

Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing. By MIRANDA FRICKER. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

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In this elegant and ground-breaking work, Fricker names the phenomenon of *epistemic injustice*, and distinguishes two central forms of it, with their two corresponding remedies. As the title conveys, Fricker is working in the newly fertile borderland between theories of value and of knowledge. We are social creatures—something that tends to be forgotten by traditional analytic epistemology. We are also knowers—something that tends to be forgotten by power-obsessed postmodern theorizing. Fricker steers a careful passage between the Scylla of the one and the Charybdis of the other. For epistemology, it turns out to matter that we are social creatures; for ethics, it turns out to matter that we are knowers.

The first form of injustice is “testimonial”: perhaps you say something, and you are not believed, because your hearer has a prejudice about people like you. The second form of injustice is “hermeneutical”: perhaps you can’t find the words, or even thoughts, to express what you are groping for, because there is a lacuna in the biased conceptual resources available to you—a structural prejudice in your conceptual framework. In both cases your hearers miss out on knowledge that you could give them; but Fricker thinks that a deeper damage—at once epistemological and moral—is done, in such circumstances, to you as a knowing subject.

Looking, first of all, at *testimonial injustice*: suppose a man dismisses a woman’s thoughts by saying, “Marge, there’s female intuition, and then there are facts.” This is what the well-meaning Herbert Greenleaf says to his daughter in Anthony Minghella’s screenplay of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In so doing, he writes Marge off as an informant, and incidentally writes off the one possible route to knowledge about the murder of his son. Marge suffers testimonial injustice: she suffers a credibility deficit because of her hearer’s prejudice about the social type to which she belongs. Testimonial injustice is thus, in its central case, a matter of credibility deficit, arising from prejudice about someone’s social identity. Fricker’s argument about the connections between credibility and social power is subtle and nuanced. She points out that a credibility excess is not always to someone’s advantage: imagine an overworked doctor, over-burdened by the unrealistic epistemic demands his patients place upon him. All the same, it is the deficits, rather than excesses, that are of special interest to her.

What is the harm of testimonial injustice? When you are not taken seriously in your capacity as a knower, you are not taken seriously in a fundamental human capacity. You are damaged in your standing as a knower, and as a human being. Fricker draws here on a concrete, social understanding of what it is to be a knower, according to which being counted as a source of knowledge matters just as much as whether your beliefs are true and justified. (Here she draws on, inter alia, the work of Edward Craig, Bernard Williams, and Linda Alcoff.) She argues that this primary harm can be understood as an aspect of objectification: when you are not treated as a knower, as an informant, as a speaker, you are not treated as fully human. (Here she draws on, inter alia, Martha Nussbaum and Catharine MacKinnon).

There are other harms too. Testimonial injustice can have bad effects on the person who suffers it—including epistemic effects and effects on who she is. Not being believed can prevent you from being a participant in the trustful conversation that “steadies the mind”: it can undermine your confidence in your own beliefs, and thus your knowledge. Marge ends up desperate, incoherent, saying both that she doesn’t know, and that she just knows. Not being believed can also literally affect who you are, because of its role in social construction. Marge counts as an intuitive, hysterical female—and eventually becomes the pathetic sort of

creature she has been counted as being. This then, ironically, can bring a sort of eleventh-hour epistemic justification for her father's initial dismissal, as she comes, at least partly, to conform to the stereotype he projected upon her. Fricker's discussion of power, stereotypes, and social construction is particularly interesting and sensitive, drawing on the substantial empirical literature about "stereotype threat" and its real-life consequences.

Turning now to *hermeneutical injustice*, consider the experience of Carmita Wood, who was asked, on her unemployment insurance form, the reasons for quitting her job after eight years. She thought about what her employer had been doing: he used to deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for papers, corner her, plant unwanted kisses on her when no-one was looking, jiggle his crotch while standing near her desk, so that she was driven to avoid him, apply (unsuccessfully) for a transfer, and eventually quit. She wrote: "personal." (She was refused insurance.) She couldn't find an adequate concept to understand her own experience, let alone describe it. This sort of lacuna in someone's conceptual resources can mean that however hard someone tries, they can't make their experiences understood, even to themselves. What was needed, in this case, was a conceptual revolution, filling the lacuna with an entirely new concept—sexual harassment. If you are a member of a group systematically disadvantaged by lacunae of this kind, you are on the receiving end of hermeneutical injustice—an injustice that is structural rather than perpetrated by an individual, but just as damaging.

What is the harm of hermeneutical injustice? In a sense, *all* parties are epistemologically damaged, when there is hermeneutical injustice—neither the harasser nor the harrassee, in the above example, have an adequate understanding of what is going on. But there is an asymmetry. The shared ignorance of all manifests the hermeneutical marginalization, not of all, but of only some. And the shared ignorance of all is in the interests, not of all, but of only some. As Fricker puts it, "Hermeneutical lacunas are like holes in the ozone—it's the people who live under them that get burned" (161). Carmita can't understand, or make intelligible to others, something it is very much in her interests to understand and make intelligible. And this asymmetry captures the primary harm, which Fricker calls "situated hermeneutical inequality."

There are other harms too: Carmita encountered illness, job loss, and threat of poverty as a result of this injustice. More subtly: pervasive hermeneutical injustice may sometimes cramp self-development. Here, by way of illustration, Fricker draws on Edmund White's eloquent autobiographical account of the gulf between his tentative apprehensions of his own adolescent sexuality and the crude stereotypes of "the Homosexual" projected by others upon him.

If these are the epistemic injustices, how are they remedied? In Fricker's view, the solution lies in *virtue*: in the particular virtues of testimonial justice and hermeneutical justice. She offers an interesting, genealogical, state-of-nature story about the point of such virtue in human social life, and she sees Aristotelian moral virtue as having a straightforward epistemological parallel. On an Aristotelian picture, the morally virtuous agent needs a finely honed, moral, perceptual capacity, which is non-inferential, uncodifiable, intrinsically motivating, and intrinsically reason-giving. According to Fricker, these features all apply to "testimonial sensibility" as well; and thus her argument also contributes to traditional debates about the epistemology of testimony. And there is more than mere analogy here, between ethics and epistemology. Part of being morally virtuous *is* to be epistemically virtuous: a receptive hearer, alert to the likely impact of prejudice and stereotype on one's credibility judgments, able to correct for this by focusing attention on positive features, creating a perceptual "gestalt switch" whereby, for example, an apparently (on first hearing) less credible woman politician will be heard as she really is. The epistemically virtuous agent cultivates in addition a *hermeneutical* sensibility, which aims to correct for whatever

hermeneutical injustice the agent may encounter: patiently waiting to hear someone out, giving credit, working with a default assumption that they may, despite appearances, be saying something in principle intelligible—if only there were the patience and conceptual resources to reveal it.

Fricker's illustrations of how the epistemological virtues might work are concretely spelled out and informed by a subtle, sympathetic intelligence. We should surely welcome her central idea that epistemological virtues are as necessary to moral virtue as are the more narrowly ethical ones. However, while full of admiration for Fricker's hopes and ambitions, I am left with a niggling worry. Is virtue enough? Are these virtues really remedies? Can the two forms of epistemic injustice be mended by the two corresponding epistemic virtues? I wish I could share Fricker's optimism, but I have my doubts.

First, it is surely an empirical question whether individuals can in fact manage to cultivate these epistemic virtues; and an empirical question whether, if cultivated, they would correct for epistemic injustice. I hope she is right. But, much as I respect Aristotle, it is not obvious he is an authority on these empirical questions. It is a refreshing aspect of Fricker's work that she exhibits many of the very virtues she talks about: she is so very open to every source of enlightenment—historical, philosophical, literary, and empirical. She writes illuminatingly of the sociological data about how stereotypes, and their threat, help create epistemic injustice. It would be good to provide some analogous empirical data about the remedies. Aristotle left the relevant perceptual capacity mostly up to the luck of a good education. Well, we hardly have that! So there is a real question about whether, and to what extent, well-meaning individual efforts can remedy the problem and correct for the bad education we start out with.

This connects with my second concern, which is about the significance of abstract structures. On Fricker's account, individuals do testimonial injustice, whereas hermeneutical injustice is structural. Individual hearers fail to give credibility where it is due; abstract structures have lacunas that render our lived experience unintelligible. She offers us an *individual* remedy—epistemic virtue—in response to individual and structural vice. But the reverse solution may have more plausibility: namely, a *structural* remedy, in response to individual and structural vice.

Note first that the domain of the structural may extend further than so far observed: in particular, there might be a structural aspect to testimonial injustice. Herbert Greenleaf is not simply prejudiced: his prejudice is given a particular shape by the concept “women's intuition.” The ready availability of this stereotype is not his own doing (as Fricker indeed allows), though his refusal to give Marge credit is. The point is, the hermeneutical resources include damaging *presences*, as well as damaging *absences*, and these may sometimes be implicated in testimonial injustice. Seen this way, the presence of stereotypes is just a different side of the structural problem of hermeneutical injustice.

These wide-ranging, structural factors raise suspicions about the likely effectiveness of individual reform, even if that reform involves the development of epistemic-moral virtue. If individual vice is the problem, as with testimonial injustice, this does not mean the inculcation of individual virtue is the best solution. Perhaps it would be slow, or ineffective. Perhaps (who knows?) it may be subject to a backfiring phenomenon, comparable to the paradox of hedonism: if you aim too hard for it, you won't get it. Perhaps it could generate injustice of its own, if it sometimes demotes an apparently more credible speaker, who really *is* the more credible. A structural solution may be more promising. An example: think how “testimonial injustice” toward girls in school exams has sometimes been solved, not by the individual remedy of inculcating virtue in examiners, but by the structural remedy of making exams anonymous. Once the problem is at least partly remedied, by whatever means, this in itself may help undermine the stereotypes that inform individual vice. In this way, structural remedy might pave the way for individual virtue.

What of the structural problem of hermeneutical injustice? Here it is even harder to see how the inculcation of individual epistemic virtue will solve the difficulty, when what is needed is, apparently, a conceptual revolution. Again, though, a structural remedy has at least sometimes been effective. For pioneer feminists, it was something structural that caused scales to fall from eyes: altering the structure of women's environment to create consciousness-raising groups, pooling common experiences about, for example, harassment; brain-storming a name to match the common experience; creating the social—and let's not forget, legal—momentum to make the name stick, and to make actionable the behavior denoted by the name. How that particular hole in the conceptual ozone layer was filled is a familiar and still inspiring story, whose beginning Fricker tells with energy, but whose finale she does not fully spell out. Suppose, instead, it had all been left to well-meaning attempts at individual epistemic virtue? It hardly bears thinking about.

On a final, and more sanguine note, let me conclude with a happy irony. There is one individual effort, at least, that has promise of effecting a small conceptual revolution and filling a lacuna in our shared conceptual resources, and that is Fricker's book itself. The book is not only a wonderful, ambitious attempt to bring ethics and epistemology together in a way that has rarely been done before, it is also a beautiful, and powerful, attempt to name something that matters. What progress, to be able to name the enemy, be it sexual harassment or epistemic injustice! The concepts Fricker sets out for us, and illustrates so eloquently, capture something we partly, inchoately, knew already: yes, testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice are instantly recognizable. But, as Shakespeare describes, Fricker has managed to give to these inchoate, airy nothings "a local habitation, and a name." And knowing your enemy by name is half the battle.

NOTES

1. The screenplay is based on Highsmith 2000; first discussed by Fricker, 9, and is used as a central example thereafter.
2. Fricker's discussion of this example is at 149-56, quoting Brownmiller 1990, 280-81.
3. White 1983, discussed by Fricker, 163-67.

REFERENCES

- Brownmiller, Susan. 1990. *In our time: Memoir of a revolution*. New York: Dial Press.
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