

AN EVALUATION OF MIRANDA FRICKER'S THEORY OF EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE

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Abstract

All Human beings are rational. This entails that they possess the experience of cognition; that process that allows consciousness to hold claim to knowledge. A scan of ancient philosophy however shows that all the contributors to the unravelling of the cosmological question as well as other issues which were the preoccupation at this time were male human beings who wrote about the issues, with an exclusion of the female gender. This exclusion of the female contributions to knowledge continues, as early female writers had to use male names to gain acceptability in the male dominated literary world. Could it be that the excluded gender was not as rational as the male? Miranda Fricker argues that the female gender is as rational as the male but only suffers what she calls epistemic injustice; an injustice which prevents one from exerting their epistemic authority as rational beings. This paper argues that a plethora of woman have been denied the privilege of epistemic expression. Consequently, the paper establishes that the female gender shares equal rationality as the male and their unique process of cognition should be appreciated as their unique way of knowing, peculiar to their gender.

Keywords: Epistemic Injustice, Hermeneutic Injustice, Testimonial Injustice

Introduction

Women have historically been viewed as lesser beings throughout human history, which has prevented them from participating in activities that enable them to play a significant role in defining and developing ideas that solve human problems. Throughout history, men have dominated global intellectual discourse, determining what reality is and is not. The woman's ability to enjoy herself and meet her husband's and children's demands has become her only source of reasonable dignity. This essay makes the case that, despite significant advancements in women's rational involvement in society over time, the prejudice that had hitherto relegated the woman's contributions in intellectual discourse still remains.

This paper's motivation stems from the observation of how one cannot find a feminine

voice at the beginning of knowledge. An analysis of Greek philosophy shows that men were the majority of the era's knowledge providers. Could it be that the inquisitiveness that propelled the ancient philosophers to ponder reality and endeavour to characterize it was not a trait associated with women at this period? If so, how is it that Socrates, who is revered in Plato's writings as the greatest philosopher to have ever lived, granted legitimacy to a woman named Diotima for helping him understand the true meaning of love in Plato's Symposium? Socrates' allusion to Diotima in the Symposium highlights the reality that, despite the existence of female philosophers at the period who were just as insightful as Diotima, they had to be suppressed or marginalized by certain ideas that were presumably patriarchal in origin. It may be argued that Diotima has to be extremely intelligent for Socrates to have heard her out and cited her on the subject.

It is sufficient to say that all rational creatures, including male and female humans, possess "cognition," a priceless ability that enables the subject to learn about the item and then strive to define it. It would then follow that there is no way that women could not have understood the truth of the universe that surrounded them or that they could not have tried to provide a solution to the issue of what the basic substance is, from which all reality originates. This raises the question of why the female voice was absent from the numerous narratives from the endeavours of the ancient Greek philosophers to address the cosmological question. Imagine the amount of information that might have been learned by recounting the experiences and ideas of these female thinkers.

Furthermore, literary scholars have noted that female authors, who ordinarily should have been allowed to publish in their capacity as "knowers," or rational creatures, were only able to do so via the use of pseudonyms that portrayed them as men, from the early modern era through the medieval period. It seemed as though a woman was less able to write down what she learned in order to share her knowledge with the world. It might be argued that society has been unfairly suppressing the voice of women since antiquity. Despite some documented progress toward gender equality, most women continue to face a particular form of discrimination due to their status as the subjects and objects of knowledge.

This is the most severe form of social injustice that women face because it robs them not only of the same dignity as men but also of the credibility to enjoy the fun of experience and the dignity to participate in the world of reason, both of which make our existence as rational animals much more peculiar compared to that of humans. The capacity to "convey knowledge to others by telling them, and making sense of our own social experiences" – basic, daily epistemic activities that all humans participate in – is what actually defines humanity and freedom. It is these kinds of practices that one exercises "epistemic authority".

Numerous feminist authors, including Mary Astell, Simon De Beauvoir, Sorojini Henry, Aynd Rand, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mirander Fricker, and many more, denounce this type of social injustice. They all hold that women deserve the same respect and

legitimacy that men do when it comes to epistemic goods like knowledge and education, since they are just as rational as men are.

In particular, Fricker demonstrates to us that social injustice may persist even in a science as abstract as epistemology if we consider the human actions that constitute the fundamental means of acquiring – or losing – knowledge. She examines epistemic activities in the context of socially situated beings, as they inevitably are. She contends that this socially situated view prioritizes issues of power and social identity and serves as a necessary precondition for the disclosure of an ethical aspect of epistemic life – that is, the aspect related to justice and injustice. In light of this, this paper examines Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice and highlights the opportunities for epistemology that arise from looking at instances of women's epistemic social injustices.

Fricker's Notion of Epistemic Injustice

In recent years, social and political philosophy has come to see the right to be treated equally as a knower as a crucial component of justice. Institutions, behaviours, and communication systems that are unfair and unjust have the capacity to perpetuate and worsen already-existing socioeconomic injustices and inequalities. The concept of epistemic injustice holds that we may be unfairly discriminated against in our role as knowledge providers due to preconceived notions about the speaker's gender, social background, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, accent, tone of voice, and other characteristics. In recent years, the idea of epistemic injustice has given rise to a substantial corpus of literature that aims to elucidate the notion and apply it to real-world situations. In a broad sense, "epistemic injustice" refers to two different but related types of injustice that, depending on the circumstances, might be used to gaslight a person or people in their role as prospective 'knowers' or to undermine, undercut, devalue, constrain, exclude, or discard them outright. The ethical aspects (and potential for harm) that underlie two of our fundamental epistemic practices – teaching others and deciphering our own social experiences – usually serve as the focal point of analysis of the idea. Miranda Fricker, an epistemologist, distinguished between two types of epistemic injustices in her ground-breaking book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*: (i) testimonial injustice and (ii) hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice arises when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (1), while hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage when "a gap in collective interpretative resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences" (1).

Understanding Testimonial Injustice

Testimonial injustice occurs in cases where you say something, and are not believed, or at the very least, a negligible credence affixed to your words because your hearer betrays a deep-seated prejudice about people like you – a prejudice, which to their mind reduces you to the status of a sub-knower. Despite the specific label, the speech act in which this word is expressed need not be strictly that of testimony or telling, but might equally be the airing of

a question, an opinion, suggestion, point of clarification, critique, or relevant possibility. A prejudice for present purposes can be framed in terms of a motivating epistemic vice leading to a prejudgment which “displays some (typically, epistemically culpable) resistance to counter-evidence, owing to some affective investment on the part of the subject” (Fricker 35).

What negative effects does testimonial unfairness have? Well, it's not always simple to measure the damages. Some of the most harmful effects may not become apparent until much later than their original source. There are certain damages that a person may know about in general, some harms they may not know about at a given moment, and some injuries they may never completely understand. Then there are the compounding effects that spread when unquestioned shared experiences are accepted and may result in presumptive behaviors. Given our social nature and the fact that we learn from others as well as the conflict between our common experiences, only a triangulated approach can provide a trustworthy picture. However, in general, epistemologists concur on the following:

When you are harmed in your capacity as a knower, you are not treated as fully human. Not being taken seriously, at its core a form of dehumanization, damages you, not only in your standing as a knower but also as a human being.

Not being listened to or believed eats away at a person. It marginalizes them; it strips them of their agency; it forces them to incessantly doubt themselves; to question their self-worth, to distrust the significance and evidential weight of their lived experience; to doubt the worthiness of their own beliefs or claims to knowledge. This can lead to the suppression of one's voice, interpretative capacities, and correspondingly, one's standing within collective meaning-making and meaning-sharing social practices.

Testimonial injustice obstructs the optimal circulation and flow of knowledge. It blocks the open-minded, curiosity-driven giving and asking for reasons at the center of any worthwhile rational inquiry. Equally, it impedes the flow of evidence, doubts, fresh ideas, the epistemic friction of discordant reasons, and any other epistemic inputs conducive to knowledge.

Formally put, in situations, “where the speaker knows that p and the prejudice operative in the hearer's credibility judgment prevents her learning that p from the speaker, other things equal, she thereby stays ignorant of p” (Fricker 162).

Testimonial injustice can create or sustain hermeneutical marginalization by blocking the flow of divergent ideas and alternative perspectives. Impeding polyphonic perspectives in this way impoverishes the shared pool of hermeneutical resources that people draw on to make sense of, both their own socially situated experiences and, crucially, the experiences of others.

Hermeneutical Injustice

The second form of injustice, “hermeneutical,” occurs in situations where you are at a loss to find the words or thoughts to accurately express your feelings or experience as a situated knower due to a lacuna in conceptual resources available to you at that particular time. Whereas testimonial injustice might focus on individual credibility errors on the part of the Hearer, hermeneutical injustice, as Fricker conceives it (though this view of injustice sans perpetrators, responsibility, critique or blameworthiness is contested by Medina. Medina focuses on injustices that are collectively structured; instances of unmet needs of understanding where no individual agent is at fault.

On the macro level, in this case, the institutional, hermeneutical injustice occurs when a significant area of one’s social experience is obscured from collective understanding due to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. Roughly speaking, three necessary and jointly sufficient conditions characterize the phenomenon: There is some sort of non-blameworthy conceptual ignorance (a lacuna) on the part of the speaker.

This conceptual ignorance is brought about through a lack of sufficient conceptual resources in the relevant social group or community.

The absence of adequate conceptual resources is brought about unjustly through hermeneutical marginalization (which importantly, need not be systematic).

In epistemic terms, hermeneutical injustice can lead to the radical suppression of one’s voice, interpretative capacities, and critical faculties. With this, it can weaken the exchange value and evidential weight others’ affix to a given person’s situated experience. This more often than not can have a detrimental effect on one’s status within collective meaning-questioning, meaning generating, and meaning-sharing practices. Tantamount to an extreme form of “epistemic oppression,” it excludes and hinders one’s contribution to knowledge production (Dotson 23). At its peak, it can even result in “epistemic death” (Medina 51). Epistemic death, in this instance, captures the annihilation of self – a condition precipitated through the steady destruction or curtailment of one’s voice, identity, self-worth, agency, meaning-making and meaning-sharing capacities, and with this, the steady erosion of confidence in one’s capabilities as a situated knower to agitate for change and ameliorate, what are in some cases, deeply prejudicial, yet regrettably, entrenched and established, epistemic wrongs.

The Challenges of Fricker’s Account of Epistemic Injustice

One of the major problems with Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice is one that Pohlhaus and Medina identify. An essential part of her definition of hermeneutical injustice involves a “gap” in what she calls the “collective hermeneutical resource”. She argues that marginalization from that “collective hermeneutical resource” leads to

situations where “non-dominant groups fail to understand their social experiences” (Fricker 6), which Fricker takes to be a hermeneutical injustice. All three critics argue that in this definition, Fricker does not account for the hermeneutical resources that are developed inside of marginalized communities (Medina 207, Pohlhaus 724), and as a result Fricker conflates collective with dominant hermeneutical resource. In doing so, she ignores how the members of marginalized communities can use more localized, non-dominant hermeneutical resources developed among people who share their experiences in order to understand those experiences (Medina 210, Pohlhaus, 724). These shall be referred to as alternative hermeneutical resources.

Alternative hermeneutical resources are those shared resources that people draw on for understandings that are specific to a particular social group outside of the dominant one(s). Women share hermeneutical resources with regard to experiences that are particular to women, such as facing sexism when trying advance in their careers. These experiences are not shared by men, who are the dominant social group, and as a result will likely not be incorporated into the dominant hermeneutical resource. However, the alternative hermeneutical resources available to women and shared with other women will mean that they can still understand their experiences and communicate them to people who share them, even if they cannot successfully communicate them to men who do not because they are silenced, ignored or discredited. These alternative hermeneutical resources arise in other marginalized communities as well, such as racial minorities, sexual minorities, gender minorities, lower economic classes, etc. The presence of these alternative understandings must be recognized in a theory of epistemic injustice, because they are a source of agency and resistance for the marginalized and oppressed social groups. They are also a source of hope and potential for overcoming the hermeneutical marginalization of such groups from the dominant hermeneutical resource.

The presence of alternative hermeneutical resources draws attention to an incomplete aspect of Fricker’s approach, where the parameters of hermeneutical injustice need to be clarified. In her account, it seems that when there is a hermeneutical injustice, no one can understand the marginalized person’s experience. However, recognizing alternative hermeneutical resources reveals that a gap in the dominant hermeneutical resource does not necessarily mean that a person who is marginalized from the dominant hermeneutical community is unable to understand their own experiences, or that other members of their marginalized community won’t recognize the experience. Part of the problem is that Fricker assumes the perspective of the dominant group, only taking into consideration the hermeneutical resources available to the powerful. This dominant perspective is also what leads her to excuse Herbert Greenleaf from blame and instead call the epistemic injustice he does to Marge Sherwood “epistemic bad luck”. The existence of alternative hermeneutical resources needs to be addressed if those harmed by hermeneutical injustice are to be fully respected as epistemic agents with their own ways of knowing and understanding the world. In order for theorists and practitioners to avoid re-entrenching epistemic injustice, oppression, and marginalization, those harmed by injustice need to be

acknowledged as having an active role in and knowledge of their own beliefs, values, and experiences. Otherwise, they are treated as less than fully human agents.

Overcoming Epistemic Injustice

To combat testimonial injustice, Fricker advocates that (for those that are biased, that is), they engage in an open-minded, reflective (reasons-sensitive/ responsive), self-corrective epistemic stance. The purpose here is to try to correct the biases that one knows they embody. More formally, idealized interpersonal exchanges require a person to systematically adjust their credence in a person's testimony to accurately reflect whether they are hearing from someone whom they may be biased against or in favour of. On the other hand, hermeneutical injustices can only be tackled when Hearers are taught to embody a certain conceptual and reflexive openness and awareness, together with a deep sensitivity and insight which helps them realize that the speaker is struggling with "an objective difficulty and not a subjective failing" (Fricker169). In this way, affectively attuned knowers, and indeed, affective knowing for that matter, might then be equipped to move beyond knowing in terms of clearly delineated propositional knowledge claims and therefore be better placed to see epistemic injustice more clearly (Shotwell48).

Critiques of Fricker's work propose that modelling oneself according to the virtues embodied in the prototypical epistemic agent is highly problematic. One of the most pressing concerns hinges on the prevalence and proximity of exemplary epistemic agents. Naturally enough, epistemically just communities are more likely to have the preponderance of exemplars to emulate than those residing in epistemically unjust communities. Left to their own devices, this might, of course, in the long run actually end up reinforcing epistemic injustices instead of rooting them out. A related concern centers on how such exemplars are received, especially in hostile environments. Though this is an empirical question rather than a conceptual one, intuitively one might conclude that exemplars in such instances are more than likely to be wilfully ignored on account of the entrenched nature of the epistemic vices such as, haughtiness, intellectual superiority, and closed-mindedness that characterize people (bayardism) in such positions, and which invariably lead to the malfunctioning of established epistemic practices such as turntaking and assertion (Tanesini 102). On this view then, receptivity to corrective exemplars in epistemically unjust environments might be overstated. Be this as it may, these objections are hardly definitive. What they bring to the fore are questions about the worthiness and plausibility of virtue-focused exemplarist models since they arguably fail to be "properly action-guiding" (Kotzee et al. 29).

Evaluation and Conclusion

In contemporary society, epistemic injustice against women continues to manifest in complex and often subtle ways. Despite progress in gender equality, women still encounter forms of discrimination that undermine their credibility, limit their access to knowledge,

and hinder the recognition of their unique experiences. These injustices, as explored by this paper as highlighted by Miranda Fricker, fall into two primary categories: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Both types are intricately woven into social structures, cultural norms, and institutional practices, making them persistent challenges for women across various domains.

Testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker's credibility is unjustly diminished due to prejudice, which often happens to women in both personal and professional contexts. Although strides have been made toward gender equality, women's voices are still frequently undervalued, and their contributions are questioned or overlooked. In professional settings, for example, women's ideas might be dismissed or attributed less authority, leading to a phenomenon sometimes called "hepeating," where ideas voiced by women are ignored until a male colleague repeats them, gaining recognition. This effect is seen in various fields, from corporate boardrooms to academic conferences, where women struggle to be taken as seriously as their male counterparts. Even in traditionally female-dominated professions, such as nursing or social work, women can face epistemic challenges when working alongside men, who are sometimes perceived as more competent simply due to their gender. Testimonial injustice not only damages women's confidence but also deprives society of diverse perspectives and potential solutions to complex problems.

In addition to testimonial injustice, women still encounter hermeneutical injustice, which occurs when gaps in collective interpretive resources prevent certain experiences from being fully understood or recognized. Hermeneutical injustice arises because societal frameworks have historically been shaped by those in positions of power, often men, leading to a cultural landscape that sometimes lacks the vocabulary or frameworks to articulate women's unique experiences. For instance, terms such as "sexual harassment" and "emotional labor" were largely absent from mainstream discourse until recent decades. This lack of terminology limited women's ability to discuss and address pervasive issues, as the experiences lacked collective recognition. Though progress has been made in recognizing these concepts, there are still many areas where women's perspectives and experiences are marginalized or misunderstood. In the medical field, for example, conditions like endometriosis or chronic fatigue syndrome, which disproportionately affect women, are often under-researched and misunderstood, leading to misdiagnosis and inadequate care. The persistence of these gaps reflects a broader societal trend in which women's physical and emotional experiences are often devalued or dismissed.

The digital age has introduced new arenas for epistemic injustice, with social media and online forums simultaneously providing a platform for women's voices and exposing them to new forms of silencing. While the internet offers unprecedented opportunities for women to share their experiences and build solidarity, it also subjects them to online harassment and trolling, tactics used to discredit or silence them. This phenomenon can be

seen when women raise issues related to gender inequality, harassment, or discrimination, only to face intense backlash that undermines their credibility and discourages them from speaking out. Such online harassment serves as a form of testimonial injustice by attempting to delegitimize women's voices, casting doubt on their credibility, and in some cases, driving them away from public platforms altogether. This harassment has a chilling effect, discouraging women from participating in public discourse, especially in areas such as politics, science, and technology, where their voices are still underrepresented.

Workplace cultures often reinforce both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, shaping how women's knowledge and experiences are valued – or devalued. Despite anti-discrimination policies, implicit biases persist in many organizations, affecting women's ability to advance and be heard. In male-dominated fields such as technology, engineering, and finance, women frequently find their expertise questioned and must work harder to establish credibility. This often involves engaging in “impression management,” or taking on additional tasks to prove their competence. These dynamics place an extra burden on women and hinder their ability to engage fully in intellectual exchange, resulting in missed opportunities for personal and professional growth. Furthermore, the male-centered nature of many workplaces means that issues important to women, such as family leave policies, sexual harassment protections, and mental health support, are often sidelined, perpetuating a cycle of hermeneutical injustice.

Education systems can also perpetuate epistemic injustice, particularly when curricula overlook women's contributions and perspectives. In many fields, women's achievements are minimized or ignored, which subtly reinforces the idea that knowledge production is a predominantly male domain. Textbooks and syllabi may omit or gloss over female thinkers, scientists, and leaders, depriving young people of a diverse intellectual heritage. This invisibility can discourage young women from pursuing certain careers or academic fields, internalizing a belief that they do not belong in them. By shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge, educational institutions can perpetuate the epistemic exclusion of women and reinforce gendered stereotypes.

Contemporary expressions of epistemic injustice toward women reveal the persistence of gender biases in various spheres of life, despite advancements in gender equality. These injustices affect women's ability to fully participate as knowers, hindering not only their personal and professional growth but also the richness of collective knowledge. Addressing these issues requires a multi-faceted approach that involves not only policy changes and awareness campaigns but also a deeper cultural shift. Efforts to promote gender equality must go beyond simply providing women with opportunities; they must also work to dismantle the structures and assumptions that prevent women's voices from being heard and their experiences from being understood. By doing so, society can begin to rectify epistemic injustices and move closer to a truly inclusive understanding of knowledge.

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