

Forum on Miranda FRICKER'S *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*

Précis

Miranda FRICKER

BIBLID [0495-4548 (2008) 23: 61; pp. 69-71]

ABSTRACT: This paper summarizes key themes from my *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (OUP, 2007); and it gives replies to commentators.

Keywords: credibility, testimony, social understanding, prejudice, epistemic injustice, virtue, virtue epistemology.

The overarching aim of *Epistemic Injustice* is to explore two kinds of dysfunction in our epistemic practices. The first occurs in testimonial transaction, when a speaker receives a deflated degree of credibility from a hearer owing to prejudice on the hearer's part. Many philosophers debate the question exactly how fundamental testimony is as a source of knowledge, but few would deny that an enormous amount of what we know is, at root, testimonially acquired. Testimony can be spoken or written, or for that matter signed or sung; it can be direct, as when someone tells us face to face what the time is; or indirect, as when we learn about world events from the newspapers. Since so much of what we know depends on one or another sort of testimonial transaction, it matters whether our habits of attributing credibility are in good order. Clearly it matters from a purely epistemic point of view: if, for instance, a hearer's prejudice wrongly deflates her judgement of credibility, then the flow of knowledge is blocked, truths fail to flow from knower to inquirer. But this is not all. The dysfunction of unduly deflated credibility may be not only an epistemic dysfunction, it may also be an ethical dysfunction. For the speaker who receives a prejudicially deflated degree of credibility from a hearer is thereby *wronged*—he is wronged specifically in his capacity as a knower. This idea of being wronged in one's capacity as a knower constitutes my generic characterization of epistemic injustice.

In the book I explore two ways in which someone might be so wronged. The first is as I have already described: a speaker receives a prejudicially deflated degree of credibility from a hearer. This I call *testimonial injustice*, and it wrongs the subject in his capacity as a giver of knowledge. An example might be that a jury does not believe someone simply because of the colour of his skin. The second is what I call *hermeneutical injustice*. This sort of injustice occurs at a prior stage, when someone is trying to make sense of a social experience but is handicapped in this by a certain sort of gap in collective understanding—a hermeneutical lacuna whose existence is owing to the relative powerlessness of a social group to which the subject belongs. Such a lacuna renders the collective interpretive resources *structurally prejudiced*. An example of her-



hermeneutical injustice might be the difficulty of making sense of homosexual desire as a legitimate sexual orientation in a cultural-historical context where homosexuality is interpreted as perverse or shameful. In such a context, the gay subject cannot make proper sense of his sexuality, owing to the fact that gay people as such were prevented from making a full contribution to collective resources for social meaning, with the result that the forms of understanding available for making sense of homosexuality were crucially uninformed and distorted. I analyse the wrong done by this kind of injustice in terms of what I call ‘situated hermeneutical inequality’ —the lived experience of being unfairly disadvantaged in rendering one’s social experiences intelligible, to others and possibly even to oneself.

Clearly, hermeneutical injustice will show up in attempts at communicative testimonial exchange, and so both these types of epistemic injustice call for a corrective or ameliorative virtue on the part of the hearer in any such exchange. Accordingly I identify two such virtues: testimonial justice and hermeneutical justice. Most basically, testimonial justice is such that the hearer corrects for any influence of prejudice by reinflating credibility to non-prejudiced levels; and hermeneutical justice is such that the hearer corrects for any influence of structural prejudice in social-interpretive resources by adjusting credibility levels appropriately to the hermeneutical handicap incurred by the speaker. The virtue of testimonial justice pre-empts the testimonial injustice altogether, since if the hearer corrects for her prejudice to make a non-prejudiced credibility judgement of the hearer, then all is well and no testimonial injustice has occurred. By contrast, the virtue of hermeneutical justice is after the fact of the hermeneutical injustice itself, but it can ameliorate, even neutralize, the harms associated with it. In this case, the hearer succeeds in picking up on the fact that the speaker’s lack of intelligibility is not her fault —it is due to the unfairly impoverished interpretive resources she is working with.

I conceive of both these virtues as contributing something positive to the hearer’s ‘testimonial sensibility’ —his trained sensitivity to the multifarious signs of a speaker’s degree of epistemic trustworthiness. I argue for a virtue epistemological approach to testimony, which makes central use of the idea of a testimonial sensibility and which is developed in parallel to the kind of ethical cognitivism originating in Aristotle which emphasizes the possibility of a virtuous subject’s *perceiving* the world in moral colour. In my account, the virtuous hearer perceives her interlocutor in epistemic colour, as being to this or that degree trustworthy in what he is asserting. Such an account explains the spontaneous phenomenology of everyday testimonial exchange, but preserves the operation of critical rationality in the hearer even while she spontaneously accepts what she is told. It thus cuts through the usual stalled dialectic of inferentialism on the one hand, which insists on the operation of critical rationality in the hearer by demanding some sort of inference on his part, and non-inferentialism on the other, which eschews all such argumentation on the part of the hearer in favour of an uncritical spontaneity of acceptance.

What is intriguing about both virtues I have characterized is that they display a hybridity of the intellectual and the ethical: each is at once an intellectual virtue and an ethical virtue. I argue that while many different virtues may share a common ultimate

end, they are individuated by their distinct immediate ends. Let us analyse the structure of each of our virtues one at a time. First, testimonial justice. Considered as a purely intellectual virtue it aims ultimately at truth, and more immediately at neutralizing prejudice in one's credibility judgements. Now, let us consider the same virtue as a purely ethical virtue. Ultimately it aims at justice, and more immediately it aims at neutralizing prejudice in one's credibility judgements. Same immediate end, so same virtue. I conclude that testimonial justice is at once an intellectual and an ethical virtue. Now what about the virtue of hermeneutical justice? Considered purely as an intellectual virtue it aims ultimately at understanding and more immediately at neutralizing the impact of structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. Considered as a purely ethical virtue, it aims ultimately at justice and more immediately at neutralizing the impact of structural prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource. Same immediate end, so same virtue. I conclude that hermeneutical justice too is at once an intellectual and an ethical virtue.

The hybridity of these two virtues is startling, and thoroughly out of line with the Aristotelian tradition that conceives ethical and intellectual virtues as fundamentally different in kind. However, the hybridity is manifest, and on reflection should be unsurprising: any virtue that aims to correct for the impact of prejudice in judgement will surely display the same hybridity, for prejudice is at once an intellectual and ethical vice. In both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice, the hearer misses out on something epistemically valuable, and the speaker suffers an injustice. The negative hybridity of the vices generates the positive hybridity of the correlative virtues. By studying the negative space of epistemic injustice, the positive space of epistemic justice is revealed; and so we learn what virtues we may need to cultivate in order to make our epistemic conduct at once more rational and more just.

Miranda FRICKER is Reader in Philosophy, at Birkbeck, University of London. She did her DPhil at the University of Oxford (1996), first moving to the University of London to take up a Jacobsen Research Fellowship and then a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship. Her main areas of interest are in ethics, epistemology, and in those areas of feminist philosophy that concern social identity, power, and the authority of reason. She is the author of *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (OUP, 2007); *Reading Ethics*, co-written with Sam Guttenplan (forthcoming, Blackwell, 2008), and she co-edited *The Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy* (CUP, 2000) with Jennifer Hornsby.

ADDRESS: School of Philosophy, Birkbeck, University of London, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX. Departmental Office tel: +44 (0)20 7631 6383, fax: +44 (0)20 7631 6564. E-mail: office@philosophy.bbk.ac.uk.