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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.

nist epistemological work. We can read feminist standpoint theory — most notably Hartsock's original, explicitly Marxist version of it² — as an attempt to articulate this sort of oppression and as a proposal for how to militate against it: struggle to achieve the "feminist standpoint." The achievement of this standpoint affords a perspective on the social world which brings the true character of social relations into view. In virtue of the special epistemic access it is said to provide, the feminist standpoint is described as epistemically "privileged" in relation to other standpoints.

I take the basic insight of standpoint theory to be the insight that the powerful tend to have unfair influence in structuring our understandings of the social world, together with the sister idea that some sort of epistemic privilege can be drawn from the position of powerlessness. I will argue that while this insight, properly understood, is invaluablely true, there are problems with the Marxist formulation that impede the insight's having the epistemological impact it deserves. Since the publication of Hartsock's germinal paper, there have been attempts — most notably by Sandra Harding — to argue for standpoint theory without any explicit or direct reliance on historical materialism (and Harding has attempted to apply it to scientific knowledge of the natural world as well as to knowledge of the social world).³ Those of us who are wary of tethering feminist arguments to such a monolithic and even moribund theory as Marx's are likely to see Harding's apparently more independent route as a promising one for standpoint theory. But there is a problem insofar as it is unclear that Harding's treatment provides an adequate substitute for the specifically Marxist argument for epistemic privilege. I think it remains unclear why — let

2 N. Hartsock, '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. S. Harding, S. Hintikka, and M.B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983), and *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited*.

3 See S. Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991).

alone how — scientists in the laboratory should “start thought from marginalized lives.”⁴

I hope I may be forgiven for merely reporting without argument this particular dissatisfaction with the current state of standpoint theory, for the dissatisfaction provides only a background motivation for the present paper. Insofar as others may share the view that the basic insight of standpoint theory has not yet been satisfactorily vindicated independently from an immediate dependence on historical materialism (though always, for sure, with a great debt to it), my own attempt to produce an independent argument to vindicate the idea that there is a kind of epistemic privilege that attaches to the social experience of oppressed groups will be seen to be especially well-motivated. If not, then I offer my account simply as the beginnings of a different approach.

In Section I, I shall present feminist standpoint theory in its original Marxist formulation. In Section II, while defending standpoint theory from some key objections, I shall suggest that the standpoint project is not viable without a radical re-think. Suggestions are made in Section III as to how we might go about the re-think, but the difficulties surrounding the idea of an epistemic privilege are seen to remain. This motivates my own attempt in Section IV to vindicate, independently from standpoint theory, the idea I am calling its basic insight. Section V concludes.

I Marxist-Feminist Standpoint Theory

In Hartsock’s original paper, where she adapts the Marxist notion of a standpoint, she argues that it is possible to identify a distinctive “feminist standpoint” born of women’s labour in just the same way that it

4 This formulation is attributed to Dorothy Smith (see Harding, ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is “Strong Objectivity”?’ in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. L. Alcoff and E. Potter [New York/London: Routledge, 1993], note 5), but Harding has adopted it so that it now strikes one as the signature of her own view. For Harding’s standpoint theory, see especially Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?* and ‘Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology.’

is possible to identify a proletarian standpoint born of proletarian labour. The paradigmatic Marxist contrast comes in the competition between the respective standpoints of proletarian and capitalist classes. Whereas from the capitalist standpoint society appears to be made up of individuals each pursuing self-interest, from the standpoint of proletarian wage labour it can be seen that what is really going on is the systematic exploitation of one class by another. Only one of these groups is in a position to see social reality for what it is. The correct view of social reality is made peculiarly available only from the proletarian standpoint: "The self-understanding of the proletariat is ... simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society."⁵

What, then, is a standpoint? First, it is not itself a social positioning, such as the position of the proletariat under capitalism, or the position of women under patriarchy. Rather, a standpoint is something that is made available from the relevant social positioning. Second, it is not itself a view of the world, nor any property of a view, such as the perspective it is in, or the bias or interest which it displays. Rather it is a *point of view* — an epistemic orientation, as it were — which procures a view (with a particular perspective, etc.) of the social world. A standpoint is the epistemic counterpart of a particular form of "engagement" with the world. The standpoint of the proletariat is the epistemic counterpart of proletarian wage labour, and the feminist standpoint is the counterpart of women's (waged or unwaged) labour. Hartsock characterizes women's labour in the following way:

Women's labor, like that of the male worker, is contact with material necessity. Their contribution to subsistence, like that of the male worker, involves them in a world in which the relation to nature and to concrete human requirements is central, both in the form of interaction with natural substances whose quality, rather than quantity, is important to the production of meals, clothing, etc., and in the form of close attention to the natural changes in these substances.⁶

5 G. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 149. Georgy Lukács emphasized and developed the significance of the Marxist notion of standpoint. See the section of *History and Class Consciousness* entitled 'The Standpoint of the Proletariat' (149–209).

6 Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint,' 291–92.

Next she highlights certain features of women's labour that are seen to distinguish it from male proletarian labour: the "double shift" of paid work followed by unpaid domestic labour; the larger proportion of time devoted to producing "use-values" rather than commodities; and the particular nature of the repetitiousness of women's work where not only does she repeatedly make the meals, as if on a production line, but she also repeatedly clears up after their production (and consumption), too. This rather bleak view of women's unpaid domestic labour is reminiscent of Simone de Beauvoir's description of domestic drudgery and "immanence" in *The Second Sex*:

Since the husband is the productive worker, he is the one who goes beyond family interest to that of society, opening up a future for himself through co-operation in the building of the collective future; he incarnates transcendence. Woman is doomed to the continuation of the species and the care of the home — that is to say, to immanence.⁷

In Marxist-feminist epistemology, however, this sort of labour is depicted not so much, as it is in existentialism, as a pit of "immanence," but as a standpoint of superior vantage from which one can best survey the relations of production. For Hartsock, these features of women's labour show it to be *like* male proletarian labour *only more so*. If it is the proletarian's closeness to nature and involvement with products necessary for subsistence which constitute his being in a good position to see relations of production correctly, then the supposed fact that women's labour involves a more intense engagement with nature and human subsistence leads to the conclusion that a standpoint grounded in women's labour would have a still stronger claim to veridicality. Hence, women's labour turns out to be the proletarian labour *par excellence*, a status that elevates in equal measure the epistemic standpoint correlated with it.

There is, of course, no guarantee that the right form of material engagement, the mere occupation of a certain social positioning, will inspire the view of social reality that is in principle, or ideally, available

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Picador, 1953), 449.

from that social positioning. That view has rather to be struggled for against the current of a corrupting ideology. Just as proletarians' actual views may be distorted by capitalist ideology, so may women's actual views be distorted by patriarchal ideology — or by gender ideology, which notion is perhaps the more relevant these days.⁸ The mismatch between the ideal and the actual views held by members of oppressed groups is explained in each case by the notion of false consciousness. Consequently, feminist standpoint theorists argue that the views of social reality that are proper to the "standpoint of women," as Alison Jaggar has called it, can only arise as the result of intellectual and political struggle to overcome the false consciousness imposed by patriarchal ideology:

[T]he standpoint of women is not discovered by surveying the beliefs and attitudes of women under conditions of male dominance, just as the standpoint of the proletariat is not discovered by surveying the beliefs and attitudes of workers under capitalism. The standpoint of women is that perspective which reveals women's true interests and this standpoint is reached only through scientific and political struggle.⁹

8 I take it that a society is patriarchal just if most of the positions of power, especially positions of professional and public office, are occupied by men — essentially the idea is that it is men who *rule*. "Patriarchy," as the focus of second wave feminism, inevitably has a *passé* ring to it. But the term also sounds out of date for two more substantial reasons. First, there has been enormous progress in the dismantling of patriarchal structures since the beginnings of the second wave. And, second, a symbolic turn in much feminist theory has led to a focus not so much on the material circumstances of women's lives, but on the symbolic oppression of the feminine. Of course, there is no room for complacency. Patriarchal structures persist — a fact to be borne in mind whenever material concerns are passed over for symbolic ones. Nonetheless, it is right that patriarchy is no longer the sole focus of feminism.

9 A. Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1983), 383–84. In Lukács it is quite clear that standpoint is not an empirical notion: "class consciousness is identical with neither the psychological consciousness of individual members of the proletariat, nor with the (mass-psychological) consciousness of the proletariat as a whole; but it is, on the contrary, *the sense, become conscious, of the historical role of the class*" (*History and Class Consciousness*, 73; original italics).

This sort of feminist standpoint theory, then, displays a careful fidelity to historical materialism.¹⁰ Women are fitted into the Marxist framework as a special sort of class — a sex-class — with the intention of showing that the labour which is characteristic of that sex-class has all the features that qualify male proletarian labour as epistemically privileged, and has them in greater measure. As Hartsock puts it: “The feminist standpoint which emerges through an examination of women’s activities is related to the proletarian standpoint, but deeper going.”¹¹

II Over-generalization; Essentialism; Universalism

But is it really possible to build up a conception of a feminist standpoint on the basis of women’s labour? The generalizations about women’s labour that distinguish it as closely engaged with nature and with the basics of subsistence simply don’t ring true when one reflects on the diversity of activities, paid and unpaid, that women are engaged in. In particular, there have always been significant social differences between women so as to cast doubt on the possibility that women’s activity could permit of a single unified characterization. If this is the case, then standpoint theory’s description of women’s “labour” is not just an over-generalization, but an over-generalization that neglects the significance that, for instance, class has always had on women’s activities.¹²

10 For an argument questioning the degree of the fidelity, see Bat-Ami Bar On, ‘Marginality and Epistemic Privilege,’ in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. L. Alcoff and E. Potter (New York/London: Routledge, 1993).

11 Hartsock, ‘The Feminist Standpoint,’ 290.

12 In the original paper Hartsock does sound a cautionary note about the issue: “In addressing the institutionalized division of labour, I propose to lay aside the important differences among women across race and class boundaries and instead search for central commonalities ... Still, I adopt this strategy with some reluctance, since it contains the danger of making invisible the experience of lesbians or women of color” (‘The Feminist Standpoint,’ 290). But a cautionary note cannot dispel the difficulty.

That acknowledging social differences between women would undermine the possibility of formulating a unified characterization of their labour is disastrous for standpoint theory. A closely related point is powerfully expressed by Harding in *The Science Question in Feminism* (which predates her *rapprochement* with standpoint theory): "There is no 'woman' to whose social experience the feminist ... standpoint justificatory strategies can appeal; there are, instead, *women*: chicanas and latinas, black and white."¹³ Social identity is — to borrow an apt postmodern metaphor — *fragmented*.¹⁴ This is not the same point as the objection that standpoint theory relies on an overgeneralization about women's labour. It is part of the explanation for the difficulty of coming up with any true generalization about women's labour substantial enough to provide for a unified standpoint.

It is worth remarking, on a more pragmatic note, that it is largely thanks to feminism that women's labour has become increasingly diverse, continuing to evolve out of the purely domestic world into the world of paid work, and out of an exclusive involvement in the "caring" professions into a greater diversity of different jobs. In this way standpoint theory sets up a curious tension between feminist epistemology and feminist political aims. Twenty years ago Dorothy Smith gave expression to the sort of sociological picture of women's labour that the Marxist-feminist formulation of standpoint theory requires:

The place of women ... is where the work is done to facilitate man's occupation of the conceptual mode of action. Women keep house, bear and care for children, look after him when he is sick, and in general provide for the logistics of his bodily existence.... Women work in and around the professional managerial scene in analogous ways ... They do the clerical work, giving material form to the words or thoughts of the boss. They do the routine computer work, the interviewing for the survey, the nursing, the secretarial work. At almost every point women mediate for men the relation between the conceptual mode of action and the actual concrete forms on which it depends.¹⁵

13 S. Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Milton Keynes:Open University Press, 1986), 192.

14 Hartsock begins to say something about how the subject of standpoint may be "pluralized" in the final section of *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited*.

15 D.E. Smith, 'A Sociology for Women,' in *The Prism of Sex: Essays in the Sociology*

Admittedly, this picture of women's lives may still be all too familiar. But shared domestic labour between men and women has increased, even if the bulk still falls to women in the notorious "double shift." Future progress will involve a continued movement *away* from a uniformity of activities among women, paid and unpaid. Consequently, even if there were currently enough uniformity in women's labour so as to make available a distinctive feminist standpoint, no feminist would hope that this situation continue. Thus — overgeneralization aside — women's labour could in any case provide only a transient, unstable grounding for a feminist standpoint.

Our objection has been an empirical one: women's activity is not so uniform as standpoint theory requires. This should not be conflated with any charge of essentialism. Perhaps it will help avoid confusion to say something about how things stand with regard to the frequently made objection that standpoint theory is essentialist. How things stand depends on how we understand essentialism, of course. Suppose we define it so that a claim about women is "essentialist" just if it is about the alleged *nature* of woman, or some other *essence* of woman.¹⁶ On this definition we can quickly see that Hartsock's view is not essentialist, for her account is not one of women's nature, or essence, but rather of women's place in history.

This may seem too quick, for some may want to define essentialism more generously so that mere universalism is sufficient for it. On the generous definition, if Hartsock's claims about women's labour and the feminist standpoint have universalist pretensions, then they

of Knowledge (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), 166; quoted in Jaggar, *Feminist Politics*, 373.

16 Although the idea of women's nature is often taken to be something biological, I see no reason to think this must be the case. Certainly, something's essence need not be anything biological, given that an essential property of a (type of) thing is any property whose possession is necessary for its being the (type of) thing it is. For a helpful discussion of key anti-essentialist arguments, see Charlotte Witt's 'Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory,' *Philosophical Topics* 23:2 (1995): 321–44 (special issue, *Feminist Perspectives on Language, Knowledge, and Reality*, ed. S. Haslanger).

are essentialist. Hartsock's view, however, is not universalist. As she has emphasized more recently, her original paper made plain that she "was limiting [her] efforts to 'women's lives in Western class societies'."¹⁷ This should satisfy us, for there is no tension between the stated limited domain and anything she has to say about women's labour and the feminist standpoint. It does not follow from her view that women in all cultures occupy the historical position she describes. (She does accede to an interpretation of Marx that attributes ontological significance to labour, so that women's Being is constituted by the position of women in the relations of production.¹⁸ But this need not be a universalist claim unless one adds that women across all cultures must have the same ontological status.)

Second, even if Hartsock *were* making universalist, cross-cultural claims, and thus (on the generous definition) making essentialist claims, essentialism *per se* could not then be bad, and so Hartsock would need no defence on that particular score. Essentialism could not be necessarily bad, because universalism is not necessarily bad. There is nothing wrong with pretensions to universality *per se*. To think otherwise would, for instance, be to bring undeserved discredit to some (biologically mundane, even analytically trivial, but) morally important universal truths about women: consider "all women are human beings." Of course, *suspicion* of universal claims — even those we know to be true — remains thoroughly appropriate in contexts where one has reason to think they will be misleading or exclusionary (we shall return to this point). But the appropriately suspicious attitude will not lead us to ignore the progressive value that true universal claims can have.

17 Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited*, 235.

18 "Conscious human practice, then, is at once both an epistemological category and the basis for Marx's conception of the nature of humanity itself. To put the case even more strongly, Marx argues that human activity has both an ontological and epistemological status, that human feelings are not 'merely anthropological phenomena,' but are 'truly ontological affirmations of being.'" Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint,' 306, n. 5.

III A Radical Re-think

The discussion in Section II of overgeneralization, of essentialism, and of universalism involved, respectively, an empirical question about the work that women do, a metaphysical question about the idea of a woman's *nature* or *essence*, and a logical question about the *scope* of certain claims about women. Although standpoint theory was found to be untroubled by worries relating to essentialism and universalism, the first criticism (that the theory depends on a gross overgeneralization) seems to have put in jeopardy the whole idea of a standpoint made available from women's lives. Standpoint theory in the Marxist-feminist vein may indeed have been revealed as untenable, but perhaps the standpoint theoretical project can be removed from the strictly Marxist framework so as to accommodate the social diversity of women and their activity.

A first step is to substitute talk of women's "social experience" for the vocabulary of women's "labour." A second step is to realize that a standpoint's arising out of the social experience of women need not depend on the idea that women, in virtue of being women, have many (or any) social experiences that are *the same* — an idea that would offend against difference no less than the overgeneralized description of women's labour did. It need only depend on the idea that some of women's social experiences have *similarities* in virtue of their subjects' being women. To differentiate between sameness and similarity in this way is no verbal trickery, for differentiating them brings out a genuine distinction. Whereas the idea of sameness of experience across difference may be a romanticism from identity politics, similarities of experience across difference are a linguistic necessity. There will be a similarity between two different people's experiences of, say, sexual discrimination, if there is — as there must be — a description (however thin and incomplete) of these experiences that is true across difference. The sexual discrimination that a black woman undergoes in a social context not free from racial prejudice may be very different from that which a white woman undergoes in that context. This may be so not merely because for the black woman one discrimination is compounded by another, but moreover because the nature of multiple discrimination may not be additive: there may be no isolable component of the overall experience which is the same as some component of the

white woman's experience of sexual discrimination. We can grant this, and still hold that the two women's experiences must be similar in the important, if blindingly obvious, respect that each suffers sexual discrimination. What matters, from the point of view of finding a basis for a feminist standpoint, is that the women have an experience of the same thing, where their experiencing it is non-accidentally connected with the fact that they are women.

There will doubtless be contexts in which the description of a black woman's experience of "sexual discrimination" as such is culpably incomplete; and, if assumptions from white experience are implicit, the description as it stands is likely to be misleading and exclusionary. When this happens, black social experience is wrongfully subsumed under a white model. (The phenomenon of wrongful subsumption occurs across other kinds of difference too, such as class or sexual orientation.) As far as the ambition to understand our shared social world goes, the various shortcomings of any description of social experience are every bit as important as its literal truth — more so perhaps. (Section IV presents an explanation of how the shortcomings of a description of social experience can be a resource for improved collective understanding.) But as far as seeking a basis for the idea of a feminist standpoint goes, it will be the statements of similarity that matter. Descriptions such as "Kate and Louise both suffered sexual discrimination" pick out obvious but significant similarities of experience — similarities of experience that women share because they are women. Such similarities would seem to present at least a decent prospect for establishing a basis for a unified standpoint without risk of overgeneralization. Such a standpoint project would depend only on citing similarities of experience that the proper concern with difference will not lead us to ignore.

Having changed — fragmented — both the conception of the subject and the conception of the basis for a feminist standpoint, we must make sure that there is no misunderstanding as to what the *object* of a standpoint is supposed to be. I have talked of "the social world." But only for convenience: it would be an absurd idea that anything could provide for a unified standpoint on something as diverse as "the social world" (the causes of inflation are an area of the social world, as is the rise in crime, or the score in the test match, or the bus timetable). Marxist-feminist standpoint theory inherits from Marxism the idea that

a standpoint bears on “the nature of society,”¹⁹ so that the object of standpoint is not (absurdly) all the social facts that comprise a social world. But, still, the idea that a single standpoint could procure the right view of something called “the nature of society” depends, for a start, on there being some thing that is *the* nature of society, and it is unclear that there is any such thing.

There is happily no need for the standpoint theorist to commit herself to either monolithic conception of the object of a standpoint. The standpoint theorist may instead pursue the promising possibility that similarities of social experience between women provide for a unified standpoint on certain *relevant* areas of the social world — most obviously, perhaps, the crimes of “stalking” or rape in marriage, for instance, or the question whether women come up against a professional “glass ceiling,” or perhaps the identification of certain practices as sexually discriminatory. It seems plausible to suggest that the fact that women as women are subject to these experiences could provide for a shared, distinctive standpoint. It certainly generates some shared interests. And so it may be that standpoint theory would be best served by a concentration on how similarities of experience create shared interests so as to provide for a unified standpoint on relevant areas of the social world.

IV Hermeneutical Marginalization and the Disunity of ‘We’

I have been trying to show that if standpoint theory is to be made viable, various “fragmenting” steps will have to be made. And I have argued in particular that if standpoint theory is to overcome the empirical objection that it rests on a gross overgeneralization, then it must distance itself from the strictly Marxist framework that requires some such overgeneralization. Once removed from the Marxist framework, however, standpoint theory is beset by a new difficulty: how to justify the idea that an epistemic privilege attaches

19 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 149.

to one or another standpoint? Historical materialism had its own argument for attributing privilege to the standpoint of the proletariat, and the price of removing feminist standpoint theory from its original context is that it comes to lack any such argument. I should confess to a certain skepticism that there could be a convincing positive argument for a standpoint's being epistemically privileged in a general way. But perhaps we can, in a roundabout way, arrive at a negative argument to vindicate the more basic idea that an epistemic privilege of some kind correlates with the social experience of the powerless.

Suppose we conceive of the social world as a cluster of social facts; suppose also that there are as many social worlds as there are societies, with the clusters of social facts that constitute them overlapping and permitting of no sharp delineation. (I take it that the individuation of societies is inevitably vague, and that we are philosophically no worse off for it, so long as the vagueness can be acknowledged.) What makes a cluster of facts a cluster is the same thing that makes a society be one society and not another: roughly speaking, relations of social contiguity. People living in one society live in and around each other, sharing social practices and institutions — most obviously, perhaps, political and legal institutions. These initial proposals are intended to serve simply as a minimal framework for how to understand the idea of a social world. They make it clear that when we talk of knowledge of the social world, we are talking about the social world in which “we” live, where that world or society has no clear borders with any other, and — we shall return to this point — no simple uniformity within it.

The next question is, what is the nature of the social facts that constitute our social world? Such facts seem to depend in a peculiar way upon our believing that they obtain. There seems to be a sense in which we construct or create our social world. The little discs of gold- or silver-coloured metal that I hand over to the person standing behind a counter with the packets and tins on the shelves behind him are *money*, and my handing them over to him in that place in exchange for one of the packets is part of an act of *buying something from a shop*. Its being the act that it is depends peculiarly on the fact that around here it counts as such. I propose to adopt a familiar, broadly hermeneutical model for this peculiar dependence: social facts are ontologically dependent

upon a collective interpretive practice.²⁰ We construct the social world through the operation of our interpretive practices.

Different hermeneutical accounts will conceive the relation of dependence between social facts and interpretive facts differently. I have said that social facts depend ontologically on an interpretive practice. But this ontological dependence might be construed either as a relation of constitution, or as a relation of pre-condition. If the relation were constitutive, it would not be only our understandings of the social world that were at the mercy of our interpretive practices, but the very social world itself, and our constructivism would have turned out to be idealism. The standpoint theorist has reason not to go down the idealist road. So long as it is among the ambitions of standpoint theory to honour the idea that there can be something defective — cognitively defective — in our shared interpretive practices, then standpoint theory requires that there be a possibility of mismatch between the social facts and our extant interpretive practices. It requires the possibility that our interpretive practices, as we have so far succeeded in developing them, are distortive of certain facts. This sort of mismatch is not possible on an idealist view.

It is important, then, that we are not obliged to accept the constitutive, or idealist model. We may avail ourselves instead of the preconditional model, which depicts social facts as being the facts that they are in virtue of the operations of an interpretive practice, but in such a way that once the facts are in place they are independent of many of the caprices of actual interpretation. The preconditional model allows us to honour the distinction between “opinion” and “form of

20 See, for instance, C. Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical Papers 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); P. Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1990); and J. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995). Searle’s account is perhaps more properly categorized as a species of conventionalism than a hermeneutical view, but I use ‘hermeneutical’ in the broadest possible sense to capture the basic idea that social facts are dependent upon some human practice of meaning. The differences between approaches within this broad category are not of present concern. For a discussion of the different approaches, see F. Collin, *Social Reality* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997).

life." In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein's interlocutor asks, "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" and the reply comes, "It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life."²¹ Adopting the pre-conditional model allows us to say that while the standards of truth and falsity are set by our shared form of life — our interpretive or hermeneutical practice — the truth or falsity of any statement is settled by (what else?) the facts.

There is, then, a basic agreement in language, or in interpretive practice, that is preconditional to there being a social world, and to the possibility of knowing a social world. But the question whether our shared meanings are such as to capture the character of a given human interaction, situation, or action can be an open question. We are in a position to complain about our practice that as it stands it fails to capture some of the facts — that there are some facts which would be better captured by a different concept from any currently in use. We may be able to complain that such-and-such an interaction between a man and a woman was not a case of flirtation or joking, but a case of (what we now call) sexual harassment, for instance. Or indeed the reverse. We can disagree over our interpretations without detriment to the idea that such disagreement has as a precondition a more basic level of agreement. When a new concept is coined in order finally to make proper sense of some social experience, previously only dimly comprehended, we use existing meanings to create a new one. We exploit resources within our form of life to make a change in it, realizing a new meaning. (Perhaps the coining of "sexual harassment" or "workplace bullying" or "stalking" are examples of this kind of conceptual innovation; perhaps the phrase "gay parenting" is another.) Our interpretive practice is not the employment of any finite repertoire of fixed meanings, but is an indefinite resource for new meaning.

21 L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 2d ed., ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958), section 241. Quoted in N. Scheman, 'Forms of Life: Mapping the Rough Ground,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, ed. H. Sluga and D.G. Stern (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 386.

Our extant practice — the meanings we actually make use of — is also a site of potential meanings, any of which we may come to actualize in practice as we are prompted to by the facts.²²

The possibility of this sort of conceptual innovation raises a political question: whose outlooks, and whose interests, are served by the set of existing concepts? With the possibility of such a question, we confront the disunity of the “we” who agree in form of life. If the different “we”s within a form of life stand to one another in relations of advantage and disadvantage, power and powerlessness, then this inequality is likely to be reiterated in interpretive practice. But *these* relations of advantage and disadvantage — the interpretive inequalities — will be especially hard to detect. For it is precisely in the formation of our tools of understanding that the inequality inheres.

How does such hermeneutical inequality come about? Let’s start with the idea that one’s identity and social experience condition one’s interpretive habits. This is in itself an uncontroversial and even mundane point: because of who (or what) one is, one is likely to pick out certain aspects of some situation as significant, while someone with a different social experience is likely to pick out different aspects. But this seemingly mundane point has radicalizing implications in the hermeneutical context. Given that selected features of situations are the materials for an interpretive process, then the fact that one has picked out these rather than those features as salient may lead one to a very different interpretation of events from the next person’s. If, for example, someone fails to pick up on the significance for a given interaction of the fact that only one of the two participants has the power to fire the other, or to fail the other in exams, or to prevail in a physical fight, then she may misunderstand the nature of the interaction altogether. This sort of misunderstanding may arise from a more or less systematic cognitive failing on her part. More interestingly, there can be *collective* systematic cognitive failings of a similar kind. Where a given misinterpretation stems from a collective failure to understand the nature of some type of social experience — what it’s like, for ex-

22 There is, of course, more to be said on this subject, but this is not the place to try to say it.

ample, to be the victim of long-term domestic violence — then a correct interpretation can appear to be irrational or outrageous. Perhaps it is only once the experience of long-term domestic violence is properly understood that we are collectively in a position to see the reasons in favour of extending the legal notion of provocation, so that in a murder trial the defensive claim “she was provoked” may no longer appear outrageous, as it once would have.

Such collective cognitive failings do a hermeneutical injustice to those whose experiences are excluded from collective understandings. When our practice is uninformed by the experience of people in a given social position, we are collectively in a position fully to understand neither the experiences in question, nor any other areas of the social world to which they have interpretive relevance. Thus some people’s social experience remains obscure and confusing, even for them, in a way which limits or distorts collective social understanding more generally. In principle, anyone might suffer hermeneutical injustice. But we should not fail to acknowledge the likelihood that in any given society — where there are (always?) systematic relations of power and powerlessness — it is the social experience of the powerless that is most likely to be left out in the hermeneutical cold. If so, then it will most typically be the powerless who suffer hermeneutical injustice.

A case of hermeneutical injustice will be a case of epistemic injustice, so long as the hermeneutical practice in question is one through which we gain knowledge.²³ And if someone or some group suffers epistemic injustice in a systematic way, then it will be appropriate to talk of *epistemic oppression*. Here, then, is the promised exact sense in which the powerful are likely to have a peculiar epistemic advantage of a kind which means that the powerless are epistemically oppressed: epistemic oppression arises from a situation in which the social experiences of the powerless are not properly integrated into collective understandings of the social world. To the extent that anyone suffers

23 A different species of epistemic injustice is identified in my ‘Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* (1998): Part 2, 157–77.

this, they are unfairly disadvantaged as participants in a collective form of life. A more egalitarian, more democratic, and perhaps therefore more civilized form of life would be one that is informed by the social experiences of everyone — and it would thereby be one in which our interpretive practice was free from a major source of distortion.

This last thought has the radicalizing implication that efforts at hermeneutical democratization are made rational by purely epistemic considerations. (Of course they are also enjoined by ethical considerations in favour of an inclusive form of life.) An inquirer into the character of the social world hopes *inter alia* to understand the sorts of social interaction that I have been citing in examples. As a truth-seeker, she finds herself in possession of a rationale for paying special attention to the experiences of the powerless. Close attention of this kind would be akin to the interactions in consciousness-raising groups, where it is understood that the relevant experiences cannot simply be reported, for it is understood that we lack the terms needed to report those experiences accurately. Developing a better vocabulary is the objective and not the premise of the activity. Perhaps it is permissible to read the injunction to “start thought from marginalized lives” as an injunction to pay this sort of prioritized close attention to the reported experiences of oppressed parties, as a means to ensuring that no one’s social experience is systematically obscured by unevenly informed collective interpretive practices. If so, then starting thought from marginalized lives is something we may be able to do, and something we should do as lovers of truth and understanding.

V Conclusion

We now possess the promised vindication of the basic insight in standpoint theory. Given that the background picture, briefly sketched, of the metaphysics and epistemology of the social world is acceptable, we now have an account of what is involved in the idea that our collective understandings are (likely to be) “structured” by the powerful, and of how, to whatever extent they are so structured, the powerless will be epistemically oppressed. We also possess a vindication of the other half of the basic insight, that there is some kind of epistemic

“privilege” in the position of the powerless. If it is likely that our collective understandings of the social world are systematically distorted for the reason that our interpretive practice is not properly informed by the social experience of the powerless, then there will be many contexts in which the inquirer is well served by paying special attention to the experiences of precisely those people.

On the proposed view, then, there is only a “privilege” of a corrective variety — one arising from a kind of hermeneutical affirmative action. In arguing for it we need make no strained generalizations about the nature of anyone’s labour and its closeness to human necessity. We need only remind ourselves of the collective interpretive nature of the social world, and follow through the epistemological implications of the disunity and inequality among the “we” who share a form of life. In doing this, we might reasonably hope to have made some progress toward what Naomi Scheman has called an epistemology of largesse:

The hallmark of reality ... is that it looks different to those differently placed in it; consequently realism requires an epistemology of largesse: the problem for knowledge is the problem of partiality not in the sense of bias but in the sense of incompleteness.²⁴

Once it is acknowledged that the incompleteness can go as deep as a form of life, so as to give rise to unjustly biased and even oppressive collective understandings, then the reason to “privilege” the social experiences of the powerless is revealed as a radicalizing corrective epistemic imperative.

24 Scheman, ‘Forms of Life,’ 391.