**‘Just The Facts’:**

**Thick Concepts and Hermeneutical Misfit**

Keywords: epistemic injustice, thick concepts, ideology, oppression

**0. Introduction**

A central ideological trick of unjust social structures is that they appear, as Patricia Hill Collins writes, ‘natural, normal, or inevitable’ (2000: 77). This appearance functions to sustain those very structures. If the social order really is natural or inevitable, then we cannot change it. If the social order is *normal*, however, we should not even try. We are therefore supposed to accept not just certain descriptions of the world, but certain evaluations of it. We are expected to believe, for example, not just that certain people have more power than others, but that they ought to have it; not just that certain groups have fewer resources, but that they don’t deserve resources. We don’t need to worry about changing things if they are the way they’re meant to be.

Recent literature on hermeneutical injustice has demonstrated that, under oppressive ideologies, shared concepts often fall short of the epistemic needs of marginalized people. Much of this literature has focused on the failure of these concepts to sufficiently describe the world. In this paper, I want to focus on flaws in shared concepts that make it more difficult to *evaluate* the world. I’ll argue that many *thick concepts,* or concepts which both describe and evaluate, are distorted in ways that encourage ill-fitting evaluative judgments about marginalized people. For example, a concept like *slutty* describes a pattern of behavior which does sometimes exist, but the evaluative judgments it encodes reinforce a pattern of evaluation which perpetuates sexist beliefs. I’ll argue that flawed evaluations like this undermine the possibility of both moral and nonmoral knowledge, in ways that track broader patterns of epistemic injustice.

This process is particularly pernicious because the concepts in question may not appear to us as evaluative at all. Rather, they are regularly passed off as ‘merely’ describing the world. In fact, sometimes these concepts *do* accurately describe, and thus they appear useful as hermeneutical tools. This makes them much more difficult to challenge. The result is a distinctive kind of hermeneutical injustice—one that draws on smaller truths in order to perpetuate broader epistemic harms.

I’ll proceed with a twofold strategy. First, I’ll argue that our hermeneutical landscape is saturated with concepts which encourage inappropriate normative responses to features of the world. These concepts perpetuate both epistemic harm to communities broadly, and epistemic injustices against those marginalized within communities. I’ll call this *hermeneutical misfit.* In section 1, I’ll draw together the literature in epistemic injustice and feminist ideology critique to articulate the ways in which conceptual distortions undermine shared knowledge in unjust ways. In section 2, I’ll define hermeneutical misfit as a dimension of hermeneutical distortion, manifesting in thick concepts which encode warped evaluative judgments.

Second, I’ll show that the epistemic harm of ill-fitted concepts is further entrenched when they appear to us as ‘merely descriptive.’ This directs attention away from the evaluative functions of these concepts, thereby both obscuring and reinforcing those evaluations. I’ll call this *descriptive masquerade.* In section 3, I’ll define descriptive masquerade as an ideological mask for hermeneutical misfit, one that can block attempts to improve our shared conceptual tools. I’ll discuss how descriptive masquerade manifests as epistemic injustice, and explore some strategies for resistance.

**1. Ideology and Hermeneutical Distortion**

1.1 Ideology and Epistemology

Critical social scholars have long argued that widely shared conceptual frameworks misrepresent the world in ways that perpetuate injustice. For example, feminist ideology critiques have demonstrated that ideology creates a cultural lens through which we perceive oppression and injustice as ‘normal,’ and thus are not motivated to change things (Collins 2000; Haslanger 2017). Similarly, work on hermeneutical injustice has demonstrated the ways in which shared concepts can systematically harm marginalized people, by eliminating or misshaping conceptual tools they need to understand or describe their experiences within dominant contexts (Fricker 2007; Falbo 2022; Dular 2023). In this section, I’ll build on these literatures to describe what I’m calling *hermeneutical distortion.* Hermeneutical distortion occurs when our existing conceptual tools are (mis)shaped to serve the interests of the powerful, at the expense of the needs of the oppressed.

As Hall (1996) writes, ideology ‘has especially to do with the concepts and the languages of practical thought which stabilize a particular form of power and domination’ (24). This stabilization is effected through what Haslanger describes as ‘masking or illusion’ (2017: 150); ideology misrepresents the world in ways that sustain existing structures of power, while obscuring that misrepresentation from view, presenting it as simply ‘the way things are.’ Haslanger thus distinguishes two intertwined forms of ideology critique: ‘The epistemic critique of ideology reveals the distortion, occlusion, and misrepresentation of the facts. The moral critique concerns the unjust conditions that such illusions and distortions enable’ (*ibid.*). For Haslanger, this ‘enabling’ relation is partly effected through the shaping of our values and choices, and thus our agency. A white supremacist patriarchal ideology guides us to value white heteronormative masculinity and disvalue the rest (non-whiteness, queerness, femininity, and especially their intersections); this in turn shapes what we choose or avoid, praise or disparage. But white heteronormative masculinity is not a naturally occurring force. Rather, it is produced by the same ideology which values it. The agents who embody and perpetuate it do so in order to live up to those values. Ideology therefore produces what Hacking (2006) has called a ‘looping effect’; it creates the very social reality it purports to describe. For this reason, Haslanger considers ‘ordinary epistemic critique’ to be insufficient for ideology critique (2017: 150). Ideology’s epistemic harm is not just in the dissemination of false descriptions of the world. It also warps our evaluative judgments in ways that shape social reality. This, in turn, undermines our knowledge of the factors that cause and perpetuate that reality.

Consider Patricia Hill Collins’ (2000) discussion of *controlling images*. She writes: ‘As part of a generalized ideology of domination, stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning’ (2000: 76). These images are caricatures which represent Black women as ‘naturally’ inclined to subservience, laziness, or aggressiveness, and thus ill-disposed to take care of themselves and their families or be productive members of society (76-83). These images suggest that Black women’s subordination is not just natural, but normal and appropriate, thereby obscuring the contingent social structures which perpetuate it (2000: 77). For example, a persistent controlling image in the United States is the ‘Welfare Queen.’ According to Collins, the Welfare Queen represents a Black woman who is lazy and demanding. She is unable to support herself and her family because of her unwillingness to work hard. She relies on the handouts of hardworking (white) Americans to pay her bills (hence ‘welfare’), and even to supply her with extravagant material goods which she has not earned (hence ‘Queen’). The Welfare Queen’s purportedly indolent, freeloading nature makes high poverty rates among Black women seem appropriate and deserved, which in turn is used to justify cuts to the social programs which might ameliorate that poverty.

I want to highlight here the way racist/misogynistic ideology distorts, in part by *drawing on the truth*. It is true that Black women experience disproportionately high rates of poverty in the United States. The concept of the Welfare Queen embeds these facts in a web of descriptive and normative falsehoods. First, it suggests that the primary cause of these high poverty rates is not entrenched racism and systemic oppression, but Black women’s behavior. Second, it represents these poverty rates as unobjectionable and even deserved. Finally, the deployment of the concept in American politics serves to justify policies and attitudes which *reinscribe* the causes of Black women’s higher poverty rates, ensuring that the descriptive facts on which the concept draws will remain true.

In this way, ideology does an epistemic harm to anyone who takes up the concept of the Welfare Queen, by making it harder for them to develop knowledge about structural racism and about Black women. More importantly, however, it does a epistemic injustice to Black women, by undermining their ability to make sense of and communicate their experiences of poverty within dominant conceptual frameworks. Hermeneutical injustice, as defined by Fricker (2007), occurs ‘when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences’ (1). The central premise is that power shapes our communicative tools, and thus the knowledge we are able to develop. When some social group has historically lacked power, they tend to lack access to the communicative and material resources necessary for the formation and dissemination of key concepts. Dominant conceptual frameworks therefore tend to serve the interests of the powerful, at the expense of the disempowered. The disempowered face challenges both in developing the knowledge that they need within dominant frameworks, and in disseminating the knowledge developed in their own communities to a wider audience (Fricker 2007; Medina 2012).

Feminist ideology critique can provide a big-picture structural/causal framework through which to understand the sources and impact of hermeneutical injustice. Meanwhile, the literature on hermeneutical injustice can provide a fine-grained analysis of the mechanisms by which ideology harms shared knowledge, and thereby illuminate avenues for resistance. In what follows, I’ll put these literatures in conversation to articulate the problem of *hermeneutical distortion,* a distinctively epistemic harm of ideology.

1.2. Hermeneutical Distortion As Hermeneutical Injustice

Following Fricker’s (2007) definition, much of the literature on hermeneutical injustice has focused on the problem of hermeneutical lacunae*,* or gaps in the shared knowledge where a concept is needed (Falbo 2022). A canonical example is the concept of *sexual harassment.* According to Fricker, prior to the introduction of this concept to the general understanding, people (women) who were sexually harassed could not articulate their experiences to themselves and others. This both disadvantaged the victims and provided a corollary advantage to their harassers; a problem which could not be articulated could not be addressed (Fricker 2007: 149-50). This unfairly impaired the ability of these women to form knowledge about what they had experienced (*ibid*. 153). On this approach, hermeneutical injustice is primarily ameliorated by the introduction of useful concepts (e.g. sexual harassment) to fill these lacunae.

However, not all problems with shared knowledge are due to the lack of concepts. Sometimes, existing concepts mislead us. Recent work in the epistemic injustice literature has begun to pay attention to this problem. Falbo (2022) argues that a ‘lacuna-centered analysis’ is insufficient to capture hermeneutical injustice. We also face the problem of ‘positive hermeneutical injustice,’ which primarily consists in ‘the presence of oppressive and distorting concepts which crowd out, defeat, or pre-empt the application of an available and more accurate concept’ (354). Drawing from Manne (2017), Falbo discusses the concept *golden boy*. A *golden boy* is a successful young white man, who is unimpeachably morally good. This concept cannot be deployed in conjunction with the concept *rapist.* Rapists are bad and golden boys are good, so use of the important hermeneutical resource *rapist* is blocked in cases where a golden boy is guilty of rape (Falbo 2022: 353-4).

Oppressive and distorting concepts do not just block the deployment of better concepts. They can also change the way we understand those better concepts. Dular (2023) also challenges the ‘traditional understanding of hermeneutical injustice as absence’ (2). She argues that sometimes we face an overabundance of concepts, or what she calls *hermeneutical excess*. For example, a concept of *reverse racism* represents racism as an individual prejudice that can be directed against white people. This distorts our understanding of racism as systemic injustice against people of color: ‘making room in our conceptual resources for the notion of *reverse racism* as something that in fact exists actually corrupts understanding of what racism itself is’ (Dular 2023: 426-7). Similarly, when the concept *nonconsensual sex* exists alongside the concept *rape,* it represents the actions in question as a kind of sex rather than a violent crime. This suggests that ‘nonconsensual sex’ is less wrong, and thus warrants a lighter punishment, than what U.S. Representative Todd Akin once called ‘legitimate rape’ (Alter 2014). Instances of rape can be categorized as ‘merely’ nonconsensual sex—an infraction of far less severity(Dular 2023: 427-8). Actions in the descriptive extension of the concept *nonconsensual sex* are thus misclassified, which in turn distorts our understanding of *rape.*

Concepts like *Welfare Queen, Golden Boy,* *reverse racism,* and *nonconsensual sex* perpetuate what I am calling *hermeneutical distortion*. Hermeneutical distortion occurs when shared concepts distort our view of the world. Here, I am specifically interested in hermeneutical distortion as an ideological mechanism which leads to the formation of false beliefs about oppressive systems and those who are marginalized within them. For example, *Welfare Queen* encourages the false belief that poor Black women are responsible, in both a causal and a moral sense, for their own economic situation. This damages our knowledge—not just because we form false beliefs, but also because those false beliefs get in the way of our forming better beliefs about the real causal and moral responsibility for high poverty rates among Black women.

Hermeneutical distortion can function in many ways. Here is a (non-exhaustive) list. First, as Dular demonstrates, a distorted concept can change our understanding of other, better concepts in play. For example, *reverse racism* changes the meaning of *racism,* by representing racism as a matter of individual bias, rather than as structural injustice against people of color.Second, as Falbo demonstrates, a distorted concept can block the deployment of some other, better concept. For example, the concept *golden boy* blocks deployment of the concept *rapist*, because being a golden boy is incompatible with being a rapist.Third, as Collins demonstrates, a distorted concept can recommend the wrong kind of normative response to some phenomenon. For example, the concept *Welfare Queen* represents poor Black women as lazy and undeserving of assistance, and recommends normative responses like disdain and censure.

These functions are interconnected, and distorted concepts often do triple duty. However, the third function remains underexplored. For example, Maitra (2018) argues that Fricker’s (2007) discussion of sexual harassment ignores this systematic misevaluation. Fricker argues that, prior to the introduction of the concept *sexual harassment* to the shared understanding, people (women) who were sexually harassed had no concept for their experience. But this isn’t entirely accurate. In fact, there *were* some concepts for this experience, such as *flirting* or *chasing around the desk* (Beeby 2011). The problem was that these concepts undersold the normative importance of the experiences in question. Those who were sexually harassed could describe what they had experienced, but not in a way that served their epistemic needs. As Maitra writes: ‘Even if any label can enable communication about an experience, not just any label will lay bare its crucial normative properties, as is required for communicative intelligibility’ (2018: 351). These concepts therefore work against hermeneutical justice through the evaluative judgments they encourage, even as they appear to be describing the world.

I want to focus on this function of hermeneutical distortion. In the rest of this paper, I’ll investigate the ways in which some distorted concepts draw on real facts, thus lending legitimacy to their continued use. However, these concepts tie warped evaluations to those facts, and thus both negatively impact the development of shared knowledge, and perpetuate hermeneutical injustice. In the next section, I’ll articulate the way in which this form of hermeneutical distortion manifests through what metaethicists have called *thick concepts.*

**2. Hermeneutical Misfit**

2.1 Thick Concepts and Fit

In his foundational discussion of ethical ‘thickness,’ Williams (1985: 140-41) describes thick concepts as being both *action-guiding* and *guided by the world.* For example, consider the concept *courage.* A person or act in the extension of *courage* is described as *resistant to pain, fear, or grief*, and thereby evaluated as *praiseworthy, impressive,* or *morally good*. That is, the application of the concept is guided by the world, in that only certain kinds of actions are properly described as courageous; but it is also action-guiding, in that to understand some action as *courageous* guides us to do it, to praise it, and so forth. Importantly, the evaluation is not merely ‘added on’ to the description. Rather, the evaluation is taken to apply *in virtue of* the description (Väyrynen 2021). Thick concepts therefore represent their normative upshot or associated evaluative judgment as warranted by the descriptive facts.The existence and widespread use of a thick concept in a particular epistemic community suggests that this community endorses, or at least accepts, the connection of this evaluation with this description.

The nature of thick concepts is a matter of much philosophical discussion. For example, there is disagreement about whether evaluations are part of the proper extension of a thick concept, or whether the descriptive features alone determine extension, with the evaluation attached by connotation or conventional implicature (Väyrynen 2021). Similarly, there is disagreement about whether the normative and descriptive features of thick concepts are in principle separable (Väyrynen 2021).  I will lay these interesting debates to the side. What matters for my purposes is that thick concepts do, in practice, both describe and evaluate—that is, use of the concept is both action-guiding and guided by the world. It is this feature which makes thick concepts philosophically interesting. I will argue that this feature is also what makes distorted thick concepts particularly pernicious.

Many thick concepts are unproblematic. Consider *courage*. Most cases of resistance to pain, fear, or grief do warrant a positive normative evaluation; such behavior is *pro tanto* praiseworthy, impressive, or morally good.As Ecklund (2017) puts it, the evaluation seems *fitting* for the description. These ‘well-fitted’ thick concepts track intuitions about which facts warrant which evaluations, or, in Williams’ terms, how particular features of the world ought to guide our actions.

However, other thick concepts do not fare so well. Ecklund (2017: 53) calls attention to the concepts *slutty* and *chaste.* These concepts represent particular sexual behaviors as having particular normative upshots. If, say, *chaste* is applied to some person, that person is described as abstaining from sexual activity on principle, and thereby evaluated as praiseworthy or virtuous. If *slutty* is applied, the person is described as engaging in sexual activity with many partners, and thereby evaluated as shameworthy or corrupt. These evaluations are distorted. Abstaining from or engaging in sexual activity does not in itself warrant any particular normative evaluation. As Ecklund argues, *slutty* or *chaste* therefore ‘misevaluates’ because the normative content does not ‘fit’ the descriptive content (74). Borrowing from Ecklund’s terminology of ‘fit,’ I’ll call this phenomenon *hermeneutical misfit.* Hermeneutical misfit occurs when a thick concept’s evaluative elements are ‘ill-fitting’; it’s not the case that we should respond to those features of the world in the way the concept’s normative upshot suggests.

There may be benign cases of hermeneutical misfit. For example, among the European aristocracy in the 18th century, it was widely believed that tomatoes were poisonous. A concept of *poison apples* described the tomato and recommended culinary avoidance. Since this evaluation does not fit the facts, this is technically a case of hermeneutical misfit. However, benign cases are not the focus of my inquiry. I am interested in the ways in which hermeneutical misfit constitutes hermeneutical injustice, by constructing our hermeneutical landscape in ways that systematically and unfairly disadvantage marginalized people.

This discussion might appear to bump against literature in the philosophy of language on derogatory thick terms, such as slurs. In metaethics, talk of thick terms and thick concepts is often run together, as if the two phenomena can be painted with the same brush (see, for example, Ecklund 2017; Väyrynen 2021). There are important points of contact between analysis of thick terms and thick concepts, since we communicate shared concepts through language. However, there are also important differences. To draw a direct link between discussion of thick terms and thick concepts would be to assume ‘the simplified view that language and concepts stand in a one-to-one relation’ (Cepollaro 2020: xii; see also Burgess & Plunkett 2013: 1094-5). I don’t want to assume this. More importantly, however, the projects are distinct in focus. The relevant literature on thick terms has tended to focus on the semantics and pragmatics of hate speech; what it means, how it refers, and what it does in our conversations (Cepollaro 2020; Anderson & Barnes 2023). By contrast, I am interested in the impact of ill-fitting thick concepts on shared knowledge; how they (mis)shape what we believe and how we evaluate. Thus, my discussion in this section will set aside thick terms and focus on thick concepts. In section 3, I will draw these discussions back together to discuss resources of resistance.

2.2. Descriptive and Normative Misfit

I will articulate two primary mechanisms of hermeneutical misfit. First, concepts can group together descriptions that do not belong together. This in turn leads to the implication that some group, individual, or kind has features that it does not in fact have (Maitra 2018). The normative upshot of the concept will then trade on these purported features. It therefore is not warranted, whether or not the descriptions *would* warrant that normative upshot *if* they were accurate. For example, the concept *golden boy* connects the social group of young successful white men with the (non-)behavior of never committing sexual assault. The concept therefore communicates the normative upshot that we should not blame members of this group for sexual assault. It’s true that people who don’t commit sexual assault don’t deserve to be blamed for it. It is not true that young successful white men never commit sexual assault. Thus, this thick concept is ill-fitted because its normative error is grounded in a descriptive error. Call this *descriptive hermeneutical misfit.*

As another example, consider again the *Welfare Queen.* This concept draws a causal relationship between poverty among Black women and the supposed characteristically lazy, demanding behavior of those women. In general, if someone is unwilling to work hard and lives a life of extravagance at the expense of others, it seems appropriate to scorn them and deny them support. Consider, for example, the attitudes we might have towards an indolent heir whose inherited wealth depends upon the exploitation of labor and natural resources. However, Black women are not characteristically lazy or demanding; moreover, the high rates of poverty they face are not caused by any particular behaviors on their part, but by centuries of racist oppression. The concept *Welfare Queen* is therefore descriptively ill-fitted, because the facts are not as the concept represents them.

But some concepts are distorted in ways that do not depend on descriptive error. Ecklund writes that ‘*slutty* indeed is true of some behaviors (the ones fitting the conception associated with the concept), despite there being something objectionable about the normative views with which it is associated’ (2017: 14). Some people do have sex with many different partners, and do not deserve negative evaluation on those grounds alone. However, Ecklund has understated the problem. Concepts like *slutty* and *chaste* aren’t just objectionable; they are unjust. They are disproportionately applied to women or femininized people, and used to control their sexual behavior. In praising one pattern of behavior and shaming another, the twin concepts *slutty* and *chaste* delimit a normative standard for the sexual activity of women and feminized people—one which places them at an unfair disadvantage with respect to agency and bodily autonomy. Women and feminized people are denied sexual agency, while simultaneously being sexualized *as well as* punished for that sexualization. The ‘systematically related pressures’ of this normative standard catch women and feminized people in an oppressive double-bind (Frye 1983: 3). Moreover, the punishments are not evenly distributed. As Collins (2000) argues, concepts like *chaste* are a feature of the ‘cult of true femininity’, a normative ideal for which only privileged white women are eligible. In this conceptual framework, women of color are primarily understood as targets for punishment or objectification, rarely reward or valor (Collins 2000: 79, 81-3).

Nevertheless, the descriptive extensions of *slutty* and *chaste* may be accurate in ways that *golden boy* and *Welfare Queen* cannot be. The problem with *slutty* and *chaste* is that these descriptive extensions do not warrant the normative upshot they recommend. Call this *normative hermeneutical misfit.*

Let’s take a fictionalized example. Suppose there is a thick concept with the same descriptive extension as our concept *sexual harassment.* However, instead of being understood as morally and legally prohibited, these descriptive features are understood as desirable and erotic. Instances of, say, *quid pro quo* for sexual favors in the workplace are understood to follow a pattern, but they are interpreted as ‘sexy’ rather than problematic. Call this concept *sexy harassment*. Individuals subject to sexy harassment will have a way to articulate what has happened to them, but those articulations will misfire in an important way. As Maitra (2018) puts it, they have no way to communicate the normative significanceof those experiences. They can say what has happened, but not why it matters.

This example is fictionalized, but not outlandish. Recall that, prior to the introduction of the concept *sexual harassment*, ill-fitting concepts like *flirting* and *chasing around the desk* were used to describe those kinds of behaviors (Beeby 2011). Maitra (2018) argues that these concepts were not only unhelpful, but were in fact ‘a big part of the problem;’ they downplayed the normative significance of these behaviors, and suggested that those who reported being harmed by them were ‘overreacting’ (350). More broadly, feminist scholars have argued that attempts by women to resist sexual harassment and abuse have been systematically eroticized by pornographic representations, so that it is possible to communicate what has happened, but impossible to protest against it (MacKinnon 1989; Langton 1993). Consider here the popularity of eroticized representations of power-asymmetrical workplace romance between a male supervisor and a female employee, as in the film *Secretary* (based on a short story which had quite a different normative upshot), the novel series *Fifty Shades of Grey,* and a plethora of other erotic films, texts, or images.[[1]](#footnote-1) Here, patterns of dehumanizing, sexist behavior are represented as erotic and desirable, which undermines women’s power to understand and communicate their experiences of those behaviors. My example invites us to imagine that these background ideas crystallize into a distorted thick concept which packages a description of existing patterns with an ill-fitting evaluative judgment. This concept is then available for deployment whenever these patterns are observed, making it more difficult to know and say why those behaviors matter.

Normative and descriptive hermeneutical misfit are not mutually exclusive. Many flawed concepts are distorted along both axes. In these cases, some concept misdescribes the world, *and* its descriptive extension would not fit its normative upshot even if it accurately described the world. For example, Collins argues that the ‘allegedly emotional, passionate nature of Black women has long been used to justify Black women’s sexual exploitation’ (2000: 79). In this example, a concept of *Black women’s nature* describes Black women as emotionally volatile and excessively sexual, while also suggesting that they are appropriate targets of sexual exploitation. This concept is descriptively distorted, because it misdescribes Black women as a group. However, even if this description were accurate, it would not justify this normative upshot. Sexual exploitation is equally impermissible in all cases, including cases where the target is emotionally volatile or excessively sexual. The distortion in this case is twofold. First, the descriptive facts are misrepresented, and second, they are attached to a normative evaluation that would not be fitting even if they were accurate.

In short, hermeneutical misfit occurs when a concept recommends the wrong kind of normative response to the actual features of the world. This can happen either through misrepresenting the facts in that world such that a particular normative upshot seems appropriate (whether or not it is), or through attaching an ill-fitting normative upshot to particular descriptive facts in themselves (whether or not those facts are accurate). In either case, hermeneutical misfit interferes with our ability to evaluate the world.

However, normative misfit raises distinctive philosophical challenges. Correcting descriptive errors can be a relatively straightforward task of demonstrating that the facts are not as they are described. In theory, then, a descriptively ill-fitted concept can be ameliorated by the introduction of better empirical facts. To unpack normative misfit, however, we must ask difficult philosophical questions about what kinds of facts justify what kinds of evaluative judgments. This is tricky for two reasons. First, evaluative judgments are considered ‘subjective’ in a way that empirical facts aren’t, and thus it is practically more difficult to raise these issues. Second, distorted thick concepts often don’t appear to us as encoding evaluative judgments at all. Rather, they masquerade as ‘merely’ describing the world. I’ll articulate and explore this phenomenon in Section 3. First, however, I’ll make clear the epistemic impact of hermeneutical misfit, both as a widespread harm and as an injustice.

2.3. Hermeneutical Misfit as Epistemic Injustice

Haslanger writes that ideology functions in part to ‘skew our understanding of what is valuable’ (2017: 159). This is in part ‘an epistemic problem: the resources we have for experiencing, interpreting and understanding the world prevent us from appreciating what’s morally relevant’ (*ibid*.) The epistemic critique of ideology requires careful attention not only to the accuracy of our descriptions of the world, but the quality of our evaluation. We need to be able to understand and articulate ‘what and who matters’ (*ibid*). As a mechanism of ideology, hermeneutical misfit interferes with our ability to do this. When ill-fitting concepts litter an epistemic community’s shared understanding, they damage that community’s knowledge, in a way that systematically disadvantages marginalized people as knowers.

The epistemic impact of hermeneutical misfit is twofold. First, hermeneutical misfit can damage moral knowledge. If shared concepts systematically misevaluate the world, and those evaluations play a role in the formation of moral beliefs, then those beliefs are likely to be false. For example, suppose some epistemic community shares the concept *sexy harassment.* Community members might, as a result, form the belief that *quid pro quo* offers made by male supervisors to female employees in the workplace are morally permissible, or even desirable. But this belief is misguided. Offers of this kind reinforce gendered patterns of subordination and thus perpetuate structural inequalities. They also regularly cause harm to the individuals targeted by them. They are morally impermissible as a general rule. Uptake of the ill-fitting concept *sexy harassment* will therefore lead to the widespread formation of false moral beliefs about those descriptive facts, and the community which shares this concept will be impaired in their development of moral knowledge.

Hermeneutical misfit also affects nonmoral knowledge. As feminist epistemologists have long argued, we do not form beliefs on the basis of neutral, value-free observations of the world. Rather, what we value shapes what we perceive, how we understand, and thus what we come to know. For example, at the level of perception, our evaluations literally affect what we see. We perceive things as larger or smaller, brighter or dimmer, or even present or absent—that is, we ‘remark very different features of the world’—based on our value judgments (Jaggar 1989: 160; see also Dion & Dion 1976; Anderson *et al.* 2011; Safavi & Dayan 2022). These perceptions in turn affect the beliefs that we form, as perceptions do.

Evaluative judgments also affect the development of knowledge in a broader sense. What we judge to be important shapes what we view as worthy of further study, what we come to learn more about, what we accept as evidence for a given hypothesis, and, ultimately, the beliefs we develop about the world (Longino 1990; Anderson 2004). This is particularly noticeable within communities of knowledge production. For example, feminist critics have demonstrated the ways in which medical science is affected by misogyny. It prioritizes the study of male-coded bodies, and thus fails to develop critical knowledge about issues relevant to women; moreover, misogynistic attitudes affect the knowledge that is developed, to the detriment of women’s health (Merone *et al.* 2022). In this way, faulty evaluative judgments can undermine the development of nonmoral knowledge relevant to marginalized people.

Consider a concept like *chasing around the desk.* As articulated by Beeby (2011), prior to the introduction of the concept *sexual harassment,* this concept described behaviors that we would now count as sexual harassment, but undersold their normative importance. The people (women) who were targets of these behaviors thus struggled to communicate their experiences. Attempts to protest or claims to have suffered harm were brushed off as overreactions, or simply ‘personal’ issues (see Fricker 2007: 150). As a result, those women were cut off from a significant source of knowledge: the community of others who shared those experiences. Widespread awareness of the prevalence of these behaviors was difficult to develop, in part because those who experienced them could not draw attention to them without being perceived as overreacting. Thus, knowledge about a set of descriptive facts—that sexual words and actions in the workplace, particularly by male supervisors towards female subordinates, was (and is) commonplace, enabled by structural factors, and harmful to women’s professional success and personal health—was obscured. Collective consciousness is critical to our understanding of both the normative and descriptive features of issues like sexual harassment. (Consider, for example, how the #metoo movement changed widespread knowledge about the prevalence of these matters.) But in order to develop that consciousness, we must be able to understand and communicate about what matters; and ill-fitting concepts get in the way of this capacity.

In some ways, the epistemic harms do not discriminate. As Fricker (2007) points out, in the absence of the concept of *sexual harassment,* harassers and their victims alike will lack understanding (151). However, those who are marginalized by these systems are disproportionately affected. As Lindemann (2001) has argued, when dominant narratives represent marginalized groups in ways that are ‘dismissive and exploitative’ of their experiences, a member of those groups potentially ‘loses or fails to acquire a sense of herself as worthy of full moral respect’ (2001: xii). For Lindemann, this harm is partly epistemic. These narratives can alter the way marginalized people understand themselves, causing them to interpret themselves through caricatured stereotypes that misrepresent or misevaluate them—as less intelligent or capable, more volatile or harmful, or simply morally less worthy than others (*ibid.*: 19-22). Lindemann is interested in the development of broad cultural narratives that affect our understanding of one another and ourselves. I’m suggesting that these epistemic forces crystallize into ill-fitted thick concepts. These concepts in turn function in our thought and talk to deepen the warped narrative grooves that shape our lives.

This discussion helps us to see how hermeneutical misfit is a form of epistemic injustice. Recall Fricker’s (2007) definition of epistemic injustice, as a ‘wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower’ that is structurally unfair (1). Those who unjustly lack social power are similarly unjustly harmed in their capacities as knowers by flawed evaluative judgments of them. Without good concepts in play, they may struggle to understand their own experiences or responses. This may contribute to a lack of trust in their own epistemic abilities, and thus undermine their ability to develop knowledge more generally. Moreover, if they try to communicate that experience to others, they may be interpreted as incompetent or irrational, and thus unfairly disbelieved or ignored. Their capacities as knowers are undermined both from the inside and the outside. Insofar as hermeneutical misfit encourages warped evaluative judgments about marginalized people, it is an epistemic injustice.

In short, hermeneutical misfit encodes oppressive, ideological misevaluations of the world into thick concepts, which in turn encourage the development of false moral and nonmoral beliefs within an epistemic community. These false beliefs disproportionately harm marginalized people as knowers. In the next section, I expand on the ideological masking of normatively ill-fitting concepts as ‘merely’ descriptive. I then discuss some strategies for resistance.

**3. ‘It’s Just Science!’ Descriptive Masquerade and Resistance**

3.1 Descriptive Masquerade

Most discussions of hermeneutical injustice have either focused on the absence of good, useful concepts (Fricker 2007; Medina 2012) or the presence of bad, unhelpful ones (Falbo 2022; Dular 2023). I suggest that hermeneutical misfit poses a distinctive challenge: the presence of distorted concepts which draw on real facts, and thus make themselves appear useful. In what follows, I’ll argue that this allows the concept to be obscured behind a veil of ‘mere’ description, which makes their normative upshots more difficult to challenge.

Ideology is primarily characterized by a process of ‘masking or illusion’ (Haslanger 2017: 150). It obscures its own mechanisms in order to shield them from critique. Hermeneutical misfit is no exception. In particular, normatively ill-fitting thick concepts regularly function as if they are not thick concepts at all. Rather, they operate in our thought and talk as if they ‘merely’ describe the world. These concepts do sometimes trade on accurate descriptive facts, which makes them seem useful. Meanwhile, the normative upshot of the concept is at once deployed and obscured. In this way, normative hermeneutical misfit covers its own tracks, as the concepts pretend only to describe—and sometimes to describe well. Call this process *descriptive masquerade.*

Descriptive masquerade is easiest to see by example. Consider the concept *obesity.* According to the World Health Organization, *obesity* is defined as having a body mass index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30 (WHO 2021). *Obesity* is also sometimes defined in terms of ‘excessive fat accumulation that may impair health’ (*ibid*.) Throughout the scientific literature, *obesity* is regularly treated as a mere descriptor of a medical condition. Researchers have argued that the medical classification of *obesity* as a disease is an attempt to reduce anti-fat bias, by shifting the onus of responsibility away from individuals and instead describing fatness as a mere medical fact (Rosen 2014; Kyle *et al.* 2016). Doctors regularly use this concept in patient care settings as if it is ‘objective,’ a heuristic for describing the state of someone’s body and recommending care on that basis (Wind 2022; see also Mehl forthcoming).

But *obesity* doesn’t just describe. Since its introduction into medical and scientific language, the concept has been associated with notions of personal failure and ‘moral weakness’ on the part of those whose bodies are thus described (Bray 1990; Lupton 2014). Concordantly, fat people consistently experience the concept *obesity* as laden with negative evaluation, evoking shame and disgust (Cameron 2015; Mehl forthcoming). And doctors who specialize in ‘obesity management’ have been found to associate *obese* with negative evaluations, like *lazy, worthless,* and *stupid* (Schwartz *et al.* 2003).

It should be apparent that these evaluations are ill-fitted to the concept’s descriptive extension. Having a high BMI or body fat percentage does not warrant judgments like *moral weakness* or *worthlessness.* The concept thus leads to the formation of false moral beliefs about fat people. It also leads to the develop of false nonmoral beliefs. For example, doctors regularly assume that a given patient described as *obese* habitually eats poorly, doesn’t exercise, and, concordantly, has higher blood pressure, cholesterol, and other risk factors—even when there is no evidence for these assumptions (Lupton 2014; Reiheld 2015; Mehl forthcoming). This leads to systematic misdiagnosis and poor patient outcomes (*ibid*.). On a broader scale, these assumptions about fat people have affected research practices, leading to gaps in scientific knowledge (Kyle 2016; Mehl forthcoming). In short, the normative valence of the concept *obesity* leads to the development of false beliefs, which in turn interfere with experts’ abilities to form true beliefs, and thus develop knowledge, about these patients—knowledge which is necessary for ensuring their access to healthcare (Mehl forthcoming).

We should be wary, then, of the work this concept does for us. But we often are not. Doctors seem to believe that they are ‘just describing’ their patients, even as their reliance on the concept of *obesity* perpetuate warped evaluative judgments about them (Wind 2022). This permits a kind of collective deniability about the concept’s normative upshot. The notion that *obesity* ‘merely’ describes a medical fact permits it entry into our thought and talk about this issue—even when we may not intend to deploy its associated evaluations.

This is complicated by the fact that *obesity* does, in fact, describe some facts in the world. Thus, the descriptive extension of the concept can be given as evidence that the concept is useful—after all, we are using it, and in a sense using it ‘correctly.’ Even as the concept regularly leads to the formation of false beliefs, it persists in part because it appears valuable.

This discussion demonstrates how normatively ill-fitted thick concepts can masquerade as simply doing descriptive work. If they do this descriptive work well, then they may appear as good and useful concepts. Meanwhile, they bring evaluative judgments into our thought and talk, in a way that makes those evaluative judgments difficult to articulate and critique. Thus, the beliefs encouraged by those evaluative judgments may go unnoticed or unchallenged. The epistemic harm of hermeneutical misfit is thus at once perpetuated and obscured. I’m calling this *descriptive masquerade.*

As the case of *obesity* demonstrates, scientific concepts are particularly good vehicles for descriptive masquerade. This is likely due in part to the persistence of the *value-free ideal* of science. The value-free ideal is the notion that science at its best is a locus of unfiltered access to natural facts, free of human-imposed evaluative judgments (Longino 1990). Feminist philosophers of science have long critiqued this ideal, arguing that science both draws on and communicates a variety of value judgments which require defense (Longino 1990; Antony 2002; Anderson 2004; Hufendiek 2020). Nevertheless, the scientific process is regularly passed off as ‘detached fact gathering,’ and its results as ‘objective’ (Antony 2002: 144.) The value-free ideal is thus not only a misunderstanding of the way science works; it can also obscure the values that are actually operating in scientific discourse.

Nevertheless, layfolk and experts alike will often appeal to ‘mere science’ as if it is both descriptively and normatively unimpeachable. I suggest that these appeals are often cases of descriptive masquerade. Science is not immune from ideology, and the concepts that are used in the production of scientific knowledge have historically entrenched a variety of ill-fitting evaluations. Consider, for example, sexist concepts like *hysteria,* trans-antagonistic concepts like *gender identity disorder* or *autogynephilia,* or racist and eugenicist concepts like *miscegenation*. These concepts have been thoroughly critiqued for their normative shortcomings. It should go without saying, for example, that there is nothing evaluatively wrong with the facts described by *miscegenation*. Nevertheless, appeals to their scientific functions sometimes shield these concepts from normative critique. Users of the concept can and do fall back on the defense that ‘it’s just science!’—thereby invoking the value-free ideal and obscuring the normative upshot from view. This, of course, does not eliminate that normative upshot. On the contrary, it blocks critique of that upshot, while simultaneously implying that the concept *needs* no normative critique.

Descriptive masquerade makes normative hermeneutical misfit particularly challenging to articulate and critique. In the remainder of this paper, I will discuss strategies for resistance.

3.2 Misfit and Resistance

In her monograph *Slurs and Thick Terms: When Language Encodes Values,* Bianca Cepollaro (2020) argues that slurs and thick terms function to both describe the world, and trigger evaluative presuppositions about it. For example, the slur ‘wop’ refers to Italians, and triggers a presupposition that Italians are bad in virtue of being Italian. However, presuppositions are linguistically sneaky. They don’t straightforwardly present themselves for entry into the conversational record. Rather, they are assumed as *already* part of that record. Thus, presuppositions which enter the common ground without objection are understood to be endorsed by all speakers (Lewis 1979). This is why it can feel morally wrong merely to be part of a conversation where a slur is uttered; if one doesn’t object to the presupposition, one is complicit in endorsing it (Cepollaro 2020: 47-8).

As discussed in Section 2.1, I am primarily interested in the role of thick concepts in our shared frameworks of belief. Cepollaro, by contrast, is interested in linguistic semantics and pragmatics. However, concept use is often most visible in communicative acts—hence the common locution of ‘thought and talk’ in literature on conceptual ethics (Burgess & Plunkett 2013). Moreover, Cepollaro’s diagnosis here provides a linguistic analogue to the conceptual problem of descriptive masquerade. The phenomena are similar: evaluative judgments are introduced in a ‘sneaky’ way that makes them difficult to challenge. Thus, these projects have points of analysis, as well as resistance strategies, in common. Thus, I’ll borrow from Cepollaro’s work to illuminate some issues and strategies for the deployment of ill-fitted thick concepts.

Cepollaro argues that it can be difficult to respond effectively when someone introduces problematic evaluative presuppositions. It’s not enough, for example, to simply negate the statement. She considers the following exchange:

Lila: Lenù’s a dyke, isn’t she?
Enzo: No, she isn’t. (Cepollaro 2020: 51)

As Cepollaro points out, Enzo’s response ‘cannot succeed in rejecting the derogatory content of Lila’s utterance, as it only targets the descriptive truth-conditional content (i.e. that Lenù is homosexual)’ (*ibid*.). But this move leaves the evaluative presupposition intact. Cepollaro therefore argues that ‘it is particularly important to train people to respond to slurs in the proper way when they come across them, i.e. by articulating and rejecting [the evaluation]’ (52). Similarly, when we encounter a normatively ill-fitted concept that is masquerading as merely descriptive, it won’t be enough to object to a particular deployment of the concept. This will let the masquerade continue and the normative upshot persist. To launch a proper critique, we must articulate and reject that upshot.

But this can be difficult. It can be costly to articulate what is left implicit, particularly if it is a value judgment (Cepollaro 2020: 38-9). To see this, consider the following exchange:

1. Alex: Carina has been acting slutty, hasn’t she?
2. Bonita: Hey, that’s sexist.
3. Alex:It’s just a fact. She had sex with Dax, Emanuel, *and* Fiona last weekend!

In (1), Alex invokes the normatively ill-fitted concept *slutty*. In response, Bonita tries to articulate and reject the associated evaluative judgment (2). But Alex doesn’t give this move uptake. Instead, in (3) he relies on descriptive masquerade to react as if normative questions are irrelevant. Bonita’s critique is treated as ‘out of bounds’—as if she were the one to introduce normativity to a perfectly neutral discussion of descriptive fact.

Bonita’s options here are limited. If she responds to Alex in descriptive terms, she’ll cede the point. This will happen whether or not his claim in (3) is true. Suppose, for example, that Carina has in fact done the things Alex says she has. If Bonita is unable to launch a normative critique, she may be forced to concede that Alex has accurately described Carina. This will perpetuate the appearance that the concept *slutty* is useful and appropriate, because it has been used ‘correctly.’

However, even when the facts in question are not accurate, an engagement on purely descriptive grounds will miss something. Suppose Bonita responds like this:

(4a) Bonita: That’s not true. She didn’t do any of that.

Bonita may be successful here in deflecting the evaluative judgment associated with *slutty* from applying to her friend—undoubtedly an important goal. However, this tactic leaves the ill-fitted normative upshot of the concept untouched, suggesting that those who *do* fit its descriptive extension still deserve its normative upshot.

To launch a more ambitious critique, Bonita will need to articulate and reject the concept’s normative upshot. For example, she might say:

(4b) Bonita: It doesn’t matter what Carina did. Slut-shaming is wrong.

This kind of response can be difficult to launch. As Cepollaro points out, it requires interfering with the flow of conversation and refusing to cooperate with your interlocutors—an awkward thing to do for anyone, and one that may be more costly, or less effective, for marginalized people (2020: 51-3). Moreover, our interlocutors are not always ready to hear critique of the concepts on which they uncritically rely in thought and talk.

However, we can draw an important lesson from Bonita’s response in (4b). Notice that she has at her disposal an important hermeneutical tool: the concept *slut-shaming. Slut-shaming* is a concept that encodes a critique of another concept. Let’s call this a *meta-hermeneutical resource.* Specifically, *slut-shaming* describes the attachment of negative normative upshot to the descriptive extension of *slutty,* and evaluates that connection as wrong.

The existence of meta-hermeneutical resources demonstrates that critiques of particular conceptsare already underway. Like all concepts, meta-hermeneutical resources are generally not invented by individuals, but develop in communities. Specifically, these kinds of concepts are often the product of collective intellectual labor by activists. For example, Keller (2016) argues that the concept *slut-shaming* was developed and circulated by bloggers in conversation with the feminist activist movement SlutWalk (93). Once a meta-hermeneutical resource has been developed, it can be deployed by individual communicators, drawing on the work of those who have gone before. In this case, *slut-shaming* not onlyenables Bonita to concisely bring out *and* critique the normative upshot of *slutty;* it also bolsters her case, by pointing to the arguments that have already been made by feminist activists, and connecting her with a movement of hermeneutical resistance that is bigger than a single exchange or a single person. She is not fighting the hermeneutical tide alone. Rather, she is contributing to a larger conversation about conceptual ethics, one in which the concept *slutty* is already under scrutiny.

Developing meta-hermeneutical resources helps us highlight the problems with ill-fitted concepts, but it does not tell us what to do with those concepts. One answer is simply to stop using them. But this doesn’t always work. Concepts are sticky, and eliminating them by fiat isn’t always effective. Another strategy, then, is to change or replace the concepts. For example, we might draw inspiration from linguistic reclaiming movements, where ‘some people (typically but not necessarily members of the target group) can use a slur in such a way that it is not offensive anymore in those contexts’ (Cepollaro 2020: 54). The conceptual analogue would be to effect a *valence shift*. If a concept is normatively ill-fitted, we can deploy it in ways that associate its descriptive extension with a different, better-fitting normative upshot. An example of widely successful valence shift is the concept *queer*. The original, ill-fitted concept described homosexuality or gender-nonconformity, and evaluated it negatively; the new, improved concept associates those descriptions with neutral, or positive, evaluation. Similarly, in many contexts, the concept *slutty* has recently been undergoing a valence shift towards the positive, even the celebratory (Madigan 2023).

Successful cases of valence shifts are promising. However, this strategy is controversial. We might worry about the persistence of the original valence, and the difficulty of disseminating it across contexts. Moreover, valence shifts primarily seem to work when a concept is *not* descriptively ill-fitted. For example, Hufendiek (2020) critiques Haselton’s (2018) attempt to shift the valence of the concept *hormonal,* which describes women’s behavior as caused by fluctuations in their hormone levels and evaluates it negatively on these grounds. Haselton argues that feminists should reframe the concept hormonal in a positive light—because, as she puts it, ‘after all, we *are*’ (2018: introduction). However, as Hufendiek chronicles, the purported empirical evidence for the causal relationship described by *hormonal* rest on a history of flawed empirical methodologies in evolutionary psychology (2020: 494-6). Thus, Haselton’s suggested valence shift will not rehabilitate this concept, because it leaves its descriptive misfit untouched.

As I noted previously, I take descriptive misfit to be relatively easy to address, at least by comparison to normative misfit. However, concepts which are both normatively and descriptively ill-fitted may require multifaceted strategies of intervention. In general, there is no single solution to hermeneutical misfit. The effectiveness of any resistance effort will depend on the specifics of the concept: the type of misfit that it encodes, the situations in which it is used, the material realities that it purports to describe, and the kind of uptake that various efforts can achieve. Any resistance efforts must therefore engage not just on theoretical grounds, but with attention to the practical realities of our thought and talk. What do these concepts do for us? And (how) can we do it better?

This is another reason that collective consciousness and community activism is crucial. Resistance to ideologically motivated hermeneutical injustice cannot be achieved by individuals, but requires critical engagement by a critical mass of thinkers and speakers. In this paper, I have tried to shed light on some of the epistemic mechanisms of this injustice, in order to clear the way for this resistance.

**V. Conclusion**

Ideology is effective in part because it obscures its own mechanisms of control. Combating it therefore requires revealing those mechanisms. In this paper, I have articulated one such mechanism: *hermeneutical misfit.* Hermeneutical misfit is a form of epistemic injustice in which thick concepts encourage us to misevaluate the world, in ways disadvantage marginalized people as knowers. I’ve argued that there are two forms of hermeneutical misfit; descriptive misfit, in which a concept groups together descriptive facts that do not belong together, and normative misfit, in which a concept’s normative upshot does not fit its descriptive extension. In both cases, ill-fitted thick concepts encourage us to misevaluate the world in ways that undermine general knowledge, as well as perpetuating epistemic injustice specifically against marginalized people.

I’ve also argued that the effectiveness of responses to hermeneutical misfit is hampered by what I’ve called *descriptive masquerade.* Descriptive masquerade occurs when a normatively ill-fitted concept is passed off in our thought and talk as if it merely describes; for example, a concept like *obesity* might be defended on the grounds that it’s ‘just science’ (i.e. just descriptive). This makes it harder to reject the concept’s normative upshot. For this reason, it is important to challenge hermeneutical misfit through collective consciousness-raising and activism. Hermeneutical injustice is a problem that primarily affects epistemic communities, and so effective resistance must also arise primarily from those communities.

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1. “How do I know this?” you ask; “A friend of a friend,” I quickly reply” (Mills 1994, 133) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)