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Assymmetric Epistemic Labor as Hermeneutical Injustice

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ASSYMETRIC EPISTEMIC LABOR AS HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

by

MARGARET OWENS

Under the Direction of Andrew Altman, PhD

ABSTRACT

The semantic gaps of hermeneutical injustice can be and are routinely overcome. The effort involved in responding to hermeneutical injustice, though, should be included in a taxonomy of epistemic injustice. Those who overcome hermeneutical injustice are deprived non-arbitrarily of access to the epistemic labor of others, and so their choices about where to direct their epistemic labors are unjustly limited.

INDEX WORDS: Epistemic Injustice, Epistemic Labor, Marginalization, Hermeneutical Injustice, Epistemic Virtues, Epistemic Humility

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1 INTRODUCTION

In her 2007 book *Epistemic Injustice*, Miranda Fricker develops an account of two kinds of epistemic injustice. Her focus is on unjustifiable systemic disadvantages from which members of oppressed groups suffer when they 1) seek to offer testimony to others about what they know and 2) to interpret their own social position and life experience. She calls the unjust burdens of interpreting one's position and experience "hermeneutical injustice." Despite the intuitive appeal of her account of such injustice, Fricker has been criticized for falsely assuming a monolithic view of the interpretive resources available in a society. In this thesis, I rebut such criticisms by arguing that they overlook the extent to which hermeneutical injustice is a matter of the distribution of epistemic labor. By epistemic labor, I mean very generally the effort exerted in forming, questioning, and revising beliefs and in seeking resources to support this process. Fricker's account neglects to explicitly identify this aspect of hermeneutical injustice, but, as I will argue, including the special burden carried by marginalized groups in our understanding of hermeneutical injustice makes sense of this injustice in a way that is compatible with epistemic agency and even epistemic advantages of the oppressed.

José Medina offers a pluralized analysis of hermeneutical resources available to the oppressed which is sensitive to the variety and dynamicity of the interpretations available within marginalized communities. While his analysis accurately captures certain features of the dynamic reality of social epistemic interaction, I argue that Medina's account fails to recognize the injustice of the special burden members of marginalized groups confront in making sense of their social experiences. What he identifies as epistemic virtues (often developed by the oppressed) are often domain-specific, and thus the sense-making effort exerted by the oppressed

is better described as epistemic labor made necessary by the hermeneutical marginalization of one's group than as the performance of epistemic virtues.

In what follows, I begin in section II by outlining the types of epistemic injustices Miranda Fricker identifies. In section III I turn to a critic of her work in order to show that the development of non-dominant or resistant hermeneutical resources involves significant work, and in section IV I argue that this work in fact is a component of hermeneutical injustice. In section VI I argue that Medina's analysis of the epistemic virtues developed in oppressive contexts does not register this type of harm. I reject Medina's claim that epistemic advantages originate from virtues commonly found among the oppressed, and argue instead that oppression often makes it the case that oppressed subjects' epistemic needs align with true beliefs about their situation, yet these beliefs are made less accessible to those who would (most) benefit from them by hermeneutical marginalization. Finally, in section VIII I argue that Medina's addition to (or expansion of) Fricker's hermeneutical sensitivity should be distinguished as a second type of responsibility given agents' quotidian interests in avoiding inordinate epistemic labor and in holding beliefs that are simply accurate enough to serve their needs.

2 FRICKER'S INJUSTICES

Miranda Fricker distinguishes two kinds of epistemic injustice: testimonial and hermeneutical. Both kinds operate according to *identity power*, which Fricker defines as "a form of social power which is directly dependent upon shared social-imaginative conceptions of the social identities of those implicated in the particular operation of power." (2007: 4) Thus, both forms of injustice are part of the broader category of identity-based social injustice. Testimonial injustice involves diminished credibility accorded to a person's testimony in light of their (perceived) social type. Fricker's paradigmatic example of this form of injustice is the police's

disbelief of a black person's word. Testimonial injustice is rooted in the prejudice of a hearer and perpetrated by that hearer. By contrast, hermeneutical injustice is not committed by some agent. Fricker writes that "no agent *perpetrates* hermeneutical injustice—it is a purely structural notion," (2007:159) defined as "the injustice of having some significant area of one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to hermeneutical marginalization." (2007:158) Hermeneutical marginalization refers to an oppressed group's exclusion from the prominent meaning-making roles of a society such as careers in law, journalism, and academia. A paradigmatic case of hermeneutical injustice is a person's confusion about their own queer sexuality or gender identity in circumstances that allow no exposure or access to others with comparable identities or to other sources of information such as literature.¹

Fricker acknowledges that instances of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are possible outside of more general systems of oppression but focuses on the systemic variety. She notes that hermeneutical injustice is closely connected to the testimonial variety, writing that the fact "that hermeneutical injustice most typically manifests itself in the speaker struggling to make herself intelligible in a testimonial exchange raises a grim possibility: that hermeneutical injustice might often be compounded by testimonial injustice." (2007: 159) Critics have taken issue with Fricker's discussion of hermeneutical injustice on the grounds that it presupposes some single, coherent system of shared ideas available to the members of a given society for making sense of their experiences in which hermeneutical resources either circulate or do not. In reality, her critics point out, there is no such single, coherent system. I now turn to a prominent critic who argues along these lines.

¹ Exposure to models with like identities that is heavily mediated by oppressive hermeneutical resources can also contribute to hermeneutical injustice, though a straightforward lack of exposure to similar others more straightforwardly contributes to an unjust hermeneutical lacuna.

3 A CRITIQUE OF FRICKER'S ACCOUNT OF THE COLLECTIVE HERMENEUTICAL RESOURCE

Rebecca Mason identifies in Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice a failure to distinguish various social knowledge-sharing groups. While Fricker points out that hermeneutical injustice depends on "*shared* social-imaginative conceptions of the social identities of those implicated in the particular operation of power," (2007: 4 emphasis added) Mason argues that Fricker does not pay sufficient attention to the multiplicity of communities which internally share social-imaginative conceptions. Making use of Charles Mills' account of the ignorance of dominant groups to the conditions of the groups they oppress, Mason argues that the conflation of hermeneutical resources of dominant and marginalized/oppressed groups into those of a single universal social discourse undervalues the hermeneutical resources available to members of oppressed groups. Mason writes, "Fricker problematically identifies 'collective' hermeneutical resources with that which is articulated and taken up in dominant discourses" (2011: 298) and holds that this is problematic in that it "pays insufficient attention to non-dominant hermeneutical resources to which members of marginalized groups have access in order to render their social experiences communicatively intelligible." (2011: 298) Because, according to Mason, members of marginalized groups are in fact capable (even uniquely capable) of understanding and testifying to their experiences, the injustice committed when an experience of oppression is not recognized by the dominant social discourse is not a structural phenomena which results in the inability of members of the marginalized groups to make sense of their experiences of marginalization in a way that can be communicated to others.

Mason highlights an example given by Fricker of a case of hermeneutical injustice which she takes to show that Fricker does not attribute proper epistemic agency to marginalized

subjects who “have non-dominant interpretive resources from which they can draw to understand and describe their experiences despite absences or distortions that exist in so-called collective hermeneutical resources.” (2011: 295) In this case, a woman, Carmita Wood, experienced repeated sexual harassment before it was so named. Wood eventually quit her job because of the harassment and was denied unemployment insurance. In response to the denial, Wood sought out feminist activists who both assisted her in legal recourse for the denial of unemployment insurance and held a conference during which women shared their experiences of sexual harassment and together gave it this name. Mason denies that Wood’s experience was rendered unintelligible (a component of hermeneutical injustice according to Fricker), writing that Wood’s responses to the insurance claim denial “were not the actions of a woman mystified by her experiences of a yet-to-be-named phenomenon.” (2011: 297)

Mason concludes, *pace* Fricker, that hermeneutical injustice can not be a purely structural phenomenon that is not perpetrated by any specific person or persons. Rather, we see case after case of hermeneutical resources forged within oppressed groups which, in spite of being well-developed and readily communicated, are resisted by specific members of mainstream society. Mason makes the point that for Wood, “rather than functioning as ‘a life-changing flash of enlightenment,’ naming [sexual harassment] created a hermeneutical environment conducive to organized social activism against one manifestation of sexism” (2011: 298). Mason adds, “the act of naming in which Wood participated incited social change.” (2011: 298) So Mason shows us that while Wood surely gained a deeper understanding of the universality of sexual harassment through talking to women about their similar experiences, the primary injustice she suffered came from the failure by those in positions of power to recognize the experiences she attempted to communicate. Her experience was not ultimately unintelligible. Mason proposes

that “an unknowing to which members of dominant groups are subject by virtue of their ethically bad knowledge practices” (2011: 295) better characterizes what Fricker describes as a hermeneutical gap.

In sum, Mason holds that members of oppressed groups are positioned to more readily understand their oppression than are members of dominant groups. Gaps in the hermeneutical resources of the dominant social sphere are not to be identified with gaps in the resources of oppressed groups. Fricker’s paradigm example of hermeneutical injustice reveals that the victim of still-unnamed sexual harassment in fact had a keen understanding of her experience and its connection to her broader oppression and so did not suffer under the interpretive gap Fricker takes as the core problem of hermeneutical injustice. According to Mason, by failing to recognize that understanding, Fricker contributes to the injustice suffered by the oppressed. That is, Mason takes issue with “Fricker’s claim that a ‘gap’ in collective hermeneutical resources prevents marginalized subjects from understanding their own experiences” (2011: 295) on the grounds that it is both inaccurate and ethically irresponsible. In the following section I argue that while it is true that the oppressed can and do develop hermeneutical resources appropriate to their experiences, hermeneutical injustice makes it the case that access to these resources involves work that would not be necessary absent hermeneutical marginalization.

4 IN DEFENSE OF A MONOLITHIC SOCIAL MILIEU (TWO KINDS OF HARMS)

In this section I argue that hermeneutical injustice is not simply a straightforward problem of lacking interpretive resources (as much of Fricker’s language suggests). It is also a problem of the burden confronted by the oppressed of recreating interpretive resources that others in their group have already created but have been unable to effectively circulate

throughout the group, and a problem of the communication of the relevant experiences to others requiring inordinate effort. I argue that Mason mistakenly concludes that Wood's demonstration of some understanding of the injustice done to her implies the absence of hermeneutical injustice. In order to demonstrate that hermeneutical injustice is operative even when oppressed subjects have well-developed hermeneutical resources, I will distinguish two kinds of wrongful harms which hermeneutical injustice may cause. I do not mean this distinction to be exhaustive of the sorts of harms constitutive of or caused by hermeneutical injustice. Nor do I claim to identify an empirically clean distinction. Rather, the distinction is meant to clarify some ways in which lucidity, epistemic advantages, and hermeneutical injustices can co-occur.

First, hermeneutical injustice inflicts wrongful harm insofar as the truth about some social phenomenon is obscured or rendered unintelligible. Second, hermeneutical injustice inflicts wrongful harm insofar as members of marginalized groups must exert inordinate effort in order to benefit from their epistemic community. Mason takes Fricker to be claiming that the first sort of harm affected Carmita Wood before sexual harassment was so named. When a straightforward gap exists in the interpretive resources of a community, those with an interest in the relevant understanding experience a hermeneutical injustice. Mason is right to point out that Carmita Wood did not suffer this sort of injustice because she did not suffer under a total hermeneutical lacuna. We can expect hermeneutical injustices of this sort to most intensely affect those who have little to no exposure to others with similar experiences and/or who have had few similar experiences themselves.

Although Fricker sometimes writes as though understanding one's social experience is a binary on/off property, her examples of hermeneutical injustice suggest that a complete lack of understanding is not all that she intends hermeneutical injustice to reference. It is clear that

Carmita Wood had some understanding of her experience. Portions of her response to the experience demonstrate her understanding. (Seeking feminist lawyers, requesting a transfer, etc.) But rather than comparing Carmita Wood's behaviors to what we would expect of someone who completely lacked understanding of her situation, we might compare her behaviors and communicative efforts to what we would expect if the "background condition of hermeneutical injustice" (2007:159) were absent. If Wood experienced unwanted sexual advances from her supervisor within a culture that readily recognized these actions as worthy of punishment and part of a more general pattern of quotidian oppression, we can imagine that Wood may not have initially taken it upon herself to try to avoid the harassment. She might have quickly reported to her supervisor if she had reason to believe her report would be believed and addressed, and may not have developed physical symptoms of stress as she attempted to avoid interactions with her harasser. While Wood had some understanding of her experience, a well-developed comprehension of sexual harassment as common, undeserved, and connected to wider injustices was not readily available to her or to those whose understanding of her experience might have contributed to a just response.

When members of a group with similar social experiences are excluded from the meaning-making roles of their society (however informal these roles may be), the resources they discover or invent as they meet their epistemic needs often constitute a re-creation of hermeneutical resources which, absent hermeneutical marginalization, would be (more) readily available. The hermeneutically marginalized, in order to simply meet their communicative needs and to achieve a level of understanding which could ease the cognitive discomfort that comes from what Mills has described as "the phenomenological experience of the disjuncture between official (white) reality and actual (nonwhite) experience," (1997:109) often must re-invent the

conceptual wheel from their pre-theoretic experiences. As Mason's example of the well-developed hermeneutical resources of racialized groups illustrates, it is sometimes possible for the oppressed to separate from the dominant group and to create and circulate interpretive resources among themselves. By limiting their epistemic community to exclude their oppressors, the oppressed may create an environment in which they can have (relatively easier) access to the benefits of their epistemic community.² The labor of theorizing some sort of experience can be eased when those with similar experiences have already developed and circulated relevant interpretive heuristics.

The conference which named sexual harassment *developed* the participating women's ability to quickly communicate about an experience, but it is not true, as Mason makes clear, that "the lexical gap that was later filled in with the name *sexual harassment* rendered women's experience of it confused and inarticulate." (2011: 297) While Mason's identification of marginalized hermeneutical resources is an important contribution to and critique of Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice, Mason overlooks the fact that marginalized groups interact with their oppressors and do not reap the full epistemic benefits of their communities even as they work to overcome their epistemic marginalization. It is notable that Mason relies particularly on examples of the epistemic resources of members of marginalized racial groups while Fricker focuses more on the experiences of women and LGBTQ+ people. Although the pattern is nuanced, it is broadly true that women are dispersed throughout the population, while marginalized racial groups maintain a higher degree of separation from the dominant racial group. While people of color clearly do interact with whites, women are the prototypical

² I do not claim that oppressed groups need not interact with their oppressors, but that they are in different ways able to separate, and to the extent that they can create their own truly separate social epistemic community they do not experience or are more readily able to overcome hermeneutical injustice.

example of a group dispersed among their oppressors. Other examples of dispersal are marginalized genders, sexual minorities, and people with certain disabilities or chronic illnesses, and for these groups, dispersal is further compounded by their being fewer in number than women. To the extent that an oppressed group is excluded from the (dominant) discourse within their own society, they will find hermeneutical resources appropriate to their experiences lacking or obscured, and so are deprived of the full benefits of access to others' epistemic labor.

Mason draws attention to the existence of well-developed hermeneutical resources among the marginalized, but their development is not automatic, and access to resources normally requires communication among the marginalized. This communication involves less work wherever the oppressed interact with other members of their oppressed group in daily life³. As Mills points out, members of oppressed groups have an epistemic advantage in the sense of dissonance between received white theory and actual non-white experience, and he notes that this dissonance “*generates* an alternative moral and political perception of social reality.” (1997: 109, emphasis added) While an alternative perception is to some degree available to all members of oppressed groups, since it is founded in individual experience, the collective alternative hermeneutical resources that arise from reflection on these individual perceptions are not given. Rather, they are generated through hard-fought resistance to dominant hermeneutical resources and entrenched hermeneutical lacunae, and this resistance is made more burdensome by members of an oppressed group's lack of contact with similar others.

At times, Fricker seems to suggest that her conception of hermeneutical injustice includes the varied epistemic burdens it creates for the oppressed. She notes the importance of courage in full epistemic development, and writes that “when you find yourself in a situation in which you

³ This is of course complicated by internalized oppressive ideology, but Mills points out that the epistemic advantage of a peculiar phenomenology remains even among the actively ignorant.

seem to be the only one to feel the dissonance between received understanding and your own intimated sense of a given experience, it tends to knock your faith in your own ability to make sense of the world, or at least the relevant region of the world.” (2007: 163) Fricker notes that it is nonetheless the case that we can “put a number of people together who have felt a certain dissonance about an area of social experience... and... the sense of dissonance can increase and become critically emboldened.” (2007: 168) While Mason is right to note that the oppressed often have access to hermeneutical resources of their own, she does not adequately deal with the asymmetric epistemic burdens carried by the oppressed, whose received interpretive heuristics diverge significantly from their phenomenology, more starkly than for those whose experiences are better represented by dominant hermeneutical resources. The hermeneutical resources most readily available, especially to those dispersed among their oppressors, are typically those that reflect the ideas of those who hold power within society. The resistant resources, which are not represented in dominant popular media, public discourse, law, etc. are generally less accessible.

In her discussion of the virtue of testimonial justice, Fricker introduces a distinction between “*routine* discursive moves in a moral discourse and *exceptional*, more imaginative moves in which existing resources are used in an innovative way that stands as a progressive move in moral consciousness.” (2007: 104) Each individual or group who creates resistant hermeneutical resources will, because of the ubiquitous dominant discourse, need to make exceptional discursive moves to gain an accurate understanding of their situation. The loss of epistemic confidence that results from making repeated exceptional moves will vary according to that person’s discourse among others with similar experiences⁴. Dispersal of the oppressed among their oppressors can thus function to diminish epistemic confidence and make it more

⁴ It will also depend on the personality and body of similar experiences within one’s own life, as well as the degree to which the exceptional discursive moves challenge nearby beliefs.

difficult for members of oppressed groups to develop their individual understandings of their peculiar phenomenology.

There is textual evidence that Fricker factors these effects of dispersal into her account of hermeneutical injustice. She gives an example of a young boy growing up and developing an understanding of his sexuality, writing “as he grows up, he has to contend with various powerful bogeyman constructions of The Homosexual. None of them fits, but these collective understandings are so powerful, and the personal experiential promise of an alternative understanding so lonely and inarticulate.” (2007: 165) Further, she notes that there are typically norms of social epistemic interaction counteracting such dispersal: “Even in the most severely oppressive societies, members of the most subordinated groups will rely on and cooperate epistemically *with each other*, and this will remain so even if they have internalized the oppressive ideology to a significant degree.” (2007: 131) Thus, in spite of her occasional binary language about understanding or misunderstanding, we can best make sense of Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice as positing a spectrum of intensity from the most severe forms, involving complete isolation with access only to one’s own individual pre-theoretic experiences to less severe forms, involving hermeneutical resources shared to various degrees across an oppressed group but unintelligible or unfamiliar to one’s oppressors or to those who have limited contact with similar others.

Fricker writes that hermeneutical injustice renders an experience “inadequately conceptualized and so ill-understood, perhaps even by the subjects themselves” (2007:6) While Mason interprets her to suggest that the relevant experience is unintelligible including to one’s self, I understand Fricker to mean that an experience is rendered unintelligible only in its more intense forms even to the subject. I now turn to Medina’s analysis of epistemic virtues and argue

that the ostensibly virtuous actions he identifies lack key features of epistemic virtues but are similar to the sort of resistant epistemic labor Mason points us toward among the oppressed, which I have argued is a component of hermeneutical injustice.

5 MEDINA'S EPISTEMIC VIRTUES

Medina introduces his discussion of epistemic virtues and vices by noting that “epistemic advantages and disadvantages, fortunately, do not correlate perfectly with non-epistemic forms of privilege and oppression.” (2013:28-9) He draws attention to some epistemic advantages of the oppressed and epistemic disadvantages of oppressors, and identifies three epistemic virtues that are often demonstrated by the oppressed but rare among oppressors: epistemic humility, intellectual curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness. He argues that we should not give a “prima facie presumption of epistemic superiority” (2013:45) to specific perspectives of oppressed subjects, but that distinctive experiences unique to the oppressed can affect the epistemic character of subjects such that they are able to develop a subversive lucidity about oppression. In the following sections I argue against the proposal that lucidity about oppression is evidence of epistemic virtues’ prevalence among the oppressed. The argument hinges on the domain-specificity of apparent epistemic virtues, and since, for better or worse, attitudes about one’s intellectual abilities and limitations are often relatively global, I will focus here on Medina’s analysis of intellectual curiosity/diligence and open-mindedness.

Intellectual curiosity/diligence, according to Medina, includes “answering cognitive calls to find out, to face epistemic challenges head-on, to meet cognitive demands, etc.” (2013:51) This virtue involves the motivation to acknowledge one’s epistemic limits and to persevere in the actions required to overcome them. Medina describes open-mindedness as “the epistemic feat of maintaining active in [one’s mind] two cognitive perspectives simultaneously as [one performs]

various tasks.” (2013:44) Epistemic open-mindedness, he argues, is also found disproportionately often among the oppressed, since “oppressed subjects tend to feel the need of being more attentive to the perspectives of others. They have no option but to acknowledge, respect, and (to some extent) inhabit alternative perspectives, in particular the perspective of the dominant other(s).” (2013: 44) Just as Medina’s open-mindedness is something the oppressed are more or less forced into exhibiting, Medina explains that intellectual curiosity/diligence is prevalent among the oppressed as a result of their peculiar needs. He writes, “Oppressed subjects frequently find themselves forced to acquire deep familiarity with certain domains, developing forms of expertise that no one else has.” (2013:44) While the virtue-based explanation of epistemic advantages possessed by the oppressed is compelling, I maintain that the epistemic labor occasioned by hermeneutical injustice provides a simpler and more accurate explanation of those advantages which simultaneously respects the burdensome nature of hermeneutical marginalization.

6 APPARENT EPISTEMIC VIRTUES AS EPISTEMIC LABOR

While it is true that oppression necessitates curiosity, diligence, and open-mindedness about certain epistemic affairs, it is not clear that the virtues of epistemic curiosity/diligence and open-mindedness are evidenced by (even compelling and well-developed) perspectives about oppression. As I have argued above, hermeneutical marginalization makes it the case that accessing, forming, and circulating hermeneutical resources are burdensome tasks. Achieving lucidity about oppression, then, often requires epistemic labor that may appear (and may be) virtuous as the oppressed acquire the interpretive resources which are in their interests yet obscured by hermeneutical injustice. That the oppressed on average put in much effort to form, consider, and circulate certain beliefs, though, even if these beliefs turn out to be true, is a

necessary but not sufficient condition for epistemically virtuous activity. We should expect those who possess the virtue of open-mindedness, for example, to examine potential challenges or alternatives to many of their beliefs, or for the epistemically curious and diligent to persevere in discovering truths generally, but as Medina points out, “having one kind of multiplicitous or kaleidoscopic consciousness does not guarantee lucidity with respect to other forms of oppression.” (2013:202) Even racist women, classist queers, and sexist people of color may possess non-trivial domain-specific phenomenological and reflective epistemic advantages about their own oppression without a general disposition toward open-mindedness, epistemic curiosity/diligence, or other intellectual virtues.

Though complicated by intersectionality, the interests of the oppressed more often are in truths about the relevant social experience than are the interests of the oppressors, who may benefit from the circulation of false beliefs. Meeting one’s epistemic needs will on average produce truth more often when one’s interests align with truth. Epistemic virtues can aid in this process but are not necessary for there to be a higher probability of accuracy among the perspectives of the oppressed. Of course, we may also find that the oppressed are more likely to develop actual epistemic virtues, but these are not necessary for the domain-specific epistemic advantages Medina claims they reveal. Evidence of epistemically virtuous activity is more clearly demonstrated by resistant perspectives on oppression held by those who do not experience the type of oppression in question than by resistant perspectives held by the relevantly oppressed.

7 MEDINA’S HERMENEUTICAL SENSITIVITY

For Fricker, the virtue of hermeneutical justice “is an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tries to render something

communicatively intelligible is due... to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources.” (2007: 169) It therefore applies when one has already become (in some way) aware of the relevant type(s) of oppression. She cautions, though, that “hermeneutical marginalization is first and foremost the product of unequal relations of social power more generally, and as such is not the sort of thing that could itself be eradicated by what we do as virtuous hearers alone.” (2007:174) Fricker’s virtue of hermeneutical justice functions much like a domain-specific epistemic humility.

Medina rejects Fricker’s account of hermeneutical injustice as fundamentally a structural injustice which is not perpetrated by agents and argues that “hermeneutically sensitive and alert interlocutors can contribute to bring about hermeneutical justice.” (2013:113) He holds that agents resist new hermeneutical resources but could do much to avoid the reinforcement of hermeneutical injustice, and so argues for an expanded responsibility of hearers with respect to hermeneutical injustice. Medina writes, “for as long as we remain entrenched in dynamics that block new forms of understanding and foster communicative dysfunctions, we are contributing to hermeneutical marginalization and, if that marginalization is based on identity prejudices and correlated with disparities in identity power, we are *perpetrating* a hermeneutical injustice.” (2013:111) For Medina, resisting hermeneutical injustice and refraining from reinforcing it require a more robust virtue of hermeneutical sensitivity than Fricker proposes. He argues that the responsibility for perpetrating hermeneutical injustices corresponds to one’s social roles, with academics and journalists carrying relatively more responsibility than parents and teachers, who are still more responsible than those who do not participate significantly in the epistemic development of others. Medina calls for all subjects, though, to become “hermeneutically open,” (2013:114) which means “being alert and sensitive to eccentric voices and styles as well as to

nonstandard meanings and interpretative perspectives.” (2013:114) The openness Medina calls for is not domain-specific and does not apply only where some form of oppression is identified as relevant.

In what follows, I argue that Medina’s expanded hermeneutical sensitivity is not so much an expansion of Fricker’s hermeneutical sensitivity as a distinct obligation of epistemic humility. In distinguishing the domain-specific hermeneutical sensitivity Fricker calls for from Medina’s more global and eternally open sensitivity, I acknowledge the interest agents may have in achieving rough social understandings which allow for rest from epistemic labor and some ways in which hermeneutical injustice, even as it is successfully resisted, limits the choices of oppressed agents.

8 MEDINA’S HERMENEUTICAL SENSITIVITY AS EPISTEMIC HUMILITY

I wholeheartedly agree with Medina’s call for an ever-open sensitivity to the possibility of new experiences and new interpretations of apparently familiar experiences, but I maintain that this global sensitivity is distinct from a hermeneutical sensitivity which responds to identified forms of oppression, in that it functions more like a truly global or general epistemic humility than does Fricker’s domain-specific response.

Medina rightfully points out that dominant social understandings can be rough and inaccurate. He compares the understandings queer people often have of their sexuality to those which straight people, who are not expected to deny, repress, and question their attractions develop. The former tend to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of sexuality than the latter. In presenting the epistemic benefits of being queer in a heteronormative society, though, Medina fails to note the privilege of having relatively easy access to a simple and easily communicated explanation for one’s experiences, even if it does not quite fit all the nuances of one’s

phenomenology. The dominant in this way enjoy the right to choose to pursue a more developed understanding of some experience simply for the epistemic benefits of the pursuit, or to avoid such a pursuit in favor of rest from epistemic labor or directing one's efforts elsewhere. There is significant privilege in the freedom to choose where to focus one's epistemic labors which hermeneutical marginalization limits for the oppressed by both making it the case that only meta-lucid interpretations will be accurate enough to meet (some of) their epistemic needs, and by vitiating the circulation of resistant perspectives so that shared experiences might be more readily, if roughly, understood by those who would find them helpful.

Medina is right to point out that the interpretive resources of any group are inherently inadequate for providing a fully nuanced understanding of some social experience and that understanding better describes a goal toward which hermeneutical resources point than a description of what they provide. In praising the meta-lucidity of resistant interpretive resources, though, Medina overlooks the interest agents may have in resting from the epistemic labor involved in working toward understanding. A concept like "gay," in spite of its inability to capture much about a person's experiences of attraction and love, can be helpful for those who wish to simply introduce their partner to others as a romantic partner of the same gender and to end the theorizing about gender and sexuality at that. Those who employ such rough concepts are nonetheless rightfully called to recognize that the concepts they use are simply tools for communicating about and achieving some understanding of one's experiences. Epistemic humility, that is, is appropriate for all hermeneutical resources.

Fricker's domain-specific epistemic humility, though, which requires a targeted epistemic humility when one has recognized that oppression may make a person or group's ability to theorize and communicate about their experience more burdensome, can not be expanded to the

virtue of hermeneutical sensitivity that Medina calls for. Our obligations toward identified systems of oppression are distinct from our obligations toward social concepts generally. If the domain-specific humility Fricker calls for is simply a part of an obligation we have toward all hermeneutical resources, it is difficult to make sense of the difference between, for example, a call for white subjects to listen carefully to perspectives on racialized experience from people of color, and a call for openness toward some new interpretation about racialized reality which paints white subjects as the ultimate victims of racism. The latter, though *prima facie* untenable, and easily considered a waste of epistemic labor, is not ruled out by Medina's call for an ever-open sensitivity toward the possibilities of new interpretations. We can more readily make sense of a blameless choice to pause in the exercise of a global epistemic humility than a blameless choice to pause from the exercise of epistemic humility toward testimony about experiences of oppression from those whose testimony about oppression is supported by empirical and historical evidence of such oppression.

I worry that Medina's hermeneutical openness can do very little to shift the burden of epistemic labor from oppressed subjects and risks attributing disproportionate credit to dominant subjects who respond well to the testimony of marginalized subjects. The phenomenon of white ignorance becoming gradually less suited to whites' experiences demonstrates the reduction of epistemic privilege through structural changes which require more epistemic labor from whites, but it is not clear that dominant subjects can take much credit for this epistemic achievement.

Medina writes,

“Given the new social and cultural conditions of today, it is increasingly hard for whiteness to remain invisible... Many subjects who were recruited to arrogant white perception in subtle ways during their upbringing and early socialization find many opportunities throughout their lives to grow uncomfortable with this racial way of seeing and to develop a critical distance with it. More and more subjects find it difficult to inhabit the white gaze as a matter of course- no questions

asked, no worry felt. Farewell to an invisible and uninterrogated white common sense.”
(2013:217)

As white subjects’ epistemic needs have shifted, their epistemic behavior has adjusted. Some, of course, may work harder to maintain an active ignorance, while others respond by questioning the racialized narratives with which they were raised and listening to the testimony of people of color. Both responses require epistemic labor. The latter response, though, is better described as a communicative achievement by people of color (perhaps supported by the virtue of testimonial sensitivity) than a demonstration of hermeneutical sensitivity by whites.

Filming and sharing interactions with the police, for example, is a means of resisting hermeneutical injustice, but whites who have been unfamiliar with police violence and mistreatment of people of color yet begin to accept the reality of racism when exposed to such testimony have simply avoided discounting testimony about racism because it is made by people of color, and so have simply not perpetrated testimonial injustice. Dominant subjects do not universally resist novel or unfamiliar understandings of social phenomena, and a blanket suspicion of the novel does not constitute an injustice.

Medina rightly calls us to recognize that even our resistant hermeneutical resources are heuristics and never perfectly accurate truths, given the dynamic and ever-changing nature of the social experiences hermeneutical resources address, but the imperfect heuristics to which this humility is rightfully applied may be more or less accurate, and so exceptional discursive moves of different intensities may be demanded by the epistemic needs of different subjects.

9 CONCLUSION

I have argued that hermeneutical injustice is best understood as including the inordinate effort required by oppressed subjects to meet their epistemic needs. Hermeneutical

marginalization does not prevent subjects from making sense of their experiences, but it makes it the case that understanding and communicating about those experiences involves more work than would be necessary if those with similar experiences were accorded full participation in the mainstream epistemic community. While some may develop epistemic virtues as they do this work, epistemic virtues are not necessary to accord a higher probability of truth to the perspectives developed by oppressed subjects than to those developed by their oppressors. Generally, the oppressed must develop their hermeneutical resources with those who have somewhat shared experiences. The role of the oppressors in response to this development is most centrally to exhibit the virtue of testimonial sensitivity.

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