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Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege

MIRANDA FRICKER

[T]he dominated live in a world structured by others for their purposes — purposes that at the very least are not our own and that are in various degrees inimical to our development and even existence.¹

We are perhaps used to the idea that there are various species of oppression: political, economic, or sexual, for instance. But where there is the phenomenon that Nancy Hartsock picks out in saying that the world is “structured” by the powerful to the detriment of the powerless, there is another species of oppression at work, one that has not been registered in mainstream epistemology: *epistemic oppression*. The word ‘structured’ may be read materially, so as to imply that social institutions and practices favour the powerful, or ontologically, so as to imply that the powerful somehow constitute the world. But for present purposes I am interested only in an epistemological reading, which implies that the powerful have some sort of unfair advantage in “structuring” our *understandings* of the social world. I will try to present an account of what this initially vague idea involves. I hope thereby to explain an exact sense in which the powerful can have a kind of epistemic advantage that means the powerless are epistemically oppressed.

If the possibility of epistemic oppression does not register much in mainstream theory of knowledge, it registers loud and clear in femi-

1 N. Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 241.