

Identity Matters: Standpoint Epistemology with Briana Toole

Eleanor Price, producer: This episode contains discussions of sexual assault and sexual abuse, which may be triggering to survivors.

Christiane Wisehart, producer: I'm Christiane Wisehart. And this is Examining Ethics, brought to you by the Janet Prindle Institute for Ethics at DePauw University.

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How do we obtain knowledge? Is it a purely objective, ~~rational~~, abstract process separate from identity? Or does who we are, and where we sit on the social spectrum *matter* when it comes to how we form beliefs? On today's show, we're talking to Briana Toole, a philosopher who defends an idea known as standpoint epistemology. It's the view that *your identity* has the power to help influence the kinds of knowledge you have access to.

Briana Toole: The best way to get knowledge if that's really what we care about is to get as many people at the table as possible, because someone who's trans is going to know things about the world that I just don't know. A person who is gay is going to know things that I just don't know as a heterosexual woman. And the more people we get at the table, the more robust our views about the world. The more robust our knowledge is going to be.

Christiane: Stay tuned for all of that and more on today's episode of Examining Ethics!

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Briana [intro conversation]: I feel like an ESPN sportscaster!

Christiane [in conversation]: [laughter] I know, we're gonna like talk about the field and [laughter] [fades].

Christiane [narration]: I recently sat down with Briana Toole, a newly minted philosopher.

Briana: So my name is Briana Toole, and I just completed my PhD at the University of Texas at Austin, so I'm still playing with what I want to be called. Right now I'm thinking Dr. B., but some of the alternatives are Mrs. Dr. Briana Toole, PhD, just as much fluff as possible. But mostly Briana is fine. I am a doctor of philosophy. [fade]

Christiane: Briana is an epistemologist, which means that she studies knowledge, or how people can know things. So she's thinking about things like, what counts as good evidence for a belief?

Briana: Mostly the field of epistemology is concerned with finding out, how can we say that someone, in fact, knows some proposition? If you're sitting on a jury for a murder trial, you want to be able to say, "I know this person did this thing," or, "I don't know that they did this thing." So,

epistemologists want to say, "Okay, what's required for you to say that you know? Do you have to have evidence? Does the belief that you have have to be true?" So it's more about analyzing what conditions are necessary... It's like a threshold concept. "What do we have to have in order to even say that we have some knowledge?"

Christiane: Briana's especially interested in figuring out why certain people are respected as knowers more than others. And by knowers, we mean people who can form and maintain beliefs. She explained that, for example, women have historically been rejected as reliable knowers. This has had some alarming consequences. Take the recent USA Gymnastics scandal. In early 2018, 156 survivors publicly shared their experiences of sexual assault and abuse in a courtroom.

Rachael Denhollander: My misplaced trust in my physician, and my misplaced trust in the adults around me, were wielded like a weapon. And it cost me dearly. And it follows me...[fade]

Christiane [over Rachael Denhollander's tape]: Their testimonies centered on the heinous acts of a single man--Larry Nassar, a former doctor for the USA Gymnastics team. Rachael Denhollander, one of the victims who shared her testimony, also spoke out against Michigan State University, who employed Nassar for much of the time he was abusing young women.

Rachael Denhollander: MSU, we have been telling our stories for more than 18 months, and you have yet to answer a single question I have asked. Every time I repeat these facts about the number of women who reported to employees at MSU and were silenced, you respond the exact same way. You issue a press statement saying there is no cover-up because no one who heard the reports of assaults believed that Larry was committing abuse. You played word games saying you didn't know because no one believed. I know that. And the reason everyone who heard about Larry's abuse did not believe it is because they *did not listen*. They did not listen in 1997 or 1998 or 1999 or 2000 or 2004 or 2014. No one knew, according to your definition of *know*, because no one handled the reports of abuse properly. Victims were silenced, intimidated, repeatedly told it was medical treatment and even forced to go back for continued sexual assault.

Christiane: There were a lot of reasons this abuse continued for more than 20 years--a relentless focus on winning medals at all costs, or Larry Nassar's ability to groom and manipulate his victims. However, as this statement reveals, a central factor that allowed Nassar to continue assaulting women and girls was the tendency for people to dismiss the testimony of women. Briana agrees.

Briana: Part of what we see happen there is that women's testimony just isn't taken seriously because women as knowers aren't valued. Their knowledge isn't recognized. Which is why he was allowed, even with officials in the gymnastics organization having gotten reports that this was happening, this is why he was able to do that for so long. Because women just aren't recognized and taken seriously as epistemic agents. Part of what I'm interested in investigating is what beliefs, what stereotypes we have about certain people that lead us to subsequently reject their testimony. We live in this world where women are characterized as being irrational,

overly emotional, far too sensitive. In a way, they're characterized almost in the same way that children are. And that's the evidence, right? I don't have to believe a woman telling me she's been sexually assaulted because I have evidence that women are just irrational creatures who are unreliable.

Christiane: When we refuse to acknowledge certain people as knowers, this leads to something Briana calls "epistemic oppression." Because for so long women were rejected as rational knowers, they were also excluded from contributing to a shared pool of cultural and societal knowledge.

Briana: Women weren't admitted into law school or colleges, or allowed to be lawyers, or partners in firms, or to run for Congress for so long that they just weren't part of the meaning-generating practices in which we understand what behavior is impermissible.

Christiane: Briana argues that we should stop rejecting women and other marginalized populations as reliable knowers. In fact, she claims that people from socially-marginalized populations might actually be more reliable and more knowledgeable about certain situations than people in a dominant social position. It's all a part of something called standpoint epistemology.

Briana: Standpoint epistemology, roughly speaking, is the view that knowledge is sensitive to features related to a person's social identity. So, knowledge is sensitive to features like your race, your sex, your gender, your sexual orientation, your class, your religious affiliation, and so on. So the things that you know about the world will depend, in some sense, on how you engage with the world. And how you engage with the world is going to depend, in a large part, on whether or not you're black, or you're a woman, or you're poor, and so on. So, standpoint epistemology allots a special role to social identity and says, "Look, we are embodied agents. We are men, we're women, we're white, we're people of color, and that affects the experiences that we're going to have and the things about this world that we're going to attend to."

Christiane: Standpoint epistemology is an idea that allows for our identity to influence what evidence we have access to. It's a departure from traditional epistemology, where philosophers believe identity *shouldn't* influence our knowledge.

Briana: If epistemology is concerned with figuring out how we get knowledge and how to recognize that we have knowledge when we, in fact, have it, then we think epistemology is concerned with truth? Many epistemologists think in order to acquire truth, you have to be objective. So we have this question now about, "What is it to be objective?" And epistemologists tend to say, "Okay, if you're going to be objective, we sort of have to abstract away from our bodies. We have to occupy this view from nowhere." So, we want to rule out things that can distort what we know. Things like preferences, biases, desires. So there is a really natural sense in which you might think a feature of our social identity is going to be a distorting feature that eliminates our capacity to be objective.

Christiane: Many traditional epistemologists claim that people don't have access to additional evidence just because they're say, a person of color or a woman. They argue that everyone has access to the same evidence, and it's just a matter of what you do with the evidence that's important.

Briana: They say knowledge just depends on things like belief, truth, reliability, evidence. So, the tension between standpoint epistemology and traditional epistemology maps onto this debate in philosophy more broadly about our reliance on ideal theory versus non-ideal theory. So traditional epistemologists are in this ideal theory camp, and there is something very useful about this analysis, figuring out if we were perfect rational creatures, what would the process of acquiring knowledge look like? But the fact remains that we're not perfectly rational creatures. We're embodied creatures, and it's important to recognize that whether or not we like it, that's going to have some impact on what we know. If we fail to take this into account, I argue, we're doing very serious harm to people who know things that aren't recognized as knowledge under the traditional epistemological framework.

Christiane: Because we all occupy different positions socially, and we all have varying identities, we're all going to have access to different evidence. We're going to be different types of knowers. Briana explained that in standpoint epistemology, you can be a marginally-situated knower or a dominantly-situated knower.

Briana: So, I tend to define a dominantly-situated knower as a knower that does not occupy a position of social oppression. And by contrast, a socially-marginalized knower is a knower that does occupy a position of oppression. Now, of course this is problematic because, as we know, there are intersectional analyses. So, you can be a white man, which means that for the most part, you occupy a dominant social positioning. But you could be a gay white man, and so you're a dominantly-situated knower when it comes to your race and when it comes to your gender, but you're a marginally-situated knower when it comes to your sexuality. But this does make a difference in how we analyze knowledge claims. So if I want to know if a certain policy that Congress is considering is homophobic, I'm not going to ask a black woman if she's heterosexual. I'm going to ask this white man, if he's homosexual. Because he's going to be able to give me way more information about what impact this policy will have on his life.

Christiane: So if you accept standpoint epistemology -- that some knowers are just going to have access to more evidence because of their position in society -- you have to accept that other knowers might know *less* because of their position in society. As Briana explains, marginally-situated knowers and dominantly-situated knowers are not "epistemic peers" in certain situations.

Briana: An epistemic peer is someone you think is roughly equally likely as you are to get things right on a certain question. One way to really draw out how epistemic peerhood relates to epistemic oppression in standpoint epistemology is to think about police brutality and the many varied responses we've seen to this in the media and perhaps in our communities and at our own dinner tables. So, it seems to me, based on the arguments you can give for standpoint

epistemology, that black people are just in a much better position to know about police brutality. They're more likely to suffer from policies like stop and frisk, they're more likely to be pulled over and misidentified because white people do tend to struggle to recognize minute differences in black people's faces. But here's what happens. You have a black person and a white person and they're friends. And the black person says, "Look. Police brutality's a real issue. Police tend to abuse their power." And the white person says, "Look. Every cop I know is excellent. All of them. I just don't think police brutality is an issue."

White people have their set of evidence, and they just assume that that's the evidence there is, and that's what's problematic. White communities aren't over-policed. I think, on average, white people do have very good, positive interactions with police officers. So from their perspective, it does just seem incredible that police officers could be engaging in the sorts of behavior that black people are accusing them of. What that white person has done is assumed that they're equally credible as the black person, as to what police brutality is, and to the severity of police brutality. But given that they occupy different social locations, and that means that they're going to interact with the world and be treated by the world in very different ways, it seems very obvious and intuitive to me that this black person just has much better evidence than the white person does. So it's this presumption that you're on equal footing on issues like racial oppression that leads to epistemic oppression.

Christiane: The idea that some people might be more knowledgeable about certain social situations is not new.

Briana: I think there are lots of reason to take seriously the idea that socially-marginalized knowers just have a greater body of evidence. One reason we might think for this is something that W.E.B. Du Bois called, "double-consciousness." So, double-consciousness is the idea that, if you're a marginalized person, particularly he had in mind black people, you have to see the world from two perspectives. You have to engage with the world as a black person, but you also have to consider how white people are going to see the world. If you don't, you put yourself at serious risk. If you're a black man walking down the street in New York at night, you need to know that many white people might see you as a threat and then call the cops. So, that's going to impact how you engage with the world.

I also argue that there's something called a second nature. It's a sort of continual mode of engagement that causes you to attend to things that certain dominantly-situated knowers will just completely overlook. So, an example I like to use a lot is that of a transgender individual looking for a bathroom. I never think about where a gender-neutral bathroom is, because I don't need one. I don't ever stop to think, "Hm, is there a gender-neutral bathroom for my friends who are transgender to use?" But they are very aware of the fact that that sort of thing is missing, because it's the kind of thing they have to attend to as soon as they enter a building. So, those sorts of things make a difference as well, but it's also a function of your social identity. What sorts of needs you have.

Christiane: Having to think through social situations differently gives certain knowers access to more evidence. It gives them something Briana calls epistemic privilege.

Briana: Epistemic privilege is the idea that, in virtue of their positions of social marginalization, marginalized knowers have some epistemic advantage. So, I limit that claim to the social domain. I think black women, for instance, are just better positioned to know about hypersexualization, which is a unique issue for black women. I think gay men are just in a better position to know about the justness or unjustness of the restriction for donating blood. So it really is just restricted to claims in the social domain. Socially-marginalized knowers either have a greater body of evidence, or, in those cases where marginalized knowers and dominant knowers have equal evidence, marginalized knowers are better placed to do things with that evidence. Now, one reason for that latter claim is, if you're socially marginalized, there is just very little benefit to you in keeping the status quo. But if you're a dominantly-situated knower, you do have an interest in being ignorant of how the social system that you're embedded in oppresses people to your benefit. If you're a dominantly-situated knower, it's really good for you not to consider police brutality. It's good for you not to think seriously about affirmative action. Because to do so, and to realize the issues that are there would demand that you give up some of your social privilege.

Christiane: Briana explained another reason why people tend to resist the idea of epistemic privilege. People, especially those in power or in dominant social groups, have a story about the way the world works, and want to keep that story intact. Standpoint epistemology, and the idea of epistemic privilege, challenge that story. Let's return to the example of police brutality.

Briana: We do have this strong preference for keeping our schema intact. If our schema tell us that police officers are people who are trustworthy, they're reliable, they're there to protect us, they're looking out for our best interest, then you just think it should take an overwhelming amount of evidence before you give up that belief.

Christiane: Briana argues that people are also resistant to the idea of epistemic privilege because it seems to go against objectivity.

Briana: This is the view that knowledge is produced only through dispassionate, disinterested, value-free, point-of-viewless, objective inquiry. But, by definition, standpoint epistemology and epistemic privilege is saying, "No, no, no, no, knowledge is passionate and it is driven by values, and it does have a point of view, and it's perspectival, not objective. We are embodied agents, and so you can say that you want value-free inquiry all you want, but here's what happens when we say we want value-free inquiry. We can't listen to black people, we can't listen to women, because they're irrational and emotional, and they want to change the system. So who does that mean we end up listening to? White men. But white men are not point-of-viewless. They're not objective. They're not value-neutral, either, because every single person has a body. And, in virtue of that body, we're going to have different experiences, we're going to attend to different things. So even the claim that we ought to be point of viewless is problematic, because it's

made from the perspective of someone who has a point of view. And so that's why we see this history, not just in philosophy, but in academia more broadly, and in politics, where things are run by primarily, you know, cisgender, white, heterosexual men, because they're the people who are supposed to be dispassionate and disinterested. But, as a standpoint epistemologist, I say, look, that's just not true. They're representing their interest just like everybody else is. The best way to get knowledge if that's really what we care about is to get as many people at the table as possible, because someone who's trans is going to know things about the world that I just don't know. A person who is gay is going to know things that I just don't know as a heterosexual woman. And the more people we get at the table, the more robust our views about the world. The more robust our knowledge is going to be.

Christiane: Standpoint epistemology allows for an expansive, complicated view of the world. Briana argues that it's a crucial element for encouraging diversity in our workplaces, our schools and our government.

Briana: People tend to reject affirmative action policies because they say it undermines a meritocracy. It means you give positions to people who don't deserve them, who aren't as talented, who aren't as qualified. And I want to say, actually, look. When we have diverse practitioners in academia and science and Congress, then we're generating different research questions. We're opening up new avenues of evidence that we hadn't considered. We're entertaining different hypotheses to explain data, which means that we're in a better position to achieve our epistemic goals of acquiring truth and maximizing knowledge. And there are just scores of examples in science and in philosophy where things were being badly explained because women weren't participating in research projects. Because people of color weren't participating in research projects. And that's a shame, because it's those people who are going to suffer the most from inadequate healthcare policies, from poor bills that go through Congress, from bad academic policies that don't recognize that students learn in different ways, for instance.

Christiane: Standpoint epistemology also has the power to help scholars and philosophers from marginalized communities reframe their experiences in academia.

Briana: I remember coming into philosophy and feeling powerless, because there were all these things that were happening and that I was experiencing that I couldn't communicate, or that I was afraid to communicate because I thought people would think I was stupid, or wouldn't take me seriously. So, I started this project because I needed to find my voice again.

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And standpoint epistemology, defending this view that says, look, social identity is going to account for why socially-marginalized knowers know things, and dominantly-situated knowers don't, or refuse to learn those things. So, it helped me understand this experience that I was having in graduate school. It helped me understand these interactions that I was having with people that I love, who sometimes are very resistant to the testimony that I want to offer. So I

think it's an extremely empowering account of knowledge for people who sort of fall to the wayside in academia.

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Christiane: If you want to know more about Briana Toole's scholarship, check out our show notes page at examiningethics.org, where we have a list of her work and other related resources.

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