

# Epistemic Domination

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**Abstract:** This paper identifies and elucidates the underappreciated phenomenon of *epistemic domination*. Epistemic domination is the nonmutual capacity of one party to control the evidence available to another. Where this capacity is exercised, especially by parties that are ill-intentioned or ill-informed, the dominated party may have difficulty attaining epistemically valuable states. I begin with a discussion of epistemic domination and how it is possible. I then highlight three negative consequences that may result from epistemic domination.

**Key words:** deception, defeat, domination, epistemic domination, epistemology, evidence, social epistemology, testimony

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to identify and elucidate the underappreciated phenomenon of *epistemic domination*. Epistemic domination is the nonmutual capacity of one party to control the evidence available to another. Where this capacity is exercised, especially by parties that are ill-intentioned or ill-informed, the dominated party may have difficulty attaining epistemically valuable states. I begin with a discussion of epistemic domination and how it is possible. I then highlight three negative consequences that may result from epistemic domination.

## 2. CONTROLLING EVIDENCE

Epistemic domination is an asymmetrical relation whereby one party has the capacity to control what evidence is available to another, thereby having some degree of control over the latter's ability to acquire knowledge, justified belief, understanding, and related epistemic goods. The exercise of this capacity may involve presenting evidence, withholding evidence or, more broadly, shaping the evidence available in the dominated party's epistemic environment. It should be stressed that epistemic domination is a capacity, and may be present even in relationships in which it is not exercised.<sup>1</sup>

Consider an illustration. It is typical for parents to stand in a relation of epistemic domination toward their children. Parents typically exhibit a high degree of control over the evidence to which their children have access. This control may be direct—especially insofar as children are liable to be exposed to and to trust the testimony of their parents. But this control may also take a more indirect form. For example, children may be compelled by their parents to attend specific schools and churches. More generally, the sources of information to which children have access are in many cases largely determined by their parents. In these ways, parents exhibit a great deal of

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control, whether direct or indirect, over the evidence available to their children. This alone is not sufficient for epistemic domination, which I understand as an asymmetrical relation. Parents typically epistemically dominate their children because they not only typically exhibit a high degree of control over the evidence possessed by their children, but also in part because they are typically not subject to evidential control by their children. Consider for comparison a couple whose members are highly dependent upon one another for information. Each may exhibit a large degree of control over the information available to the other but, because this control is shared, neither epistemically dominates the other.

The difference between symmetrical and asymmetrical control is significant for two reasons.<sup>2</sup> To grasp these reasons, imagine two parties such that each exhibits a significant degree of control over the evidence available to the other. First, because each party has the capacity to set back or advance the other's interests through the presentation of evidence, each has some incentive to engage cooperatively with the other. Second, each party's ability to shape the other's evidential situation will be limited, insofar as some of each party's evidence will be owed to the other. Thus, for example, if one party attempts to manipulate another by shaping the others' evidential situation, the former party may struggle to do so effectively because the latter party partially shapes the former's perception of the circumstances. This is not to say that malicious exercises of control over another's evidence can never occur where control is shared. However, as later examples will illustrate, the phenomenon of non-mutual control over others' evidence is a common enough phenomenon, and raises enough important issues, to merit independent consideration.

The parent-child example illustrates some important points about epistemic domination. First, one party may epistemically dominate another even if the former does not consciously exercise this capacity. Second, and relatedly, epistemic domination need not be nefarious. Third, the epistemic domination of one party by another may emerge from the fulfillment of societal expectations or other pressures, without the explicit intention of the dominant party. Finally, epistemic domination comes in degrees. To make this point more explicit, consider the relations between the parent in the example above, one of the child's teachers, and the child. In part because the parent does not have complete control over the teacher's interactions with the children, the parent's epistemic domination over the child is not complete. In contrast to the parent, the teacher exhibits a more limited form of epistemic domination over the child. The relation between teacher and child is appropriately construed as involving epistemic domination insofar as the former has a limited degree of asymmetrical control over the evidence available to the child. Relative to the parent's, the teacher's epistemic domination of the child is likely to be more temporary and more subject-specific, and to involve fewer ways of exercising control. Epistemic domination should thus be construed as a graded notion.<sup>3</sup> Because epistemic domination requires the ability to control the evidence available to another, and because control by one party typically excludes control by another, a dominating party's domination over a dominated party typically diminishes in proportion to increases in control by a distinct dominating party. The exclusivity of domination is lessened or eliminated, however, where a dominating party exhibits control through influence over a more directly dominating party or, as might be true in this case, one dominating party selects another to stand in a position of epistemic domination toward a further party based in part on the sort of evidence the intermediary party is likely to share. In the remainder of this section, I develop points from the example above to present an overview of how one party might asymmetrically control the evidence available to another.

Perhaps the most obvious way that one party might control the evidence available to another is through direct testimony. Debate persists among social epistemologists concerning the conditions under which an assertion that  $p$  by one party justifies or warrants a belief that  $p$  held by another.<sup>4</sup> It is, however, uncontroversial that assertions that  $p$  typically provide some evidence that  $p$ . At least in cases in which the asserter has a respectable track record of assertions, the evidence

for  $p$  furnished by an assertion may well be strong. Asserters thus exhibit a degree of control over the evidence available to their audiences.

It does not follow, however, that an asserter invariably epistemically dominates the audience. In many testimonial exchanges, each party exhibits a roughly equivalent degree of control over the evidence available to the other, and so neither dominates the other. Epistemic domination occurs only when there is a significant imbalance in the control each party has over the evidence available to the other. Such an imbalance may arise for a range of reasons. In a parent-child case, the former, but not the latter, will often be able to meaningfully assess whatever evidence they glean from the counterpart's testimony. Relatedly, in typical cases, the evidence a parent receives from the testimony of the child will be only a small portion of their total evidence bearing on a particular matter.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, a significant portion of the child's total base of evidence for particular matters is likely to be derived from the testimony of the parent. Consider, for example, the total evidence that a child has for the proposition that the Earth orbits the Sun. More generally, some parties may possess sufficient intellectual capacities and additional evidence that their evidential position is not radically changed by the testimony of others. An imbalance in epistemic control may also arise because testimony does not always take a back-and-forth form. A public figure may be capable of delivering testimony to a member of the public without that member of the public having any means of reaching the public figure with testimony.

A less direct means by which one party might shape the evidence available to another is by controlling the testimony the latter receives from others. In the parent-child case, the parent may do so by compelling the child into an environment which the child is likely to receive testimony with a desired sort of content. Epistemic dominance may also be exercised by controlling the media to which the dominated party has access. This might occur on a small scale, as when a parent demands that only certain news sources be accessed within a household. It may also occur on a grand scale, as when a totalitarian regime restricts internet access, blocks all but state media, and so on. A party might also exhibit control over the testimony another receives by shaping the wider epistemic environment. The deployment of bots and trolls on social media to promote narratives is an important recent example but is, in terms of its role in facilitating epistemic domination, a continuation of more traditional propaganda strategies. As some of the preceding examples have suggested, the exercise of epistemic domination need not involve the presentation of evidence at all. As I noted above, epistemic domination might involve setting restrictions on the internet or banning certain media outlets. It might also involve criminalizing speech. In cases like the parent-child one discussed above, epistemic domination might be exercised through restriction of access to certain books, websites, news sources, friends, and so on.

Finally, an epistemically dominant party may exercise this dominance by presenting non-testimonial forms of evidence. This can be more-or-less benign, as when a dominating party curates the images, videos, and other media available to a dominated party according to their accuracy. Yet it can also be far from benign, as when a dominating party presents fabricated or misleading evidence. The creation and dissemination of fabricated documents is a clear example of the deployment of fabricated evidence. Manipulated pictures and video likewise amount to fabricated evidence. An important recent innovation is the development of deepfake technology—which can in principle be utilized to develop fabricated but convincing video footage of individuals speaking or engaging in other activities (Rini 2020). In addition to presenting the dominated party with fabricated evidence, a dominant party can nefariously exercise epistemic domination without relying on strictly fabricated evidence. Carefully edited but veridical media, especially absent context, can prove highly misleading. Presentation of fabricated or misleading evidence is unlikely to occur in ordinary parent-child<sup>6</sup> or teacher-child relationships, but is widely used by other actors.

I want to close this section by noting that, even where one party exercises epistemic domination in a way that is epistemically harmful to another, it may not be the intention of the former to

do so. For example, where a parent is misinformed, that parent may manipulate the evidence available a child, inadvertently placing the child in a hostile epistemic environment. The parent may do so as a result of being epistemically dominated. In such a case, the parent stands in the center of a hierarchy of epistemic domination. Parties that are subject to harmful epistemic domination may themselves inadvertently extend this domination to others over whom they have control. It is in principle possible for harmful epistemic domination to be widespread and to extend through various levels with no party intentionally misinforming another. The enforcement of erroneous religious or scientific orthodoxies among communities might be an example of this. It is also possible, however, for dominant parties to deliberately exploit the ignorance of others to extend their own epistemic domination. An extreme example of this would be a cult leader intentionally deceiving adult members of the cult, who in turn unintentionally deceive their own children. In the next section, I focus on three potential negative outcomes of epistemic domination.

### 3. DECEPTION, DEFEAT, AND DISORIENTATION

The existence of some degree of epistemic domination is unavoidable. This is a simple consequence of the fact that parties can exhibit varying degrees of control over the evidence other parties possess. Moreover, insofar as dominating parties are well-informed and well-intentioned, epistemic domination may epistemically benefit dominated parties. Nonetheless, there are cases in which relations of epistemic domination cause significant obstacles to the attainment of epistemically valuable states by dominated parties. I call epistemic domination that is intended to produce this effect *malignant epistemic domination*. In this section, I highlight three ways in which malignant epistemic domination might prevent the attainment of epistemically valuable states by dominated parties.

Perhaps the most obvious negative consequence of malignant epistemic domination is that dominated party might form false beliefs. Dominated parties may be especially vulnerable to forming false beliefs because, as we have seen, part of what makes one prone to epistemic domination by another is a relative lack of intellectual capacities and total evidence. When an individual is vulnerable in this way, it is likely to be relatively easy for another party to exhibit some degree of control over what that individual believes by exerting control over that individual's evidence. This is to say that dominating parties are likely to possess a degree of long-range doxastic control (Alston 1989) over dominated parties. If the dominating party is ill-intentioned, the dominated party is likely to form false beliefs. It should be noted that this outcome is most likely where the domination of one party by the other or by a collective of aligned parties is especially extensive. Where multiple dominating parties exhibit control over the evidence available to a dominated party, and where dominating parties are not aligned in their information and intentions, the epistemic environment may come to be populated with conflicting evidence that renders belief formation on relevant matters difficult. I discuss this point at greater length below. The development of false beliefs is probably the most obvious negative impact of malignant epistemic domination. For this reason, we need not devote much attention to it here.

Let us instead turn to a second negative potential consequence of epistemic domination. In addition to leading a dominated party to form false beliefs, the exercise of epistemic domination may defeat the justification<sup>7</sup> or warrant<sup>8</sup>—which I from here on group together as positive epistemic statuses—otherwise had by a dominated party. Discussion of defeaters has generated an enormous literature within epistemology, and disagreement concerning the precise conditions under which the epistemic status of a particular belief is defeated persists. Rather than wading into controversy, I will focus on some points of consensus and will argue that, despite persisting debate concerning defeaters, epistemically dominant parties can undeniably take measures to defeat the positive epistemic statuses of others' beliefs.

Epistemologists typically distinguish between rebutting and undercutting defeaters. Undercutting defeaters operate by calling into doubt the basis on which some positive epistemic status would otherwise be had (Bergmann 2006: 158–159; Pollock 1984: 113). For instance, if a hearer believes  $p$  based on a speaker's testimony but subsequently comes to learn that the speaker is a habitual liar, the positive epistemic status of  $p$  with respect to the hearer is at least partially defeated by what the speaker learned. A rebutting defeater, in contrast, presents reason to reject the belief that would otherwise have a positive epistemic status (Bergmann 2006: 158–159; Pollock 1984: 113). If a hearer believes  $q$  based on a speaker's testimony, but subsequently hears  $\sim q$  from another trusted speaker, the hearer's positive epistemic status with respect to  $q$  is at least partially defeated.

A more controversial matter concerns the nature of defeaters themselves. I will assume that defeaters are propositions. Even given this assumption, there remain several possibilities as to when a proposition might defeat, either via undercutting or rebutting, a particular positive epistemic status. One possibility is that true propositions<sup>9</sup> may defeat a positive epistemic status even if they are not mentally represented by the subject. Such a proposal is rather implausible because it implies that one's positive epistemic statuses with respect to one's beliefs can be defeated even by misleading true propositions toward which one has no attitude.<sup>10</sup> This proposal would thus imply that privileged epistemic statuses are extraordinarily hard to come by. Alternatively, one might think that only true propositions with respect to which one has some positive epistemic status can serve as defeaters (Alston 1988: 275–276). One might alternatively<sup>11</sup> suppose, for some examples, that all and only propositions that are believed by the subject,<sup>12</sup> that are widely believed in the subject's community (Harman 1973: 142–144, 1980), or that the subject *should* believe (DeRose 2000: 699; Gibbons 2006; Goldberg 2016, 2017; Kornblith 1983: 36; Meeker 2004; Pollock 1986: 192–193) are defeaters.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than taking a stand on the contentious issue of when a proposition can act as a defeater, I instead want to highlight that, on any of the approaches discussed above, individuals can, by making misleading statements or by presenting misleading or entirely fabricated evidence, generate defeaters for the positive epistemic statuses of others' beliefs.<sup>14</sup> Where one party is epistemically dominant over another, the former party can thus make it difficult or impossible for the latter to obtain epistemic goods, without the latter possessing a corresponding capacity.

I turn now to final negative consequence that might be result from epistemic domination. It is rare for just one party to exert epistemic domination over another. More commonly, individuals are subject to degrees of domination by various parties with conflicting intentions and informational backgrounds. Consequently, dominated individuals may inhabit an epistemic environment populated with all manner of conflicting evidence. In this state, they may find themselves unsure of what to believe, who to trust, and how to resolve this uncertainty. This condition is *disorientation*.<sup>15</sup> As I indicated, disorientation might result from a competition for epistemic domination among non-aligned parties. However, disorientation may also be the explicit aim of certain parties. The contemporary Russian propaganda strategy, deployed both domestically and abroad, aims partly at producing disorientation in its audience (Paul and Matthews 2016: 1–2).

The history of skepticism in epistemology makes clear that disorientation is not exclusively traceable to explicit attempts to produce it, or to epistemic domination more broadly. However, recent studies of disinformation and propaganda underscore that disorientation can be amplified by manipulation of the epistemic landscape—by exercises of epistemic domination. A particularly worrying consequence of the increase of disorientation is that, for those who experience it, evidence itself may lose its significance.<sup>16</sup> Where evidence loses its force, some may disregard epistemic reasons for or against the endorsement of theories and views and instead treat such endorsement purely as a means of expressing partisan loyalty (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018: 37). Consequently, disorientation may be expected to worsen the same conditions that contribute to its development.

I wish to conclude this section by drawing attention to one further potential consequence of epistemic domination. So far, I have discussed negative effects likely to result from epistemic domination that is ill-motivated. Similar effects may result if dominant parties are merely ill-informed. But some worrying effects may not arise strictly from epistemic domination, or even strictly from ill-informed or malignant epistemic domination, but from the recognition that one is epistemically dominated. Upon recognizing that the evidence one possesses is partially subject to the will of others, one might lose faith in the quality or representativeness of one's evidence. Descartes famously demonstrated that the mere recognition that one's evidence is *possibly* subject to the will of another is sufficient to produce skeptical doubts. Upon realizing that much of one's evidence is controlled to some extent by others, one may succumb to a state of disorientation within which one is unsure who to trust or what to believe. For example, one who realizes that he is largely unable to assess scientific claims and is thus subject to the epistemic domination of scientists—each with their own motivations—may develop a concern for this position of epistemic domination and may come to distrust scientists and their claims. Notably, this effect may result even if one is subject only to the epistemic domination of those who are informed and well-intentioned. In this way, the mere recognition of one's status as epistemically dominated might bring about disorientation.

#### 4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has introduced the concept of epistemic domination—the nonmutual capacity of a party to control the evidence available to another. I have outlined how epistemic domination can be exercised, and some negative possible consequences that may result from malignant epistemic domination, or from the mere recognition of one's epistemic domination. In closing, I want to emphasize that, despite the potential negative consequences of epistemic domination, relationships of epistemic domination can, where dominating parties are well-intentioned and well-informed, epistemically benefit dominated parties.

#### NOTES

1. It is a matter of some contention among moral and political theorists whether non-epistemic domination can exist without being exercised. The conception of epistemic domination as a capacity that need not be exercised accords well with the republican conception of domination given voice in the following passage from Philip Pettit:  

If you are to enjoy freedom as non-domination in certain choices, so the idea went, then you must not be subject to the will of others in how you make those choices; you must not suffer *dominatio*, in the word established in Roman republican usage (Lovett 2010: Appendix i). That means that you must not be exposed to a power of interference on the part of any others, even if they happen to like you and do not exercise that power against you. (2012: 7)
2. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.
3. Epistemic domination may be extensive, but is always partial. Perhaps the most complete form of epistemic domination ever imagined is postulated in Descartes's deceiver hypothesis. Many alternative skeptical hypotheses likewise raise the possibility of extensive epistemic domination. Descartes's cogito illustrates that epistemic domination can never be complete.
4. The existing literature on the epistemology of testimony is enormous, but for an accessible recent overview of the debate concerning the conditions under which an assertion justifies or warrants a belief on the part of the audience, see Gelfert 2014: chap. 5.
5. There may be exceptions in which the parent's only evidence regarding a particular matter derives from the testimony of the child. However, such cases are relatively rare. These illustrate that epistemic domination does not require an entirely one-directional relation of evidential control. An overwhelming imbalance is sufficient.

6. Presentation of such evidence may occur in rare cases—for instance when a parent presents a half-nibbled cookie and an empty glass of milk as evidence of Santa's visit.
7. Here we need not distinguish between internalist and externalist conceptions of justification, as even externalists allow that beliefs that otherwise satisfy the conditions for justification may be defeated (Goldman 1986).
8. I understand warrant as that which must be added to true belief to yield knowledge.
9. Jennifer Lackey (1999: 476) calls true propositions that defeat positive epistemic statuses factual defeaters. Michael Bergmann (2006: 154) calls these propositional defeaters.
10. As Bergmann notes, attempts have been made to restrict propositional defeaters to only non-misleading true propositions (Annis 1973: 201–202; Klein 1976: 809, 1979; Lehrer and Paxson 1969: 229).
11. I describe these as alternatives, but one might of course allow that propositions from multiple of these categories act as defeaters.
12. Lackey (1999: 476) calls these doxastic defeaters. Doxastic defeaters belong to a broader class of what Bergmann calls mental state defeaters (2006: 154–155).
13. These options do not exhaust the space of suggested approaches to defeaters, especially as some philosophers allow that defeaters need not be propositions.
14. On some accounts of defeaters, this might require that testimony or evidence causes the recipient to form beliefs.
15. I adopt this label from Yochai Benkler, Robert Faris, and Hal Roberts (2018: 36).
16. Rini emphasizes that deepfake technology threatens the authority of video evidence (2020: 7).

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