

The Metaphysics of Injustice

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Patriarchy and white supremacy are unjust social systems, constituted by causal structures that produce systemic gender injustice and racial injustice. Intersectional theory highlights that these forms of injustice often are inseparable, as in instances of misogyny. What does this mean for our understanding of unjust systems? Recent work in feminist theory suggests that intersectional insights undermine the idea that there are multiple unjust systems. In this paper, I hope to show that this is not the case. I'll suggest that intersectional injustice is best explained by the *overlap* of unjust systems, or when unjust systems are co-constituted by the same causal structure. I'll then argue that, despite their overlap, unjust systems can be individuated in terms of their *essential ideologies*. These distinct ideologies reveal unjust systems like patriarchy and white supremacy to be distinct goal-oriented processes that can be simultaneously manifested by a single causal structure.

Introduction

Unjust social systems are ubiquitous and persistent.¹ Sally Haslanger (forthcoming) helps us understand why. Unjust systems, Haslanger tells us, are constituted by networks of events and the causal relations between them (hereon *causal structures*) that produce systemic wrongs and harms, including entrenched patterns of oppression and domination.² These causal structures are self-reproducing: they constrain agents in ways that force us to recreate them. This “causal loop”, as Haslanger calls it, is at the heart of unjust systems' stability. Because of it, formal institutions, like states, corporations, and schools, as well as informal institutions, such as social norms and conventions, continually reproduce unjust systems. Injustice begets injustice.

¹ Thanks to Sara Bernstein, Ray Briggs, Michael Della Rocca, Issa Kohler-Hausmann, Sally Haslanger, Laurie Paul, Mike Rea, Bradley Rettler, Jonathan Schaffer, Naomi Scheman, and audiences at WOGAP, Brandeis University, UC Berkeley, and UMass Amherst for helpful feedback during the development of this paper. Special thanks to Maegan Fairchild for constructive comments, enthusiasm, and pulling my head out of the weeds.

² These structures allow us to make causal predictions and explain causal outcomes. See Goodman (1983). Haslanger (personal correspondence) also believes that these structures are “of possibility, of power, [and] of normativity”, but remains neutral as to whether all these features can be explained in terms of causality.

Unjust systems do vital explanatory work: they help us predict, identify, and explain various patterns of wrongful treatment--patterns that track particular (actual or perceived) features. In doing so, they also help us more accurately determine what kinds of actions or policies will most effectively change those patterns in the future. Recently, however, the view that there are multiple and distinct unjust systems has been challenged by the rise of intersectional perspectives on injustice. Intersectionality, Patricia Hill Collins (2016, 1) writes, is a theoretical lens that highlights how unjust systems are "interrelated and mutually shaping one another". This lens emphasizes that what we usually consider distinct forms of injustice are often borne out by the very same events and patterns. One common example used to illustrate this is misogynoir, a form of misogyny that targets Black women. An intersectional lens reveals that misogynoir is not merely gender injustice, nor is it merely racial injustice; it is both. Intersectionality undermines a standard method of distinguishing between unjust systems, because it reveals that the causal structure that produces one form of injustice also produces other forms. If we want to distinguish between patriarchy and white supremacy, for example, we can't do so by looking at the causal source of gender injustice and distinguishing it from the causal source of racial injustice. The causal structure that produces one also produces the other.

Haslanger (2020b) concludes that there are not multiple unjust systems. Intersectionality, they argue, reveals that there is no system of patriarchy, as typically understood:³

Patriarchy is not the system that oppresses us... Patriarchy doesn't exist (as a system unto itself). The system that oppresses us is a patriarchal system...but 'patriarchy' is not an adequate label for that system, any more than, say, 'heteronormativity' or 'ableism' is. If we want a name for the tendency of the social order to target women, we could use the adjective, e.g., we live in a *capitalist white supremacist nationalist ableist ageist heteronormative ...etc.... patriarchal order*.

Because the causal structure that produces gender injustice simultaneously produces racial injustice, class injustice, and so on, Haslanger argues that this structure is not aptly described as patriarchy. Patriarchy does not exist, they say, and neither does white supremacy, or capitalism, or ableism, and so on. Instead, there is only one unjust system—the "capitalist white supremacist...patriarchal" system.

³ This argument is clearly related to another argument, which concludes that patriarchy does not exist because of historical and cultural variation in manifestations of gender injustice. See, e.g., Alcoff (1988), Barrett (1980), Beechey (1979), Rowbothom (1981). See also Judith Butler (1990, 35): "The very notion of 'patriarchy' has threatened to become a universalizing concept that overrides or reduces distinct articulations of gender asymmetry in different cultural contexts".

Call this injustice monism, or the view that there is only one unjust system. The reasoning from intersectionality to injustice monism goes something like this:

Intersectionality to Injustice Monism

- 1) Intersectionality reveals that systemic forms of injustice (e.g., gender injustice, racial injustice, disability injustice) are inseparable.
- 2) If systemic forms of injustice are inseparable, then unjust systems are inseparable.
- 3) Unjust systems that are inseparable are not distinct.
- 4) Unjust systems are not distinct. (1-3)

Despite the pull of this argument, I hope to convince you that we can hold onto injustice pluralism, or the view that there are multiple unjust systems. I'll get there by way of two views, one that supports Premises 1 and 2, and another that undermines Premise 3:

Intersection as Overlap: Intersectional injustice is produced by overlapping unjust systems (i.e., unjust systems co-constituted by the same causal structure).

Individuation by Ideology: Overlapping unjust systems can be individuated in terms of their essential ideologies.

I'll begin by contrasting intersection as overlap with an alternative view, prevalent within law, economics, and the social sciences: intersectionality as interaction. On this view, intersectional injustice is jointly caused by multiple unjust systems. If true, this would provide a straightforward path to injustice pluralism: in order for two systems to causally interact, they must have separate causal structures.⁴ But intersection as interaction, I'll argue, misrepresents systemic injustice, which is better explained by intersection as overlap.⁵ Injustices like misogynoir are not the joint product of multiple unjust systems; instead, they are the product of causal structures that simultaneously constitute multiple unjust systems.

Although intersection as overlap troubles the standard method of individuating unjust systems, I think another method is available to us—individuation by ideology. Using this approach, we can differentiate between unjust systems by their essential ideologies.

⁴ For discussion see, e.g., Hu and Kohler-Hausmann (2020).

⁵ My claim is not that interaction between unjust systems is impossible—e.g., an unjust system in one cultural context could come to interact with another unjust system elsewhere—but rather that outcomes paradigmatic of intersectional injustice are produced by overlapping unjust systems.

Ideology is a contested term, and I'll say more about it soon. By way of preview, though, I understand ideology as *material ideals*, or cultural ideals about what things are and ought to be. They are not ethereal; they are found in the material world around us—in our institutions, environments, technologies, and behavior. In the broadest sense, then, I'll say that causal structures “contain” ideologies. Archeologists and historians depend on this, in fact, to do their research: they articulate cultural ideals found in buildings, books, technology, wealth distribution, and so on, even long after the culture operating by those ideals is gone. Causal structures contain ideology, just as text contains story.

Here, we should keep in mind Haslanger's point: causal structures that produce systemic injustice are ones that continually reproduce themselves in a “causal loop”. That is, they constrain agents to recreate those very same causal structures.⁶ When a causal structure contains ideology, then, it is equally true to say that this causal structure constrains agents to recreate the ideology that it contains. Now, add the observation that many ideologies can be at work in the very same events and patterns. When a single causal structure contains multiple ideologies, then, it constrains agents to simultaneously reproduce all of those ideologies. For example, if a causal structure contains both gender ideals and racial ideals, this structure is one that constrains agents to continually reproduce both gender ideals and racial ideas. And yet, because these are different ideals, we can identify two processes ongoing within this causal loop: the process that aims to recreate gender ideals, and the process that aims to recreate racial ideals.

Individuation by ideology is the idea that unjust systems just are these distinct, goal-oriented processes. Patriarchy is the system that aims to reproduce gender ideals, white supremacy is the system that aims to reproduce racial ideology, and so on. As such, these systems are constituted by causal structures that orient us to reproduce ideologies. When a single causal structure orients us to simultaneously reproduce multiple ideologies, this structure constitutes overlapping unjust systems. Despite overlap, though, different ideologies allow us to individuate unjust systems: even when co-constituted, these processes have distinct goal-orientations.

Before diving in, I want to emphasize that this paper offers a high-level description of the relationship between causal structures that produce systemic injustice, ideology, and unjust systems. I am not out to provide a detailed account of any of these things, much less of any particular unjust systems, such as patriarchy or white supremacy. Instead, my aim is to sketch a general paradigm for thinking about unjust systems—one that I believe can help us identify, explain, and (hopefully) intervene upon systemic injustice. This paradigm has big implications, if it works. Intersection as overlap explains why distinct forms of systemic injustice are materially inseparable, and calls for a

⁶ While I here use ideology and material ideals interchangeably for terminological simplicity, a broader sense of material ideals might make ideology a subset of material ideals.

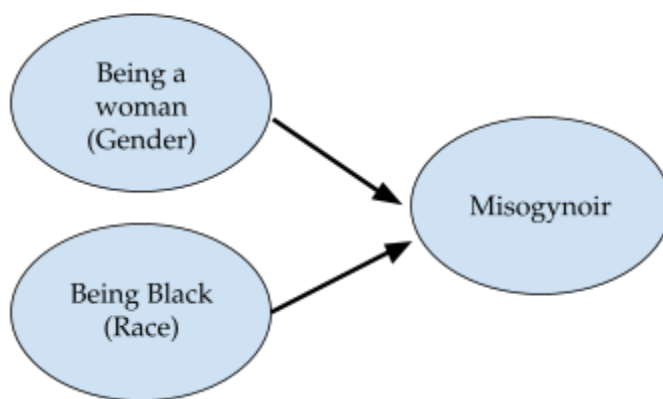
fundamental rethink of standard causal models of intersectional injustice, which almost exclusively rely on intersection as interaction. But inviduation by ideology reveals that we don't need to thereby relinquish injustice pluralism. We can maintain that systems like patriarchy and white supremacy are distinct, even while acknowledging that these systems are materially inseparable. Due to their different essential ideologies, unjust systems are different even when they overlap.

1. Intersection as Overlap

Intersectionality is a theoretical lens that helps us more accurately describe systemic injustice. Systemic injustice names the product of what Anna Carasthathis (2014, 304) calls "multiple, converging, or interwoven systems"--systems like white supremacy and patriarchy. Intersectionality, then, is a lens on the social world that emphasizes this causal process. Sara Bernstein (2020, 322), echoing Carasthathis, puts this as the point that intersectionality illuminates how "intersecting systems of power produce effects on groups or individuals that would not be produced if the dimensions did not intersect".

But what does it mean for unjust systems to intersect? Kimberlé Crenshaw, who coined the term 'intersectionality', characterizes intersection as the "structural convergence" of unjust systems.⁷ But this, too, admits of multiple interpretations, and descriptions of intersection diverge across literatures and disciplines. The most prevalent description within the social sciences takes this convergence to be one of causal interaction that results in a novel product. This approach says that patriarchy and white supremacy, for example, intersect when they jointly cause injustices that neither could produce independently. To illustrate, let's represent misogynoir as a novel product jointly caused by patriarchy and white supremacy:

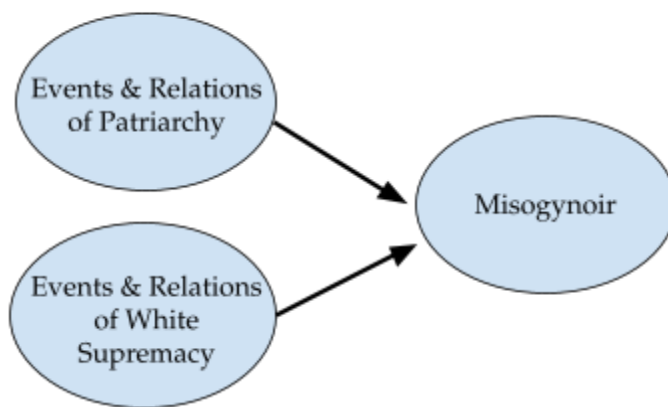
Figure 1: Intersection as Interaction



⁷ Carasthathis (2014, 305), citing Crenshaw qt. in Berger & Guidroz (2009, 65).

Here, gender and race are represented as distinct causal variables that--via different causal structures--jointly cause misogyny. If asked to explain misogyny, someone who endorses this picture might give a speech like this: 'The unjust effects of being a woman and the unjust effects of being Black together create a novel pattern—a form of injustice we call misogyny...' Since patriarchy and white supremacy name causal structures that produce these unjust effects, we could alternatively represent this story as follows:

Figure 2: Intersection as Interaction



Intersection as interaction is often assumed and rarely defended. It shapes the social scientific study of gender within economics, computer science, and legal theory. And it even sometimes appears within feminist philosophy.⁸ Ann Garry (2011), for example, compares intersection to the combination of liquids:

[O]ppressions or privileges seem to blend or fuse with others. Different liquids—milk, coffee, nail polish, olive oil, beet borscht, paint in several colors—run down from different places at different altitudes into roundabouts. Some of the liquids run together, some are marbled with others, and some stay more separate unless whipped together.

⁸ The interaction view is somewhere between assumed and defended in Lawford-Smith & Phelan (2021). It is assumed in Bright, et al. (2016), where the authors depict intersectionality using causal graphical models that represent, e.g., gender and race as distinct causal variables. For a critique of the interaction view as used within law and legal studies, see Kohler-Hausmann (2019).

Here, we are asked to imagine unjust systems as akin to distinct liquids--they exist separately but can mix together.⁹ Just as white milk could combine with red nail polish to create a novel pink liquid, patriarchy can combine with white supremacy to create new forms of injustice.

Garry's analogy illustrates the causal modularity entailed by intersection as interaction: if unjust systems have distinct causal pathways, we could (at least in principle) intervene on one system without altering the other.¹⁰ To see what I mean, return to milk and red nail polish. These are distinct liquids--ones that, when combined, would create a new liquid. Because they are distinct, we could change one without changing the other—for example, substituting cow milk for oat milk, or switching brands of red nail polish. Such interventions would teach us about the causal role of milk and red nail polish in producing the new liquid. So too, according to this picture, in cases of intersection. We could intervene on patriarchy without thereby intervening on white supremacy, and so learn something about how gender and race distinctly contribute to the production of misogynoir.

This view currently reigns in the social sciences. But it is a deeply inadequate picture of systemic injustice.¹¹ To see why, let's first agree that gender injustice occurs when someone is unjustly disadvantaged or advantaged due to gender, and that racial injustice occurs when someone is unjustly disadvantaged or advantaged due to race. Intersection as interaction tells us that the effects of gender and race are distinct, and sometimes causally interact to produce novel forms of injustice like misogynoir. But this is untrue, because human experiences of gender are sensitive to race, and vice versa. Or, put differently, race shapes how people are seen and treated on the basis of gender, and gender shapes how people are seen and treated on the basis of race: where there is gendered treatment, there also is racialized treatment, and vice versa. Given this, the causal structures that map their effects are the same, and their effects are materially inseparable.

⁹ In a similar vein, Haslanger (2012, 166) describes intersectionality as akin to discrete gels placed on a theater light. "Gender is lived differently depending on the racial (and other) positions in which one is situated", they write, "[j]ust as a light may appear different colors depending on which combination of gels it is filtered through". Haslanger (2020b), however, indicates that Haslanger has come to endorse intersection as overlap.

¹⁰ Paul and Hall (2013) and Schaffer (2016). See also Bernstein (2020, 329), who points out that if you think that unjust systems causally interact, then you must also think that they are "separable in principle".

¹¹ In addition to this inadequacy, Bernstein (2020, 329) argues that the interaction view is "weaker than many intersectionality theorists would accept", given that the majority of these theorists endorse the cross-constitution of (e.g.) gendered and racialized social positions. I take this hermeneutical point seriously, but think it is secondary to the question of the view's adequacy when it comes to providing causal explanations for systemic injustice.

Maybe that sounds strange. The effects of gender, you might think, are due to the regulation of people as men and women, whereas the effects of race are due to the regulation of people as white, Black, Asian, and so on. These are distinct social processes, so they must have distinct effects.

The inference doesn't hold. While these processes are distinct, it doesn't follow that they must have distinct effects. The regulation of people as men and women is, in effect, the regulation of people according to gender ideology, or material ideals of what men and women are and ought to be.¹² When we look closely at these ideals, we find that they embed racial ideology, or material ideals of what whites, Black, Asians, etc. are and ought to be. The same is true in reverse: racial ideals also embed gender ideals.¹³ These ideals guide how we are defined and regulated by other people, but also by institutions, economic structures, technologies, and our physical environment. The regulation of these ideals, then—i.e., how people are regulated on the basis of gender and of race—have inseparable effects.¹⁴

To illustrate, let's consider gender ideals, and how these ideals embed other types of ideals, such as racial ideals and sexual orientation ideals. We can start by distinguishing the two sets of gender ideals that, when institutionally enforced, produce systemic gender injustice.

Male/Female: Ideals of features that make someone a man, and those that make someone a woman.

Masculinity/Femininity: Ideals of features that men should have, and those that women should have.

The specifics of these ideals vary across contexts. But whatever the details, these ideals consistently embed other types of ideals, such as ideals of class, age, disability, sexual orientation, or race. Consider masculinity and femininity. In my own context—and probably yours too—these ideals say that men ought to financially support their families, be athletic and physically strong, be only sexually attracted to women, or be “civilized” (read: white).¹⁵ They also say that women ought to do the majority of

¹² Ásta (2018; 2019), Jenkins (2019), Witt (2011), Haslanger (2000).

¹³ For a clear historical example, consider how, during the period of American chattel slavery, children of a Black woman and white man were classified as Black, creating an economic incentive for white male enslavers to rape enslaved Black women. Where racial classification is sensitive to gender dynamics, we see that racial ideology embeds gender ideology. More generally, too, racial classification is based on reproductive ancestry, and reproductive ancestry typically is understood through the lens of gender.

¹⁴ My emphasis is on hegemonic ideals, or those that are so embedded in human practices that they become an invisible background to social life. See Gramsci (1971).

¹⁵ Pugh (2015), Shakespeare (1999), Kimmel (1997). For book-length treatment of the notion of civilization, and its relationship to race and masculinity, see Bederman (1995).

domestic labor, be fertile without assisted reproductive technologies, be or become mothers, and have minimal body hair (read: white).¹⁶ Given this content, how people are positioned as men and women cannot be separated from how they are positioned as rich or poor, disabled or non-disabled, straight or gay, or white or Black.

But, you might think, even if we cannot overall separate the effects of gender from those of race, class, and so on, we could at least separate them in cases when someone is disadvantaged or advantaged simply for being female or male. In these instances, you might think, we see the pure effects of gender.

There are two points to make here. The first is that this claim relies on an extremely narrow view of effects. Suppose that an employer fires all his female employees in a fit of misogynistic rage. This might seem to be a case of gender injustice but not racial injustice, since all female employees received the same treatment regardless of race. But what are the effects of being fired? The answer, of course, will depend on many things: the employee's prospects of getting another job, her access to support networks, her assets and debts, her family dynamics, her citizenship, and so on—background information where race (among other things) is a highly relevant factor. Insofar as gender explains why the employees were fired, I think it is hard to disentangle the effects of being fired from effects of gender.

But even taking this narrow view—and whatever the intentions or beliefs of the employer—firing someone simply for being female is not a race-neutral event. In order for that to be true, it would have to be the case that male and female do not embed racial ideals. But they do. As Maria Lugones (2016) and Tommy Curry (2017) point out, our inherited ideals of female and male are deeply infected with white supremacist ideology.¹⁷ Their lineage tracks to male and female ideals that explicitly made white bodies the paradigms, and placed Indigenous people of color outside these classifications. Indigenous people, according to these historical ideals, were sexually ambiguous and androgynous—the missing link between animals and humans, unable to participate in the civilized gender order of men and women.¹⁸ As Curry (2017, 565)

¹⁶ Hochschild (2012), Knight (2017), Halberstam (1998). Herzig (2015) provides a book-length discussion of hair removal norms and their relationship to race and femininity. The imperative for women to become mothers should always be seen in light of the fact that the state regularly removes children from the homes of poor women, disabled women, and women of color—see Ross and Solinger (2017).

¹⁷ Sexual dimorphism is the idea that every human body ought to be either male or female.

¹⁸ This sexual ambiguity was understood as an ambiguity between species and also an ambiguity of individuals (i.e., androgyny). For historical discussion, see Douglas (2008), Outka (2008), Jones (2005), Bederman (1995), and Plous and Williams (1995). See also DeVun (2021) for a historical discussion of how medieval anti-Semitism and Islamophobia also manifested in European meanings of maleness and femaleness, such that Jewish and Muslim people were depicted as “monstrous” hermaphrodites, too bestial to partake in the binary gender order.

writes, “[O]nly the white race was gendered—blacks were believed to be too savage to share these distinctions.”¹⁹

Today’s male and female ideals haven’t excised this white supremacist bent. We still see the imprint of this history, albeit less explicitly—e.g., disguised in the language of musculature or testosterone. Paradigms of male and female continue to be light skinned bodies, making people of color more vulnerable to the challenge that they are not ‘real’ men or women. Recall, for example, the story of Olympic sprinter Caster Semenya. Semenya’s body has a variation that produces atypically high testosterone levels for someone with otherwise female-coded features. In the global north, doctors typically intervene upon this variation, not from necessity, but to comply with female ideals.²⁰ This practice is less common in South Africa, where Semenya was born. When Semenya rose to athletic fame, her musculature—working against a background of white, thin female ideals—placed her womanhood under scrutiny. Holding Semenya up against these ideals, sportwriters deemed her “breathhtakingly butch” and “a man”, and questioned her eligibility to compete in women’s sports.²¹ When her hormonal variation was discovered, Semenya was banned from international women’s track events on the grounds that she was not sufficiently female. To return, she must artificially lower her testosterone through potentially harmful medical interventions.²²

Semenya’s story, like that of many others—and especially trans women of color, whose womanhood is deeply scrutinized—show that, even today, male and female ideals embed racial ideology. The same point has been made many times about gender and sexual orientation. Like racial ideals, sexual orientation ideals appear within gender ideals. As Michael Kimmel (1997, 214) writes, “Homophobia is the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up, that we are not real men.” While this is obvious at the level of masculinity and femininity, it also is apparent with respect to male and female ideals. Monique Wittig (1993, 105) argues that sexual availability to men is so central to female ideals that to be lesbian is to fall outside the category of women:

[O]ne feature of lesbian oppression consists precisely of making women out of reach for us, since women belong to men. Thus a lesbian *has* to be something else, a not-woman, a not-man, a product of society, not a product of nature...

¹⁹ Predictably, this exclusion from the gender order regularly appeared in colonizers’ justifications for atrocities like rape and enslavement. See Lugones (2016, 16).

²⁰ Karkazis (2008); Davis (2015); Magubane (2014)

²¹ Karkazis, et al. (2012).

²² Karkazis and Jordan-Young (2018, 2)

Wittig's claim is echoed by the work of Judith Butler (1990), as well as scholars of intersex variations like Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000), Katrina Karkazis (2008), and Julian Gill-Peterson (2018). These scholars, among others, detail how male and female ideals center on coitus. Sex assignment as male or female is based on judgments about whether an infant's clitoris/penis will become large enough to penetrate a vagina—judgments which sometimes don't have a clear answer. In cases of uncertainty, infants' bodies may be surgically or medically altered to make them better fit heteronormative ideals of male and female.

We could review similar arguments about ideals of disability and class, which also appear within gender ideals.²³ But I hope I've said enough to make my more general point, which is that gender injustice cannot be separated from other forms of injustice when their regulatory ideals embed one another. Neither, then, can the processes that produce these forms of injustice.

This observation is not unique to gender injustice: according to my approach, all systemic injustice is intersectional injustice where unjust systems overlap. The view actually rests on a simple point: distinct processes can coincide. Consider another example: in the morning, I make a pour over. Making the pour over simultaneously manifests two processes—calming myself down and waking myself up. The routine is meditative, which calms me down, but it also requires attention and precision, which wakes me up.²⁴ And although they're constituted by the same events, these are distinct processes: they aim at different goals, each of which could in principle be pursued separately. For example, calming myself down could occur through doing slow breathwork, but that wouldn't wake me up. Waking myself up could occur through jumping into a cold pond, but that definitely wouldn't calm me down. Calming myself down and waking myself up are distinct goal-oriented processes that overlap: they are co-constituted by the causal structure of making a morning pour over.²⁵

To see the analogy through to systemic injustice, think about the cup of coffee produced by this causal structure. It would be strange (and incorrect) to say that this cup of coffee was jointly produced by calming myself down and waking myself up. These processes cannot causally interact, because they are constituted by the same causal structure. But it is true that the process of calming myself down produced the cup of coffee, and it also is

²³ Smith and Hutchison (eds) (2004); Fraser & Jaeggi (2018)

²⁴ Thanks to Maegan Fairchild for the overlapping grounds example. (Sorry.)

²⁵ There are many possible ways to explain these differences. We could, with David Lewis and John Burgess (1991), hold that they are due to viewing the same events and relations under different counterpart relations. We could, with Laurie Paul (2006), hold that they are due to distinct essential property parts that supervene on shared material parts. Or we could, with Kit Fine (1999) and Kathryn Koslicki (2018), hold that they are due to distinct (non-material) formal or structuring parts. I don't have a position as to this explanation; I only claim that there *are* modal differences across these processes (and so, too, across overlapping systems).

true that the process of waking myself up produced the same cup of coffee. Because they overlap, either process can provide a causal explanation for the resulting cup of coffee.²⁶ Similarly, according to intersection as overlap, intersectional injustice is produced by causal structures that simultaneously constitute multiple unjust systems. Misogynoir, for example, is produced by causal structures that simultaneously constitute patriarchy and white supremacy. As such, misogynoir is gender injustice and it also is racial injustice; but it is not a novel hybrid of the two.²⁷

Intersection as overlap gives us much better models of systemic injustice than intersection as interaction.²⁸ And I hope that, upon introspection, you see that it better reflects individual experiences of systemic injustice. We cannot materially separate our experiences of gender from those of sexual orientation, or race, or class, or disability. But we can explain our experiences in many ways, for example, first framing them as effects of gender, then of race, then of class, and so on. Let's turn now to the importance of these distinct explanatory framings, and how they relate to injustice pluralism.

2. Individuation by Ideology

Intersection as overlap says that unjust systems like patriarchy and white supremacy overlap. Effects of gender, for example, cannot be isolated from effects of race. Given this, patriarchy cannot be materially separated from white supremacy—these systems overlap, and produce the same outcomes.

What does this mean for individuating unjust systems? Here, I think it is easy to worry that systems like patriarchy and white supremacy are either identical or fictional. Given that they overlap, it is not obvious how to distinguish between them. It's tempting to conclude, along with Haslanger (2020b), that these systems don't exist "unto [themselves]". We thought that we lived within many unjust systems; instead, it seems, we live in a single mega-unjust system—the "white supremacist... heteronormative... patriarchal" system. More specifically, because we cannot disentangle the effects of gender from those of race, class, disability, and sexual orientation, we cannot distinguish between the systems responsible for these effects.²⁹

²⁶ Which we appeal to depends on the question we ask — see section 2.

²⁷ I think this is what Crenshaw (1989, 145) meant when she said that Black women do not experience a "hybrid" of gender and race discrimination, and that white women do not experience "pure" gender discrimination. See Bernstein (2020) for a similar metaphysical picture, but by way of arguing that intersectional positions (e.g., Black women, white women) are ontologically and explanatorily prior to non-intersectional positions (e.g., Black, white, women).

²⁸ Paul (2012)

²⁹ Nancy Fraser and Rahel Jaeggi (2018, 111) offer an argument along these lines for the claim that capitalism is the sole unjust system. Patriarchy and white supremacy, they argue, are not distinct from capitalism—they are "form[s]" or "guise[s]" of what fundamentally is capitalism.

The above reasoning follows from the thin functionalism that dominates descriptions of unjust systems. Unjust systems like patriarchy and white supremacy typically are identified as the causal sources of particular forms of injustice—e.g., gender injustice is the product of patriarchy, racial injustice is the product of white supremacy, and so on:³⁰

“[Patriarchy is] the system of female subordination...”³¹

“White Supremacy is an historically based, institutionally perpetuated system of exploitation and oppression of continents, nations, and peoples of color by white peoples and nations of the European continent, for the purpose of maintaining and defending a system of wealth, power, and privilege.”³²

“Capitalism is defined as an economic system in which a country’s trade, industry, and profits are controlled by private companies, instead of by the people whose time and labor powers those companies.”³³

Intersection as overlap creates an immediate problem for this thin functionalism: overlapping systems produce the same things. If patriarchy and white supremacy overlap, then we cannot distinguish them by their distinct effects. The causal structure that subordinates women also subordinates people of color, also subordinates the working class, and so on.

But there is an alternative to this thin functionalism. This alternative allows us to distinguish between unjust systems in terms of their essential ideologies; a method that illuminates the distinct goal-orientations of each system. Importantly, we can do this individuation even when unjust systems are constituted by the same causal structure.

Let’s consider a toy example. Suppose you have a friend named Daniel who hands out treats at the local dog park every day. One day you go with them, and you notice that a dog’s size and coat seem to affect how likely it is that the dog will receive treats. For simplicity, I’ll assume two sizes and two coats:

³⁰ This functionalism takes forms of injustice to be more fundamental than unjust systems. For example, suppose we identified toasters as whatever produces toast: we would need to locate toast prior to identifying something as a toaster. Similarly, thin functionalist accounts of unjust systems assume that we can locate (e.g.) gender injustice prior to identifying patriarchy, and patriarchy is whatever produces gender injustice. This order of fundamentality is reversed by individuation by ideology.

³¹ Haslanger (2020b), describing the standard description of patriarchy within feminist theory, particularly in the 1960’s and 1970’s. See also Beechey (1979).

³² Elizabeth (Betita) Martinez, ‘What is White Supremacy?’ Originally written for the Challenging White Supremacy Workshop. San Francisco, mid 1990’s. Published by Institute for MultiRacial Justice.

³³ Kelly (2020)

Figure 3: Dog Park

	45 lbs	20 lbs
Tiger Striped	Extremely Likely	Moderately Likely
Black, Brown, & White	Extremely Unlikely	Moderately Unlikely

Puzzled, you ask Daniel about it. “At first I thought you favored 45 lbs dogs,” you say, “but then I noticed that, among the black, brown, and white dogs, you favor the 20 lbs ones. Do some dogs have an advantage because of their size?” “Yes!” they respond. “I like large dogs the best. But I think 45 lbs tiger striped dogs are truly large dogs, whereas 45 lbs black, brown, and white dogs always look too big. I like large dogs, not bears!” “Okay,” you laugh, “so your treat distribution is based primarily on size and only secondarily on coat.” “Yes and no,” they respond. “I also like brindle dogs the best. It’s just that, when a tiger striped dog is 45 lbs, it is maximally brindle—a perfect dog!”³⁴

We are now better positioned to explain the outcomes represented in Figure 3. Based on Daniel’s responses, it would be inaccurate to say that 45 lbs dogs are advantaged, and imprecise to say that black, brown, and white dogs are advantaged. But it would be both accurate and precise to say that dogs are advantaged by size, and also to say that they are advantaged by coat. This is because Daniel’s size ideals embed their coat ideals, and their coat ideals embed their size ideals. As a result, how Daniel interacts with dogs using their size ideals cannot be separated from how they interact with dogs using their coat ideals.

Even so, these are different ideals. Daniel could have had different coat ideals alongside the size ideals that they actually have, or vice versa. Maybe Daniel developed size ideals before color ideals, or maybe in the future, Daniel will retain their coat ideals after they no longer have size ideals. The difference between Daniel’s size ideals and coat ideals is important, because it reveals that these sets of ideals figure differently in explanations of Daniel’s behavior. While some questions call us to focus on size ideals to explain the outcomes in Figure 4, others call us to focus on coat ideals. Yet others call us to focus on their overlap—how size ideals embed coat ideals, or vice versa. This is because explanatory questions are contrastive. We do not explain an outcome in a vacuum; we explain why one outcome occurred rather than some other outcome.³⁵ To see what I mean, consider three questions we might ask about the outcomes in Figure 3:

³⁴ Daniel’s comments reveal that ‘large’ and ‘brindle’ are ideals, related but not identical to individual physical features like ‘45 lbs’ and ‘tiger striped’.

³⁵ See Collins, et al. (2004). My claim follows from the view that causation is counterfactual dependence, but also follows from the more modest view that causal explanation is explanation of counterfactual dependence.

- (a) Why did 45 lbs tiger striped dogs get more treats than 20 lbs tiger striped dogs?
- (b) Why did 45 lbs tiger striped dogs get more treats than 45 lbs black, brown, and white dogs?
- (c) Why did 45 lbs tiger striped dogs get more treats than all the other dogs?

If we were to go about answering these questions, I suspect our answer to (a) would emphasize Daniel's size ideals, our answer to (b) would emphasize their coat ideals, and our answer to (c) would emphasize the interrelation of both sets of ideals. These are substantively different explanations of the same outcome. We get these different explanations because size ideals are not identical to color ideals; they give us distinct explanatory frameworks.

We can expand this lesson from the dog park to the earlier example of the pour over. Suppose we want to explain the resultant cup of coffee. In asking this 'why' question, we assume—usually implicitly—some counterfactual contrast. For example, we might be asking why there is a cup of coffee now instead of earlier, or why there is a cup of coffee rather than tea.³⁶ Different questions call for different explanatory frameworks. If asked why now instead of earlier, I might appeal to the process of calming myself down, and point out that rushing this process would be counterproductive. If asked why coffee instead of tea, I might instead appeal to the process of waking myself up, and observe that the simpler task of making tea isn't sufficiently demanding to wake me up. Here again, we see that explanatory perspectives on a single outcome change in response to shifting inquiries.

Waking myself up and calming myself down give us different explanations because they are distinct goal-oriented processes, even when they overlap. I think the same about unjust systems. Patriarchy and white supremacy are distinct goal-oriented processes that can overlap, but even when they do, provide us with distinct frameworks for explaining systemic injustice. But why do these systems have distinct goal-orientations? Here, we return to ideology, or material ideals. Recall our starting lesson from Haslanger: there are massive causal structures that orient us to reproduce systemic injustice. These causal structures are concrete, material, and actual, just as making a pour over is concrete,

³⁶ See Haslanger (2016, 115-116), which has a rich discussion of why different causal questions about the same outcomes often call for distinct structural explanations.

material, and actual.³⁷ But, like the pour over, injustice-producing causal structures admit multiple apt descriptions. The descriptions that I specifically have in mind are ones that identify the cultural ideals of gender, of race, of class, and of sexual orientation (among others) contained in these structures. These ideals appear in social behavior, institutions, technologies, and environments: clothing tells us who should wear what, architecture tells us who should go where, and economies tell us who is more valuable than who.³⁸

A causal structure that contains ideology is one that is oriented to regulate people in accordance with that ideology. In doing so, these structures also are oriented to reproduce themselves and the ideologies that they contain. For example, a causal structure that contains gender ideology is one that is oriented to regulate people in accordance with gender ideals—in so doing, it tends toward producing another causal structure that contains those gender ideals. I think this causal looping is aptly described as a goal-oriented process. And we can identify different processes for distinct ideologies: the process that aims to reproduce gender ideals is not identical to the process that aims to reproduce racial ideals.

Individuation by ideology is the view that unjust systems have distinct essential ideologies, and so can be individuated in terms of these ideologies—e.g., gender ideals are essential to patriarchy, racial ideals are essential to white supremacy, and so on. When a causal structure is oriented to reproduce the essential ideology of an unjust system, it constitutes (an instance of) that system. For example, a causal structure that is oriented to reproduce gender ideals constitutes patriarchy. A causal structure that aims to reproduce racial ideals constitutes white supremacy. And so on. In cases where a causal structure is oriented to regulate people in accordance with multiple ideologies, it constitutes overlapping unjust systems.

Since this is the core claim of individuation by ideology, I'll repeat it in slightly different terms. Unjust systems can be distinguished by their distinct aims, and these distinct aims are a function of their distinct essential ideologies: ideologies are, by definition, ideals that orient us to reproduce the causal systems in which they are found. And so, because gender ideals are essential to patriarchy, patriarchy is found in causal structures oriented to recreate (i.e., regulate people in accordance with) gender ideals, whereas white supremacy is found in causal structures oriented to recreate racial ideals. These

³⁷ While material, ideology is also found in prejudiced mental states like racist beliefs or sexist attitudes. These mental states are causally-efficacious reflections of ideology—as such, they are both parts of and also representations of ideology.

³⁸ I find it helpful to think of these cultural ideals as stories about what people are and should be. These stories provide different explanations for the same outcomes because, as Roger Schank (1990, 24) observes, “storytelling and understanding are functionally the same thing”. Cf Velleman (2003, 7)

processes, though distinct, will overlap when a causal structure orients us to simultaneously reproduce both ideologies.

Here, the question of injustice monism might resurrect as a question about individuating ideologies. But there isn't a similarly compelling worry about ideology, understood in terms of material ideals. At risk of sounding like a broken record, I again point to apparent differences: e.g., we could end patriarchy before we manage to end white supremacy (or vice versa), and when we imagine a world without patriarchy, we might fail to imagine a world without white supremacy. Imaginatively and historically, the ideologies that characterize each are distinct.³⁹

We need these distinct ideologies to arrive at distinct explanations of systemic injustice. As we saw in the dog park example, distinct ideals do the important work of providing us with various frameworks for explaining why some outcome occurred. Applying this to misogynoir, suppose we ask:

- (d) Why does misogynoir affect Black women (as opposed to white women)?
- (e) Why does misogynoir affect Black women (as opposed to Black men)?
- (f) Why does misogynoir affect Black women (as opposed to everyone else)?

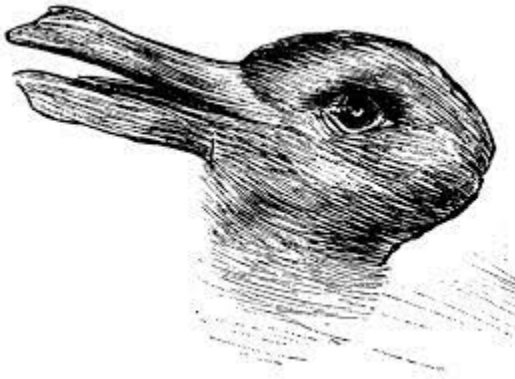
Here again, different questions call for different explanations of the same thing. While an answer to (d) is likely to emphasize white supremacy, or causal structures that orient us to recreate racial ideals, an answer to (e) is more likely to emphasize patriarchy, or causal structures that orient us to recreate gender ideals. An adequate answer to (f), in contrast, must address their overlap; it must speak to how we occupy a causal structure that orients us to simultaneously recreate both ideologies.

Examples like this also illustrate how distinct ideologies allow us to distinguish, not only between unjust systems, but also between types of systemic injustice. Whether we call something (e.g.) gender injustice or racial injustice is a matter of explanatory frame: in identifying something as gender injustice, we emphasize patriarchy as an explanation for that outcome. If we instead identify it as racial injustice, we emphasize white supremacy as an explanation. These are not discrete or incompatible explanations; a single outcome (e.g., an instance of misogynoir) can be both at the same time, because both patriarchy and white supremacy adequately explain the outcome. Which explanation is more apt, though, depends on the question at hand.

In this way, I think that forms of systemic injustice are akin to gestalts:

³⁹ It is often said that gender ideals preceded racial ideals—at least, in the sense that sexually dimorphic gender ideals preceded colonialist racial ideals.

Figure 4: Duck-Rabbit



In front of you is a network of lines and shading on a page. This network, as Wittgenstein (1960) famously pointed out, contains at least two distinct images—one of a duck and one of a rabbit. The duck image is not merely the networks of lines and shading—that network equally constitutes the rabbit image. Instead, the duck image is a distinct way of making sense of this network. That doesn't mean the image is mental, of course: the duck image is there in the network before you, whether or not you have the hermeneutical tools to recognize and name it.⁴⁰

So too, I think, when it comes to identifying distinct forms of injustice. Gender injustice is constituted by events in the world that also constitute other kinds of injustice. To recognize gender injustice is to use certain hermeneutical tools for making sense of these events, and the messy causal structures that produce them. These tools emphasize gender ideals, and highlight structural elements that manifestly recreate those ideals. If we were to instead recognize the same events as racial injustice, we would make sense of them using a different set of hermeneutical tools—ones that emphasize structural elements that manifestly recreate racial ideals.

Let's pause to take stock. Unjust systems, I've proposed, are constituted by causal structures that are oriented to reproduce ideologies. A particular unjust system is individuated by its essential ideology: it is constituted by causal structures oriented to reproduce that ideology. And, as I've suggested, causal structures can multitask; they might be oriented to reproduce multiple ideologies. To give an account of an unjust system, then, requires delineating its essential ideology, or describing the material ideals that are essential to that system, and showing how these ideals appear in causal structures.

I'm a pluralist about such accounts. In my view, how we delineate (e.g.) patriarchy's essential ideology is sensitive to the question we are asking, and to the context of our

⁴⁰ While not needed for my argument, I recommend Putnam (2002) and Scheman (2011) for metaphysics that I think makes good sense of gestalts.

inquiry. If we want to explain gender injustice in the late 20th century in New England, we would do well to describe gender ideals at a finer level of grain than if we want to explain gender injustice across cultures with sexually dimorphic ideals of male and female. And, if we want to explain systemic gender injustice that targets Black women, or gay men, or those with physical disabilities, we will emphasize particular aspects of this ideology, focusing on places where it embeds ideals of race, or sexual orientation, or ability. All of these paths provide legitimate accounts of patriarchy, but they are accounts apt for answering distinct questions.

Pluralism acknowledged, I think that it is helpful to develop general accounts of systems like patriarchy. Such an account would explain forms of systemic injustice at a high level of description, and across a broad range of contexts. In doing so, I think general accounts help us see these forms of injustice across history and culture, a useful perspective when considering how to meaningfully resist that form of injustice. But there is a danger of general accounts, which is that—rather than simply abstract—they often idealize these systems, distorting or erasing the reality that gender injustice is intersectional.⁴¹ For example, when patriarchy is characterized as the system that privileges men and subordinates women, it actively misrepresents the experiences of men—e.g. Black men, gay men, disabled men—who are systematically disadvantaged relative to other men, and even relative to certain groups of women. The task of giving a general account of patriarchy, then, is the task of describing its essential ideology with enough abstraction to provide a high-level explanatory framework, but with sufficient flexibility to accommodate diverse manifestations of that ideology across contexts, including manifestations that embed other ideologies (e.g., race ideals, class ideals).

Sometimes it is better to show than tell. Focusing on patriarchy, individuation by ideology suggests the following:

Patriarchy is a system that aims to recreate gender ideals—i.e., it is constituted by causal structures oriented to regulate people in accordance with gender ideals.⁴²

This is only so helpful without an account of gender ideals.⁴³ So, by way of example, I'll sketch the central proposal of my book, *Real Men on Top*.⁴⁴ There, I consider this question with a wide scope, focusing on gender ideals common to cultures with sexually

⁴¹ For more on the difference between idealization and abstraction, see Mills (2005).

⁴² This is the 'is' of identity, not mere description. Although white supremacy in our present context also recreates gender ideals, it is not patriarchy because it is not essential to white supremacy that it do so.

⁴³ By 'an account', I mean a picture of their identity and persistence conditions, which allow us to identify gender ideals and track them across contexts. On the importance of distinguishing between identity and persistence conditions within social ontology, see Epstein (2019).

⁴⁴ Dembroff (manuscript).

dimorphic ideals of male and female. Following the distinctions mentioned earlier, I use male and female to refer to ideals of features that make someone a man or a woman, and masculinity and femininity to refer to ideals of features that men and women should have.⁴⁵

Patriarchy is the system that aims to recreate:

Teleology: Human beings should be male or female, males should be masculine, and females should be feminine,

Sexism: Masculine males are the most valuable human beings.

The Natural Attitude: Sexism and teleology are natural—i.e., universal and immutable.⁴⁶

Any two instances of patriarchy are the same system just in case they both developed from a historical instance of patriarchy that had sexually dimorphic ideals of male and female and reproduced exploitative divisions of reproductive labor.⁴⁷

This picture tells us that when a causal structure is oriented to regulate people in accordance with teleology, sexism, and the natural attitude, it constitutes patriarchy. It also provides genealogical persistence conditions for patriarchy, centered on sexually dimorphic male and female ideals and reproductive injustice.⁴⁸

Notice that patriarchy, as described here, does not aim to produce male or men's dominance.⁴⁹ Instead, patriarchy aims to produce the dominance of those who best fit male and masculine ideals—that is, people who approximate ideals of what men are and ought to be. More colloquially, I call this group “real men”—a group valued over their “real women” counterparts, as well as everyone else. A causal structure that is oriented

⁴⁵ You might also think of these as referring to the idealized essences of men and women, as well as their idealized teloses. The details of these ideals vary by context—see Saul (2012), Barnes (2020), Dembroff (2018), Zimman (2014).

⁴⁶ Kessler and McKenna (1978), Baynton (2001), Dembroff (2021)

⁴⁷ See Lerner (1986) and O'Connor (2019, 3). There may be multiple patriarchies, if there are multiple lineages of gender.

⁴⁸ Sexual dimorphism is when members of a species tend to have one of two types of reproductive capacity. Sexual dimorphic ideals add a normative component. According to these ideals, every human body ought to clearly have one of these two capacities. Another account of patriarchy might have a different persistence condition, depending on its explanatory scope.

⁴⁹ Connell (2016). Is there any unjust system that aims to produce male dominance? I doubt it — age, class, and disability, at least, seem to be stable differentiations among men. So long as how someone is seen and treated as a man is substantially sensitive to factors such as these, it distorts patriarchy to describe it as aimed toward male dominance.

to reproduce real men's dominance, then, constitutes patriarchy. Relative to real men, and in various degrees and forms, patriarchy subordinates groups of women, men who fall short of masculine ideals, and the androgynous.⁵⁰

The features that make people count as real men or real women change across contexts. Gender ideals are contextual, contested, and continually in flux. As we've already seen, a closer look reveals that these ideals also embed other cultural ideals, such as racial and class ideals. They can be identified at many levels of grain, from the very general picture given above, to the particular gender ideals of your friend group or school. Which approach is best depends on what you want to explain. Whatever your approach though, the more general point I'm making is that gender ideals provide a framework for explaining injustice that is distinct from the framework of (e.g.) racial ideals, or class ideals. As such, they give us a way to individuate patriarchy from overlapping unjust systems. What's more, this picture similarly applies to all other unjust systems: we can be injustice pluralists while also acknowledging that unjust systems overlap.

3. Why Does This Matter?

Why does injustice pluralism matter? Here, I want to briefly discuss why I think injustice pluralism is important—that is, why we need distinct explanatory frameworks pertaining to patriarchy, white supremacy, etc., rather than the sole explanatory framework offered by injustice monism. While I think there are many reasons, I'll focus on a practical, political upshot of my picture.

Distinct unjust systems are needed to identify distinct forms of systemic injustice. Patriarchy, for example, gives us an explanatory framework that illuminates how people are regulated in accordance with gender ideals. When we cast this framework on a particular outcome, then, we notice the ways that it manifests gender injustice. If we instead cast the framework of white supremacy on the same outcome, our focus would shift to the ways that it manifests racial injustice. Which description is best—and at what level of grain—depends on our inquiry. Some questions call for answers that primarily emphasize patriarchy and gender injustice; other questions call for answers that emphasize white supremacy and racial injustice, or capitalism and economic injustice, or heteronormativity and sexual injustice, or ableism and disability injustice. Without individuating unjust systems, we cannot individuate these forms of systemic injustice.

Here, politics enters. Being able to identify distinct forms of injustice is essential for building and organizing liberation movements. Liberation movements would be infeasible if each one had to oppose systemic injustice with no further specification.

⁵⁰ That's not to say that patriarchy makes real men happy. Although related, power is not the same thing as well-being.

These movements funnel resources toward distinct aims: while some focus on economic justice, others instead promote gender justice, racial injustice, or disability justice. Without individuating forms of injustice, we cannot individuate these aims. My proposal gives us a method for this individuation. And, at the same time, it reveals why, in practice, liberation movements have overlapping aims. Gender justice movements and racial justice movements, for example, share the aim to end misogynoir. Similarly, disability justice movements and economic justice movements share the aim to end ability-based employment discrimination. Where forms of injustice overlap, movements against these injustices have every reason to collaborate, and undermine against their own aims by working against each other.⁵¹

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⁵¹ Wills (2018). See also Crenshaw (1991), where Crenshaw writes that intersectionality reveals that identity groups (e.g., women, people of color) are "in fact coalitions, or at least potential coalitions waiting to be formed". Cited in Carathathis (2013).

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