

Epistemic Injustice

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Miranda Fricker (2012) calls our attention to the phenomenon of *epistemic injustice*, or wrongs done against a person specifically *as a knower*. She identifies two kinds:

1. DISTRIBUTIVE EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE: “the unfair distribution of epistemic goods such as education or information” (1318)
2. DISCRIMINATORY EPISTEMIC INJUSTICE: a more specifically epistemic kind of wrong, which itself comes in two kinds (see 1319):
 - i. **Testimonial injustice**: a reduction in the *credibility* of a speaker due to prejudice in the hearer
 - ii. **Hermeneutical injustice**: a reduction in the *intelligibility* of the experience of a person who is a member of a marginalized group, either to herself or to others, due to a lack of hermeneutical resources in the community

Not only does epistemic injustice constitute an ethical wrong, Fricker says, it also has a political dimension: epistemic justice is required in order to achieve *non-domination*, understood as “secured non-interference.” (1321)

1 TESTIMONIAL AND HERMENEUTICAL INJUSTICE

Fricker offers an example:

A case of ‘stop and search’ by the police, where a racial prejudice affects the perception of the police officer so that a young black male driver receives a prejudicially deflated level of credibility when he declares that he is the rightful owner of the car. (1319)

Testimonial injustice can include both large and small changes to credibility for marginalized groups. More cases:

- ◇ Mustafa in Sally’s paper “Studying while black: Trust, opportunity, and disrespect”
- ◇ Tom Robinson in *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- ◇ Others?

Hermeneutical injustice can be a matter of content or of expressive form or both, and it varies in terms of who is incapable of understanding; like testimonial injustice, also it varies in degree. It’s easiest, again, to think about some examples:

- ◇ Sexual harassment
- ◇ Domestic violence and provocation
- ◇ Others?

Both forms are wrongs against marginalized people as bearers of knowledge. What does this mean?

2 NON-DOMINATION

Fricker says that epistemic justice is also required for non-domination, or political freedom. She asks us to wonder whether one can be free in a dictatorship, even one where the dictator does not in fact

interfere with people—so a regime where one is free by the “grace and favour” or the monarch. (1320–21) She thinks not; such a power relation, even if the power is not exercised, *corrupts* relationships. She quotes Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*:

It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are, in some degree, independent of man; nay, it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection, which would make them good wives and mothers. Whilst they are absolutely dependent on their husbands they will be cunning, mean, and selfish.

For this reason, Fricker says, what is required is not just actual, *de facto* non-interference, but *secured* non-interference. (1321) And to get that, an essential requirement is a means of *contestation*. Philip Pettit proposed three requirements for contestation; Fricker says there is a fourth (1323–1324):

1. A debate-based form (as opposed to a bargaining structure)
2. Suitable representation (and so diversity in representers)
3. A setting free of distorting pressures (such as intimidation and media intrusion)
4. *Testimonial and hermeneutical justice*

Testimonial justice is required to ensure that what is said by the contestator or on her behalf is given its due weight. Hermeneutical justice is required to ensure that what is said by the contestator or on her behalf is available for saying and/or understood—“because if the citizen suffers an unjust deficit either of credibility or of intelligibility, then s/he precisely cannot get the fair hearing that contestation requires.” (1324)

Case studies:

- ◇ Testimonial injustice: Stephen Lawrence and Duwayne Brooks
- ◇ Hermeneutical injustice: Domestic violence and provocation (“Why didn’t she leave?”)

3 QUESTIONS

- ◇ How might we relate epistemic injustice to Young’s “Five faces of oppression?” (Recall that the five faces were exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence.)
- ◇ Fricker thinks that the epistemic justice required for political purposes will have to involve institutional *virtue*, where this involves not just reliable performance but also a good ethos. Does that seem right? Possible?

Fricker, Miranda. Sections 1 and 2 of “Epistemic Justice as a Condition of Political Freedom?” *Synthese* 190, no. 7 (2013): 1317–32. © Springer. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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