were, in reality, faced with an infinitude or even a pair of empirically adequate theories" (Okruhlik, p. 202). This rarely happens, and so there will always be good cognitive reasons for preferring one theory

over another. Those who support the under-determination thesis, such as Okruhlik, suggest that this simply begs the question of why it is we have just this particular set of theories to choose from and not others — that is, the prior question “of how our options came to be determined in the particular ways that they have” remains unanswered (p. 203). Okruhlik goes on to suggest that our options in theory choice will reflect the dominant values and beliefs of the society in which theories are generated, and so our social arrangements, and our situatedness within these, must be considered as epistemically significant.

In situations that are irreducibly comparative, such as when we choose among extant theories to account for our data or evaluate theories in terms of explanatory power, we may need to consider that the theories or explanations available to us are not in any sense neutral, nor is the activity of choosing itself. Though we may be convinced that we are simply choosing theories that are epistemically better than other available theories — in the sense, for example, that we believe they provide better explanations — and though we may believe ourselves to be doing this quite rationally, based on the evidence, if the theories and explanations we have available to us are generated through pre-existing theoretical commitments, values, beliefs, and background assumptions, then we may also need to accept that what empirical science gives us is not the world but rather an interpretation of it (Gadow, 1990). In these terms, Gortner’s (1993/1999) key requirement that world views appropriate to nursing must have explanatory power can be seen as understandable but perhaps inadequate. To have explanatory power means only that there are no better explanations, and though explanation is very important to nursing practice, equally significant may be understanding why it is that we have just these particular explanations available to choose from and not others.

This seems to me a very relevant point given that we live in a society structured by relations of power, stratified by race, gender, and class hierarchies. If scientific theories are generated by scientists operating in a deeply sexist culture, for example, it seems quite likely that the content of science will be, as Okruhlik (1994) suggests, contaminated by sexism. And it may not necessarily be the case that non-sexist theories will never be generated. Rather, it may be that ingrained, often taken-for-granted sexist assumptions will not even be noticed. As Okruhlik emphasizes, sexism in science does not make rational theory choice impossible, but once it is allowed that biases, beliefs, and assumptions influence theory generation and theory choice, there is nothing in scientific methods themselves that can be counted upon to eliminate bias from science (Okruhlik).

Allowing the critique of empiricism to make a difference in our understanding of contemporary empiricism does not deny the value and validity of empirical methods for the development of nursing knowledge. Rather, it tells a different story about empiricism, which may allow us to position ourselves differently in relation to this particular kind of knowledge — that is, to acknowledge that empirical science, as useful as it has proven to be, is still an interpretation of what the world is like, that its grounds are not certain but, rather, shifting. I think this is perhaps part of what Gortner (1993/1999) leaves out — that is, once we recognize the implications of the critiques of empiricism, once we concede that the very content of science is affected by values, assumptions, and beliefs, then our situatedness as knowers must be foregrounded and afforded epistemic significance. In these terms, knowers are implicated in what is known, and politics and values cannot be understood as something other than or outside of knowledge-generating activities. Once again, as Caputo (1987) suggests, we are led back to ourselves “in a deeper, less innocent way” (p. 97).

### A Difference for Hermeneutics

My difference with Gortner (1993/1999) is that though she acknowledges the critiques of empirical science, there seems to be little recognition in her writing that empiricism is either an interpretive or a political activity. Rather, interpretation and politics happen in other modes of knowing. This is why I suggest that Gortner has not allowed the implications of these critiques to make a difference in her position. Understanding knowers as situated not only changes our understanding of empiricism but also may make a difference in what identifiably hermeneutic modes of inquiry may be seen to have to offer nursing practice. Hermeneutics begins, I believe, from the position of acknowledging that we live in a world of meaning. Rather than subjectivizing experience, as Gortner suggests, understanding the lived experience is about understanding the structures and relationships that construct our lived realities, the meanings we create from the contexts in which we find ourselves. As Strickland (1994) suggests, “other perspectives inform me not only about them and their situation, but of me and mine” (p. 271). The world of meaning in which we live is a shared world, where self is understood neither as separate from the world nor the absolute origin of experience. Rather, the “subject” of lived experience, the experience with which hermeneutic inquiry is concerned, is a consequence of the world.



It has been suggested that “already” is the word that distinguishes hermeneutics: we are already in a world, already invested in a world, and the work of hermeneutics is about developing a picture of how human experience fits together such that it is comprehensible. Hermeneutics is always worldly, about a world that Leonard (1989/1999) suggests is a priori — that is, the world we have is ours by virtue of our historical, cultural, and temporal situatedness: “world is the meaningful set of relationships, practices, and language that we have by virtue of being born into a culture” (p. 317). World, in this sense, is what we require to make sense of our existence; it is that upon which we rely for meaning and intelligibility, or that which is “requisite for anything to be visible to us at all” (Leonard, p. 318). This is a world that has to do with neither the subjectivism of idealism nor the objectivism of realism: “the world is neither held in the mind nor ‘out there’ to be apprehended” (Leonard, p. 318).

This is an understanding of hermeneutic inquiry that Gortner (1993/1999) loses when she renders hermeneutics through the lens of scientific realism, but I think it is an understanding implied in the recognition of the theory-ladenness of observation and experience and of the impossibility of separating fact from theory. The world that we have, the world that both empiricism and hermeneutic inquiry seek to make intelligible, is the same world, a world that depends on our knowing how to take it.

### **A Difference That Matters**

For nurses, the world that we have, the world that is intelligible or meaningful to us, may perhaps be best understood as merely the beginning of knowledge, as signifying what may be thought of as both our limits and our possibilities for understanding. Knowing something of where we begin is a necessary starting point, for, as Vasterling (1999) suggests, “to become aware of something we do not understand, we need a context of what we do understand” (p. 23). Our situatedness, though both the prior and requisite condition for knowledge, is in this way generative — that is, while situatedness speaks to us of what we know, it also points us towards what we do not know. Recognizing our limitedness may inscribe a boundary, but it also suggests that something lies beyond the present limits of our understanding; it gestures outwards. Conceptualizing knowers and knowledges in terms of the partiality and limitedness of situation both reminds and compels us to seek other perspectives and to characterize our understandings in tentative rather than absolute terms.

Knowledge of our own situatedness is also always knowledge that there are and must be other possibilities for understanding, and our openness to the world has to do with how much we are willing to allow what we think we already know to be affected by what happens. Strickland (1994) reminds us that the presence of other perspectives, other views of the world, should be understood, at least in part, as a critique of our own understanding, and so what we may need to consider is not always and only which version is better but also how different versions are related. Recognizing complexity, however, does not mean that we concede that all views of the world are equally valid or valuable for nursing, or that when faced with contradiction we should fling up our hands and do nothing. Rather than absolving ourselves of the responsibility of deciding how to proceed, we may simply need to accept that retaining a certain contingency in our own views of the world may sometimes be a more ethical choice than eliminating or suppressing that which refuses to fit. Knowledge becomes a matter of ongoing critical engagement with the world, knowing an openness to otherness rather than an act of grasping. If we acknowledge that a range of perspectives is possible and linked with the position of the knower, rather than fixing truth claims we can perhaps concern ourselves with discerning the implications of holding particular points of view — for ourselves, for our patients, and for the systems within which we practice.

Nurses and nursing must not only interrogate and try to understand our situatedness as knowers in terms of differences in perspective — that is, how our particular positionings may shape what we claim to know — but also confront the ways in which our situatedness and our claims to knowledge are also always embedded in relations of power. These are not necessarily two distinct activities, for any really meaningful understanding of the relationship between knowers and knowledge will always require a vigilance about power. In a world such as ours, stratified as it is by hierarchical relations of power, some knowers and some situations are already privileged, and, as Collins (1997) suggests, this privileging may have less to do with any internal or inherent criteria of truthfulness or validity and more to do with the power of those positioned in particular ways to enforce or impose their particular perspectives even in the presence of other equally plausible understandings. Often we find that what will count as legitimate knowledge also relies on the techniques and operations of power to make it so, suggesting that knowledge is inextricably tied to webs of domination and

exclusion, privilege and marginalization, some of which we can see but some of which is often invisible to us through its seeming naturalness or inevitability. When claims to know, whether informed by empiricism, hermeneutics, or any other approach to knowledge generation, are uprooted from the systems of power within which they are embedded, those who attempt to take the knowledge and leave the power behind or put it aside are, inadvertently or not, operating in the realm of privilege; that seeming neutrality is itself a mark of privilege (Collins). So when we become involved in conversations about what kind of knowledge is to be understood as legitimate nursing knowledge, we may also need to ask questions about who and what makes it so, and what knowledges we would hope to exclude or marginalize through this process. This is not to suggest that processes of authorization are always unwarranted, but rather to recognize that claiming authority or legitimacy also always involves processes of selection and exclusion, and these are worth paying attention to.

Haraway (1988) suggests that knowledge as vision is always a “question of the power to see” (p. 585). This view of vision is not a disembodied view from nowhere; neither is it the relativistic view from everywhere attributed to some forms of postmodern thought. Rather, Haraway advocates a view from somewhere, an embodied vision that acknowledges that what we think we know is always partial, sometimes distorted, that we see what we are able to see, and, though what we are able to see changes, our situatedness is not transcended. Situatedness offers what I consider to be a profoundly ethical positioning in relation to knowledge. Understanding and accepting our situatedness as knowers allows us to approach knowledge as a “power sensitive conversation” (Haraway, p. 590) instead of something we just do, procedures we just carry out — and who we are in what we know becomes an integral part of the epistemological context. But most important of all, when we understand ourselves as knowers to be situated, “we become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway, p. 583). As nurses, I would suggest, we are challenged to thoughtfully take up the contingencies of our situatedness and called upon to consider how it is that we can experience and believe we have knowledge of the same world, all at once and yet so variably. It seems to me that understanding knowledge and knowers as situated does not create an instability in our grounds for proceeding but rather makes us aware of, and compels us to account for, a certain groundlessness that is already there.

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