



## You Ought To Know Better: Acknowledgement and Epistemic Injustice

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“Knowledge is in the end based on acknowledgement.”  
– Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, 378.

“...acknowledged, we might say, into being.”  
– Judith Butler, “Doing Justice to Someone.”

I would like today to talk about the connection between testimony and social experience, about how the ways one speaks and, moreover, is heard may affect the way in which one may negotiate his or her experience. I would like to see how a discussion regarding the relationships between identities, social groups, prejudices, and knowledge claims may lead to a greater understanding of how who ‘we’ (in a specific socially stratified sense) are may affect what ‘we’ (in both general and specific senses) can know. Examining the relationships between attempts at speaking and being understood, attempts at understanding one’s experience, attempts at negotiating one’s social identity, and attempts at knowing about the world, all with an aim towards virtuous action, will, I hope, provide a space to speak toward both how the ways in which situated individuals attempt to know and how such individuals are situated in society may influence

what can be known by both the individuals involved and society at large.

Beyond an aim for greater lucidity regarding these relationships, I hope to further suggest ways in which individuals and societies can come to 'know better'. Such a phrase suggests both a moral and epistemic reading; one may come to normatively 'know better' than to consciously participate in epistemically unjust practices (practices that emerge from social prejudices often based upon gender or race), and, as a consequence, both individuals and societies will have an opportunity for a claim on greater, or 'better', knowledge.

### Epistemic Injustice

An account of epistemic injustice given as by Miranda Fricker will be placed into dialogue with the work of Charles Mills. Mills, in *The Racial Contract* (1997), puts forth the thesis that there is a requirement of "“objective” cognition in a racial polity... an agreement to *misinterpret* the world."<sup>1</sup> This so-called requirement or *misinterpretation* provides a space where it may be asked 'How might one interpret the world – insofar as one finds certain things to be one way (say, true) or another (say, false) – in a different way?' Further, we may ask, 'Will such a *re*interpretation be better?' Further still, 'What might make a different interpretation better (and thus more desirable)?' Both Mills and Fricker attempt to answer these questions, and by explicating each text by way of the other, I hope to develop an account of how certain sorts of epistemic dysfunction are unjust.

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<sup>1</sup> Mills, p. 18

To arrive at an explanation of epistemic injustice as perpetrated by (what will below be explained as) a historico-structural racist society, we must start at what might be considered a foundation of ethical thinking: the classical conception of personhood.

I will use as a (hopefully uncontroversial) working model for moral consideration the following two points:

- 1) Classically, rationality is a marker of a separation between humans (persons) and animals (non-persons), with Mills noting that “historically the paradigm indicator of subpersonhood has been deficient rationality, [and] the ability to exercise [rationality] in full the characteristic classically thought of as distinguishing us from animals”<sup>2</sup>;

and,

- 2) Kantian morality proclaims moral worth for persons. Here Fricker notes that “in Kant’s conception of immorality, one person undermines another’s status as rational agent.”<sup>3</sup>

We have it then that rationality entails personhood and personhood entails moral worth. Thus, syllogistically, rationality entails moral worth.

Accepting these premises, we may use them to quickly explicate the wrong of what Fricker calls ‘testimonial injustice’. First, if an individual (or a society, taken as an aggregate of individuals) is prejudiced in such a way as to have prejudices that reduce the expectations and credibility of a potential knower, such prejudices, it follows, degrade or deny an individual’s claim as a

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<sup>2</sup> Mills, p. 59

<sup>3</sup> Fricker, p. 136

knower. When credibility is diminished in a prejudicial manner, the denial of one's claim to know is ultimately an implication of a reduced or diminished capacity for rationality. <sup>4</sup> Mills writes, "Subpersons are deemed cognitively inferior, lacking the essential rationality that would make them fully human."<sup>5</sup>

Given the above – that rationality entails both personhood and moral worth – such a demeaning of rationality is thus a denial of an individual's personhood and moral worth. This is, then, the wrong of testimonial injustice: failure to abide by what Fricker considers a "duty to believe" – and what can be thought of as a moral duty to believe – ultimately undermines an individual's claim on moral worth. Quoting Fricker, "when someone suffers a testimonial injustice, they are degraded *qua* knower, and they are symbolically degraded *qua* human."<sup>6</sup>

Let the problem of testimonial injustice stand as part of the impetus for social epistemic change insofar as it can directly address the desirability of an epistemic shift: if an interpretation of the world includes (namely racist) prejudices of the kind that degrade an individual,

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, I may, in an unprejudiced manner, choose not to believe something you have to say about an event you did not witness nor have learned anything about (thus you know nothing about it), without implicitly denying your rationality. However, in a case where you would be making claims about something you in fact knew nothing about it is unclear as to why I ought to consider your utterances to be rational (perhaps you are making a joke, and the claims become merely arational). This, however, is not as simple as it seems since it may be the case that I know not my own prejudice and am here blinded by it. Barring that, though, it must be the case that individuals can be wrong about things and can be considered such.

<sup>5</sup> Mills, p. 59

<sup>6</sup> Fricker, p. 44

ultimately, “*qua* human”, then a *re*interpretation is desirable since the aim of such a *re*interpretation will be to eliminate racist prejudices.<sup>7</sup>

The moral question is intertwined with the knowledge question, and it will therefore continue to surface. However, turning away, for the moment, from the moral implications of epistemic dysfunction of this kind allows a refocused emphasis upon one of society’s general epistemic tools, what Miranda Fricker calls the “collective hermeneutic resource.”<sup>8</sup> Fricker describes the “hermeneutic resource” as “our shared tools of social interpretation”, with “our” here applying in the wide sense, so that although – on Fricker’s view – differently positioned individuals will interpret their experiences differently, the resource of interpretation from which they draw remains collective.<sup>9</sup> As a result, experiences become understood in a certain way due to collective social meanings.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> To say that a *re*interpretation may attempt to eliminate racist prejudices is not to say that it ought to do away with the idea of race as a social kind. See Haslanger, Sally. “What Are We Talking About? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds” *Hypatia* vol. 20, no. 4 (Fall 2005) 10-26.

<sup>8</sup> Fricker, p. 6

<sup>9</sup> Fricker does however allow that the skewing of shared hermeneutical resources may enable a situation where “the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences” (Fricker 148). I would take issue with her use here of ‘appropriate’, since it can mean both ‘correct’ or ‘suitable’. I must assume that she cannot mean the prior, and the latter only leads to questions of ‘appropriate for what?’ or ‘appropriate to whom?’

<sup>10</sup> A parallel must be here drawn between Fricker’s notion of the collective resource where meanings and interpretations are negotiated and thus come to inform (and, further, constitute) understanding and that of Foucault’s idea of a discourse negotiated through relationships

While such ‘understanding’ (what is it to ‘understand’ something incorrectly?) depends in some way upon dominant social meanings (meanings given hegemonic ascendancy), there is a constant negotiation of meaning, with such negotiation shaping and being shaped by the interpretive tools one uses (and is given) to understand one’s experience of the world. Times in which one is unable to describe, characterize, or understand a given experience (and is in a sense then unable to fully have such an experience), there is a gap or – as Fricker prefers to say – a “lacuna” in a society’s hermeneutical resource. *Prima facie*, such an interpretive lack appears unjust as it may negatively affect a disadvantaged individual or group insofar as the interpretation of experience available to them seems to insufficiently and thus inaccurately describe such experience.

To provide a fuller explication of the way in which the interpretation of a given situation can be skewed and influenced by the available hermeneutical resources in a given social situation, and to further explore the idea of a moral wronging occurring in such a setting, we do well to

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of power, language, and potential knowing, or – synthesizing Foucault’s characterization of discourse – what Lara Lessa calls “systems of thoughts composed of ideas, attitudes, courses of actions, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak” (Lessa).

On a strong reading, Lessa’s use of the word ‘construct’ suggests that within a discourse there is a limit to how one may know and be known, while the remainder of ‘unknowing’ or ‘unknowable’ is left without a language in which to talk about it. However, since we want to talk about relationships between speakers and hearers that exist across time, we should like to say that within such a ‘construction’ of subjects and their understanding of the world there exists a tension, a constant negotiation and re-negotiation of dominant or prevailing meanings.

turn a more nuanced look at the ways in which testimonial injustice comes to structure and reinforce what will be later called and what Fricker names *hermeneutical injustice*.

Day-to-day testimony-based social interactions (often informal exchanges between speakers and hearers) serve to negotiate “collective social meanings” and “collective understanding”. Injustice occurs when reduced acceptance of the testimony of a given “subject group” leads to insufficient influence of certain perspectives upon social meanings. To see how incidents of testimonial injustice lead to “structural identity prejudices”, which in turn further serve to construct deficient hermeneutical tools, the notion of a feedback loop may be used to show how different aspects of social experience may contribute to hermeneutical dysfunction. The question to keep in mind is ‘How do structured social disadvantages and day-to-day prejudicial actions interact so as to be mutually supportive, thus skewing the interpretation of both the day-to-day interaction and the structure itself?’ Or, as Mills would have it, ‘How might a “*misinterpretation*” come to be and sustain itself as “objective”?’<sup>11</sup>

To say that reduced acceptance of the testimony of a given group leads to insufficient influence of social meanings is a rough way of describing a structural identity

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<sup>11</sup> Since issues related to ‘correctness’ and ‘objectivity’ have been mentioned above, a question regarding objectivity must at this stage be asked, namely: “What sort of objectivity are we talking about?” I should like to say this: even if it is the case that so-called ‘Truth’ shall ever remain inaccessible to human beings in the sense of a guaranteed certainty, I would nonetheless hold that such Truth does exist, hence this paper’s aim at an idea of knowing ‘better’. That is, it should seem that we as human beings can come to recognize situations as being ‘better’ or ‘more right’ even if absolute certainty of what is ‘best’ may never be achieved.

prejudice as stemming from testimony-based prejudices, since the day-to-day interactions that adhere to the prejudicial model are informed by collective social meanings, and thus often serve to affirm or re-affirm those understandings. In other words, when a prejudice serves to degrade the value of the testimony of a speaker, that prejudice will act as its own affirmation. If there is no uptake of the testimony provided by the individual suffering from a prejudicial deficit, it will serve to show that that individual either said nothing or had nothing to say. Structural identity prejudice, a prejudice which affects people "in virtue of an aspect of their social identity" is often only strengthened by testimony-based interactions where the speaker's utterances are denigrated and belittled and thus are unable to contribute to the hermeneutical resource that allows one to (legitimately) describe one's experience as a member of a socially powerless group.

The model of day-to-day prejudices produces re-enforcing feedback in two places: namely that reduced credibility serves to affirm reduced expectations (and so on) and since both are (self) satisfying, the initial stereotype/prejudice is implicitly affirmed or re-affirmed. Karen Jones writes that an "initial low trustworthiness rating leads to a reduction in the plausibility rating we would have given to the content of [a] story, and this in turn confirms our initial assessment of untrustworthiness, which in turn make us only the more confident in our low plausibility rating."<sup>12</sup> In other words, if a hearer comes to an interaction with a lack of trust, he or she will be disposed to be skeptical of the utterances of his or her interlocutor. Such a disposition will likely lead to thinking

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<sup>12</sup> Jones, p. 160



that those utterances made are implausible, thus re-affirming the initial lack of trust (and so on).

Introducing Mills' account of the fact of racist history, a history of institutions upon which modern society (or at least the structure of modern society) is predicated, we are faced with yet another positive feedback loop. Historically, as is argued by Mills and supported by historical evidence, racist practices were explicitly predicated on a distinction between whites *qua* persons and non-whites *qua* "subpersons". Such subpersons, it was variously thought, were without rationality and thus were not objects for moral consideration.<sup>13</sup> The third feedback loop then follows from instances of what Fricker calls the "central case of testimonial injustice": "identity-prejudicial credibility deficit."<sup>14</sup> Such a deficit serves to re-enforce structural identity prejudice in that the denial of an individual's capacity to know is ultimately a denial of personhood; this view re-affirms the racist position that non-whites are subpersons. These feedback loops suggest that aspects of assumptions, prejudices, and negotiations in the world are not discrete and are in constant interaction.

The moral and epistemic questions surrounding both individual and social interaction with what has been called the hermeneutic resource may now be framed in such a way as to explicate both the moral and epistemic harm of hermeneutical injustice. To do so, it will be necessary to further inquire regarding racist structural identity prejudice by providing both diachronic and a synchronic accounts.

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<sup>13</sup> Mills, p. 59

<sup>14</sup> Fricker, p. 28, 155

On a diachronic account, present-day society is structured by and predicated upon a history of explicit racism.<sup>15</sup> There existed (or perhaps continues to exist) a prejudice against non-whites that explicitly stipulated a lack of rationality and a lack of moral worth. The further point that must be made, however, is that these racist judgements and prejudgements require what Mills considers a “*misinterpretation*” of the world.

Briefly, if we think of rationality as acceptance into a cognitive community via agreement or understanding about what counts as ‘correct’ – that is, if your interpretation agrees with some notion of the ‘held view’ – we can imagine this as granting one standing in an epistemic community (this isn’t quite truth by consensus, but perhaps it’s close). It is ultimately a case of the recognition of one’s rationality by way of one’s responses being deemed appropriate (or given assent by an authority).

However, as mentioned above, Mills writes that one of the “requirements of “objective” cognition in a racial polity... [is] an agreement to *misinterpret* the world... with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority.”<sup>16</sup> So the purported determinant of correctness is white epistemic authority, both by method and proclamation. On the other side of acceptance in to an epistemic community via such agreement, we find that worldviews that are to be deemed at odds with the accepted racial account are epistemically deficient. So,

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<sup>15</sup> If perhaps I may soften this claim, I hope it can be agreed that the past at least informs the present day in a relevant if not explicitly forceful way.

<sup>16</sup> Mills, p. 18

failure to misinterpret the world will result in exclusion from the (larger) epistemic community, with this rationality-based exclusion fuelling claims for a lack of personhood and moral worth. If one does not recognize the epistemic authority of the preferred (racist) model, this will, in a sense, serve to legitimize the racist claims made by the model.

Such a perceived cognitive ‘failing’ may be teased out as a further feedback loop, since challenges to such a model will likely issue via testimonial exchange, and often the inability to render one’s disadvantaged experience intelligible – intelligible to themselves and on the given model – will only serve to diminish the perceived worth of the given utterance and strengthen the perceived correctness of the model. So, while Fricker’s claim that “hermeneutical injustice might often be compounded by testimonial injustice” is correct, the further idea is that one supports the other.<sup>17</sup>

Historically, a racist misrepresentation of the world affects both whites and non-whites *conceptually*, in that white epistemic authority dictates adherence to a worldview that circumscribes understanding of experience to one of *misunderstanding*. Since the conceptual resources available to non-whites, those disadvantaged by the racial contract (or racist history), are only those resources made available or given credence by the white epistemic authority, non-whites may negotiate their experience (and thus their sense of self) only through those concepts.

We have then an example of structural construction of the self via the mediation of an individual’s experience by available hermeneutic resources. This is hermeneutical

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<sup>17</sup> Fricker, p. 159

dysfunction insofar as the concepts available to a given individual will necessarily be significantly constitutive of that individual's idea of self. This historical perspective further picks out such dysfunction as hermeneutical injustice (and not the sort of 'bad luck' that may be informing and skewing white experience) since, on Fricker's account, the hermeneutical gap constitutes a "significant disadvantage" in that it prevents the understanding of a significant patch of a given individual's experience, one that is strongly in his or her interests to understand.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, on the diachronic account, we find an explicit rejection of the legitimacy of a certain group's (namely non-whites) characterization or conceptualization of experience. On this account, non-whites are not to think of their experience in terms of their being persons, and this explicitly amounts to having, quoting Fricker once more, "the whole engine of collective social meaning ... geared to keeping [certain] experiences out of sight."<sup>19</sup> It is the "structural inequalities of power" that, on the historical account, amount to a systematic circumscription of hermeneutic resources.

Characterizing hermeneutic dysfunction and injustice synchronically, it can be said that the racial contract operates systemically (or, in another sense of structurally). Certain hermeneutical dysfunction points toward implicit rather than explicit inequality. Mills writes that the racial contract "has written itself out of formal existence" since there has been a "formal extension of rights", where there still exists "de facto white privilege."<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 151

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 153

<sup>20</sup> Mills, p. 73

Fricker points towards this sort of structural inequality with an example regarding health care: providing formal equality insofar as making healthcare 'available' to all is not offering true equality if the systemically disadvantaged are not in a position to afford or take advantage of such formal equality.<sup>21</sup> We then may say that presently and in the abstract there is a proclamation of 'equal society', while in reality, inequality remains and is a 'conceptual invisibility'.

It is, to borrow another phrase from Mills, a kind of "structured blindness" where proclaimed formal equality belies a structural inequality made manifest by present day unequal distributions of wealth and power along conceptually invisible lines.<sup>22</sup> Hermeneutical Injustice is perpetrated in this way by means of historical amnesia. Without an account of how things came to be the way they are combined with a formal notion of equality, conceptual resources are structurally obscured.

Testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice work in concert and co-relate as to compose epistemic injustice. Such self-affirming and self-supporting interrelation shapes the social experience of situated individuals. The impetus for an epistemic shift is provided by the fact that such a shift will serve to provide not only a more just climate for day-to-day interaction, but that greater testimonial and hermeneutical justice will provide a climate for the negotiation of a language of interpretation and experience that can better reflect the differing experiences of situated individuals. How might one enable a climate in which differing interpretations of situated

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<sup>21</sup> Fricker, p. 161

<sup>22</sup> Mills, p. 22

experiences may be justly negotiated? How might one negotiate and acknowledge situated interpretations of experience?

### Acknowledgement

To acknowledge an individual as situated is to acknowledge a system that an individual is situated within. Although this appears to be a semantic point, it appears not merely as one, for without recognition of a larger system, one cannot have a space where situation makes a difference. If it is accepted that there is no 'universal subject' (the un-situated or possibly de-situated and interchangeable 'S' of 'S knows that p' epistemologies), if it is accepted that, historically, certain individuals and the subjective positions they occupy have been relegated in structural-social ways to that of subpersonhood, it can be further claimed that certain positions have been objectified (and have thus been de-subjected).<sup>23</sup> These individuals (by way of certain social groups of which they are a part) have subsequently become viewed as objects of knowledge (*things* that can be known), as physical entities ascribed through relations of power a destiny as merely means to Othered ends. From this perspective, acknowledgement of the individual, one person, leads to the acknowledgement of a system, a system where "relations of power ... circumscribe in advance what will and will not count as truth."<sup>24</sup> So, to say that one is 'acknowledged into being' is to point towards the idea of a hermeneutical resource which permits a

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<sup>23</sup> For a fuller account of a rejection of 'S knows that p' epistemologies, see Code 1995, esp. Ch. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, p. 621

language of situated knowing and, moreover, a language which allows one to be known.

To say that one is 'understood' that one, through their being (speaking, knowing) *is* such a way that is intelligible to others, is, on the one hand, to accept such an individual in to society as a person.<sup>25</sup> It is to have the personhood of an individual made manifest. On the other hand, such manifestation must appear as intelligible and recognizable to a structured society, and therefore must remain negotiable in such a society. To acknowledge an individual is not merely to allow them a place to speak, but to re-cognize and re-negotiate the position from which an individual speaks. In other words, to acknowledge an individual is to acknowledge that individual's situation.

The moral and epistemic implications of acknowledgement are clear. Acknowledgement provides a space where individuals might express both what they know through who they are and who they are through what they may come to know. Given *how* individuals talk about things (given the requirements of intelligibility present in society), in what way can we "make ourselves understood"? That is, one says "I want you to understand me" (and here note the way in which we often say this and not 'I want you to understand my assertion'), and the claim being made is one such that one should like to say "if you do not understand *this*, then might I (or you) be so mistaken as that I might not ever be understood?" Here

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<sup>25</sup> I am thinking here of 'under-standing' as connoting a somewhat literal reading of being stood-under by others. It can be imagined as if when one understands someone else, they might be inclined to say "I – my body of knowledge, my support – stands beneath this." Much in the way of combining two other common sorts of endorsement: that people give 'support' or often say that they 'stand beside' someone.

two claims are intertwined in a way that it makes no sense to separate them. On the one hand, to be understood is to have one's utterances taken as intelligible; an individual hopes to have known that their utterance "The cat is on the mat." picks out the cat on the mat. Further, to be understood in this sense is to be understood as one who is intelligible in the world, as one that can and does know. Such a recognition *qua* knower is a recognition *qua* person.

To such a complicated interaction between people no simple and complete solution can be put. I shall suggest however that as a simple day-to-day strategy, respect on the part of a hearer may have the force to stimulate positive change. Respect towards an individual's testimony may act positively much in the way that prejudice acts negatively, since the feedback loops outlined above ought to have the capacity to serve as positive forces in shifting epistemic practices. In other words, by an effort of respectful listening, by committing one's self to the comparatively simpler enterprise of testimonial justice, one may begin to affect a shift towards hermeneutical justice. Through a moral engagement of listening, a hearer may acknowledge an individual as a person and as a potential knower, and such an attempt at acknowledgement will hopefully nurture better hermeneutical resources. Finally, such improved resources will allow individuals and society-at-large an opportunity to know and act better, with such 'bettering' of knowledge and action carrying both moral and epistemic charges: that individuals shall be acknowledged as both persons and knowers, and that such acknowledgement contributes to and constitutes a part of moral epistemic practice.



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